



HEBREW WRITINGS refer to Israel as the “navel” of the world, with Jerusalem at its center. The *Amidah* (Eighteen Benedictions) dating from the Pharisaic Synagogue is the central prayer of Jewish liturgy. It contains prayers for the restoration of the Jews to their homeland. Among its pages is the call to return the exiles, restore David’s kingdom, rebuild the temple to its former glory, and remember the observance of Passover, Pentecost, and the Feast of Tabernacles in Zion (Jerusalem).

Abram of the Old Testament, later renamed Abraham by God, was a wealthy man in the village of Haran. Conservationist Walter Clay Lowdermilk wrote:

The movement for “a Jewish homeland in Palestine” [began four thousand years earlier] when Abraham, prompted by Divine inspiration, left the plains of Mesopotamia to establish a new people on the land of Canaan.<sup>8</sup>

It is actually improper to refer to Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob as “Jewish.” The terms “Jew” and “Judaism” were not generally used until hundreds of years later—during the time of the tribe of Judah. Yet all three patriarchs were both the physical and spiritual fathers of Judaism.

Abram, a righteous Gentile, was born in the year 1948 *from* Creation<sup>9</sup> (circa 1800 BC), which points prophetically to the rebirth of the State of Israel in AD 1948. He was the son of Terah, a seller of idols in Ur, one of the largest cities in the region. Former pastor and author Ray Stedman wrote of the city:

The city of Ur was once thought to be the dwelling place of a primitive people living in mud-walled houses. Accordingly, some scholars once regarded Abraham as a primitive and unlearned man. But the spade of the archaeologist has since turned up ruins of Ur and dispelled this false impression. We now know that Ur was a city of great wealth and culture, home to a library and a university. The people of Ur were devoted to commerce, learning, and the pagan worship of the moon goddess.<sup>10</sup>

Perhaps it had been from early childhood that Abram questioned his father’s dedication to gods fashioned of stone and wood. Had he begun to seek the truth and come to believe that his surroundings, the earth and sky, were the work of one Creator? Had he shared this

concept with others? However his spiritual upheaval had come about, it may be noted that it was not Abram who sought Jehovah, but God who reached out to *him*.

I envision Abram sitting on a bench outside the front flap of his tent. Sarai, his wife, is likely overseeing the servants as they go about their daily tasks—winnowing grain, hauling water for the animals, spinning cloth, or roasting a goat or camel. Perhaps God had approached others who failed to answer His call, but obviously the Creator saw a trait in Abram that prompted Him to say something like, “That’s My man! He’s the one with whom I’ll make a covenant.” Suddenly Abram found himself in an encounter with Jehovah God. He must surely have been stunned to hear the voice of the Lord calling to him:

Now the LORD had said to Abram: “Get out of your country, from your family and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Genesis 12:1–3 NKJV)

God gave Abram three edicts: Go, acquire, multiply. The patriarch-in-training was to leave his country where idol worship was widely accepted; leave his family and its social status; and leave

his father's house and the business of making and selling idols. In exchange, Jehovah promised that Abram would become the father of a great nation. What did Abram do? He responded with great faith.

Imagine the conversation he must have had later that day with Sarai: "Wife, we're leaving first thing in the morning. God told me to go. Have the servants take down the tents, gather the flocks, pack everything, and load the camels."

"Abram, what do you mean we're leaving? We can't leave; I'm meeting my friends for lunch tomorrow. What am I supposed to tell them? Where are we going? How long will we be gone?"

"Yes, Sarai, we are leaving, and we won't be coming back. God promised me that He would lead us to the promised land—the land of Canaan. I just know I have to follow His instructions."

"Which God told you that? Where is Canaan, Abram?"

"I don't know, dear. God will direct us as we go; I just know we have to go."

But even after the direct call from God, Abram continued to linger in Ur. It was his father, Terah, who finally stepped in, packed up the family, and headed toward Haran. It was there, halfway to obedience, that Abram and Sarai settled down for a time. Only after his father died did Abram decide to set out for the land God had promised. He was seventy-five years old when he, Sarai, and his nephew Lot packed up "all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people whom

they had acquired in Haran, and they departed to go to the land of Canaan” (Genesis 12:5 NKJV). Abram’s complete trust in God and his ultimate obedience are unique in Scripture, although he did include Lot and *his* father in the group even after God had instructed him not to bring any relatives (Genesis 12:1). By the time Abram had reached the promised land, he and Lot had acquired so much cattle and livestock that they were forced to separate.

Genesis 13:5–11 paints the picture of the family feud that arose and its resolution:

Lot also, who went with Abram, had flocks and herds and tents. Now the land was not able to support them, that they might dwell together, for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock. The Canaanites and the Perizzites then dwelt in the land. So Abram said to Lot, “Please let there be no strife between you and me, and between my herdsmen and your herdsmen; for we are brethren. Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me. If you take the left, then I will go to the right; or, if you go to the right, then I will go to the left.” And Lot lifted his eyes and saw all the plain of Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere (before the LORD

destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah) like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt as you go toward Zoar. Then Lot chose for himself all the plain of Jordan, and Lot journeyed east. And they separated from each other. (NKJV)

When Lot stood on a promontory overlooking the land, he must have noted only the outward appearance of the area—the topography, the apparent wealth. He could not have seen what Jehovah saw: “Now the people of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the LORD” (Genesis 13:13 NIV). So Lot began his slow descent from the top of the mountain into the valley below—into a place of carnality, compromise, and collapse. He would ultimately lose everything he held dear—wealth and social status, as well as his wife and daughters. It seemed to be Abram’s assignment to rescue his wayward nephew, first from the captivity by marauding kings, and finally from divine retribution.

Following Lot’s departure and the later destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, God again spoke to Abram:

Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are—northward, southward, eastward, and westward; for all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could

be numbered. Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you. (Genesis 13:14–17 NKJV)

After this land grant was bestowed upon him, Abram’s name was changed to Abraham, for God had declared that his servant would be “a father of many nations” (Genesis 17:4 NKJV). At the same time, He changed Sarai’s name to Sarah (princess), and announced that she and Abraham would have a son. The news must have come as a great shock for both.

Sarah’s desperation propelled her to offer Hagar, her Egyptian handmaiden, to Abram as a surrogate. Despite Sarah’s interference, there is a lesson to be learned here. In her misery, Sarah turned from faith in God, from dependence on Jehovah, to works—dependence on self. She had a plan and nothing was going to deter her from seeing it come to fruition. Hagar represents works—man or, in this instance, woman—taking matters into their own hands. Abraham could have said, “No.” He could have reminded Sarah that God had made a promise to him and he would continue to believe God. That didn’t happen. When presented with a pretty little doe-eyed handmaiden, Abraham capitulated.

By the time Hagar was heavy with child, Sarah was consumed with jealousy, and Abraham was forced to endure the contentious atmosphere he had helped create within the camp. It continued to roil within him even after the babe was born.

Ishmael was the result of that liaison. A man of faith, Abraham acted instead in his own imprudence rather than following God's direction. He justified a foolish action through moral relativism, tradition, and human reasoning. He was trying to secure God's blessing on his own terms. It was not until some years later when the son of promise, Isaac, was born that Abraham fully realized the gravity of his mistake.

Soon Abraham reached the age of ninety-nine and Sarah eighty-nine, both obviously well past normal childbearing age. Then came the day when Sarah awoke to find that she was pregnant in her old age. She who had laughed at the pronouncement that she would bear a child, she who had intervened and proposed her own plan for an heir, was now carrying Isaac, the son of promise. Not only had God taken away her barrenness, He provided the strength for Sarah to carry the child to term and to bring him forth. God's plan for Abraham and his seed would produce a miracle child.

Soon the trouble with Hagar and Ishmael became increasingly apparent. Eight days after Isaac was born he was circumcised, and after the babe was weaned, Abraham hosted a huge celebration for the son born to Sarah. One day Sarah spied Ishmael mocking Isaac. At that moment, her anger reached volcanic proportions and she exploded. Sarah demanded that Abraham literally drive Hagar and her son from the encampment with only what bread and water they could carry. Abraham had to bear the pain,



heartache, and tragedy of losing Ishmael as he complied with Sarah's demands.

God had fulfilled his vow, and soon after the child, Isaac, arrived Abraham set about to teach God's covenant promises to his son. And then horror descended into Abraham's life:

Then [God] said, "Take now your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you." (Genesis 22:2 NKJV)

We often underestimate just how outrageous this must have seemed to Abraham. It seems impossible to believe that he didn't question God's directive, but the narrative doesn't suggest that. (Neither is there any mention of whether he told Sarah of God's command.) You and I have read the rest of the story and know the outcome—Abraham knew only what God had demanded of him. Yet verse 3 says:

So Abraham rose early in the morning and saddled his donkey, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son; and he split the wood for the burnt offering, and arose and went to the place of which God had told him. (Genesis 22:3 NKJV)

Rejecting the "son of human reasoning," God made a covenant with Isaac, the "son of faith." Ishmael became the father of the Arab

race, and Isaac a patriarch of the Hebrews. The Quran teaches that Ishmael, not Isaac, was the son of promise, and that he inherited the land and the title deed to Jerusalem. The battle continues even today.

This time Abraham did not argue nor did he hesitate to obey God's directions. He didn't bargain with God; he didn't ask for anything in return for his obedience. Instead, he immediately made arrangements for the three-day journey to Mount Moriah. I believe Abraham's heart had to have been so heavy it was difficult for him to place one foot in front of the other. I believe he was puzzled about God's plan. Abraham was not some superman—a spiritual hero with mystical powers—he was “everyman” and he was about to offer the child of promise. How would you feel if you knew you were about to lose a beloved son or daughter? Abraham was surely no different.

So, off they set on a three-day hike across the desert terrain—a journey of some sixty miles—to the place designated by God. When they arrived, Abraham asked the servants to wait while “the lad and I will go yonder and worship.” Then he added what might well be a hint to the strength of his faith, “and we will come back to you.” (Genesis 22:5 NKJV)

After three days of spiritual wrestling with God, Abraham was assured that God would provide. As he unloaded the wood from the donkey and laid it on Isaac's back, the lad asked, “Look, the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?”<sup>11</sup> And in verse 8 with great conviction and complete assurance, his father replied,

“My son, God will provide for Himself the lamb for a burnt offering.” Abraham had not figured out just how God would provide—a lamb wandering by, Isaac raised from the dead, a last-minute stay of execution—but he was convinced that God would provide!

I have a mental picture of father and son slowly trudging their way up the mountain to the place where God finally says, “Here; this is it.” When they arrived, the father and son set about gathering stones to erect an altar to Jehovah. Abraham carefully laid the wood and knelt before his son. He gently bound Isaac’s hands and feet and laid him on the altar. Now, Isaac was old enough to run for his life. Not only did Abraham display unparalleled obedience, so did his beloved son, Isaac.

Just as Abraham raises the knife to plunge it into Isaac’s heart, an angel of the Lord cries, “STOP! Don’t hurt the boy.”

And He said, “Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.”

(Genesis 22:12 NKJV)

Abraham must have heard something rustling in a bush near the altar. He looked around and there, held fast, was a ram caught by its horns. With unparalleled gratitude, Abraham untied his son, bound the ram, and laid it on the altar as a sacrifice to his faithful Jehovah—Jireh—his provider.