# Genesis, Parashat Lech L’cha, Essays (edited)

## Recognizing God’s Call

### Martin E. Marty

Perhaps the patriarchs didn’t ask themselves this question, but more than likely even they did: How on earth can we tell if a call is real? Professor Martin E. Marty is the Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service profes­sor at the University of Chicago and author of many books on reli­gious and cultural themes.

The beginning of the story of Abraham is brisk: “Now the Lord said to Abraham, ‘Go.’ So Abraham went.” *Go:* That meant leaving land, relatives and immediate family. *He went:* That meant heading a great nation and becoming a blessing to all the families of the earth.

The story of Abraham is “only a story,” say some scholars. But to most of the three billion people who are “Abrahamic”—Jews, Christians, and Muslims—that story shapes much of their lives and gives meaning to their hopes. Often, these children of Abra­ham are not a blessing to each other: The accounts of crusades and jihads and holy wars involve them fighting with each other as much as with others. But you cannot talk them out of the notion that the call to Abraham made them a people with special blessings and responsibilities.

If we agree on nothing else, we can agree that the call was fateful.

Most of the time, we slide too fast over the little words “the Lord said. “ *Should we trust a story that finds God saying something and half of the human race changing because a man heard what God said?* There is no claim here that there were stone tablets or scrolls or other physical evidences of God saying any­thing in writing. “God said.” That means: Abraham heard voices—or a voice. *Should we trust the story, the voice? Does it come to others? To us?* Who hears voices now? First, the fanatic. The fanatic has been defined as someone who knows he’s doing what the Lord would do if the Lord were also in possession of the facts. Second, people with schizophrenia hear voices, sometimes a voice of the Lord. Third, religious prophets and apostles—in scriptures past and in contemporary life—hear them.

Most believers give a special status to the calls of long ago, at­tested to in the various scriptures. Today, though, self-proclaimed “prophets”—a David Koresh or a Jim Jones—claim to hear such a call and death follows. Founders of many new religions, most of them ephemeral, claim to hear such a call and delusion or frus­tration follows. You cannot talk them out of their claims, but only a few or a few thousand follow, so taking their claims seri­ously is not an issue for virtually all the human race.

So it comes to ordinary people. Do they—do “we”—hear “the Lord said “? Should they—should “we”—follow? *Not being Abraham, how should we think of a “call”? How do we test one, if it comes?* Most of the scriptures that talk about God talking also teach skepticism along with faith: “Test the spirits, to see whether they are of God.” So the best advice is: If the call is too direct, too “miraculous”-sounding, beware. Through the centuries, the people who most felt called and did most with their call found their vocation not through a voice from the clouds or the moun­tains or even within themselves. Instead, they saw their whole lives as grounded in the mysterious care of a loving God, who does leave traces in history: in events, in scriptures, in the calls and demands of other people, in the faithful heart.

*The serious people, at the end of whose life one can observe that they sensed a divine call, tend to be those who let God speak through a million little particulars in life.* Odds are, those who lived their lives in response to such a demand and promise were challenged along the way by others. How can you tell if you or someone else was divinely called? *Never rule out the possibility that a sense of a call and a calling will be a positive good: The world gets changed, often for the better, because of such re­sponses.* *Trust the half-certain more than the cocksure; those who test their call in community more than those who go it alone. And never completely let your guard down: Response to the call can be dangerous, as many vic­tims of called and chosen people and peoples could have attested*.

So, the story of Abraham and Sarah challenges, disturbs and in­spires us; it can change our ordinary lives and make us extraordi­narily, if cautiously, responsive.

# Abraham’s call and the nature of his spiritual journey

### Sandee Brawarsky

Sandee Brawarsky, a journalist and editor, is the book critic of The Jewish Week.

It is easy to imagine a Cecil B. De Mille-style call: God’s booming voice echoes over the mountains, bracketed by thunder, myste­riously heard only by Abraham. But perhaps the pronouncement is whispered, and Abraham isn’t sure whether it is God’s words or the murmurs of his soul. Daring in his faith, he chooses to believe that the message is ultimately from God, and he com­plies. “His faith in following the voice marks the first step on the path we still seek to walk,” Rabbi Arthur Green has written.

According to instructions, Abraham goes out from his land and his father’s house, not certain where he is headed, but ready to be led by a God known only to him. At some point, he stops leaving and begins the long process of arriving, which will engage him for the rest of his days. Although he is 75 years old, it is this point in his life that modern observers might define as his coming-of-age; his sense of self is transformed. In fact, when he is called by God, he is living in the city of Charan, which can be translated as “route,” “journey,” or “crossroads.” Indeed, the moment is the crossroads of Abraham’s life, as he begins a jour­ney like no other.

Commentators on the text have read God’s brief charge to Abraham, “*Lech l’cha*,” in various ways, with different emphases and meanings—as “Go,” “Go forth,” “Get thee out,” “Go for yourself (for your own benefit),” “Go by yourself,” “Go your own way,” “Go-you-forth.” The Zohar, the 13th-century Jewish mystical text, interprets the text as “Go *to* your self, know your self, fulfill your self.” Abraham must understand his own soul in order to move ahead; it’s a sacred journey inward as well as to the promised land. As biblical scholar E. A. Speiser has writ­ten: “It was the start of an epic voyage in search of spiritual truth, a quest that was to constitute the central theme of all biblical history.”

Does Abraham look back? Do his courage and faith endure? Does he miss the security of his old life and long for its simplicity? It’s never easy to break entirely with one’s past, with one’s fam­ily. However, losses are inextricably connected to growth. For Abraham, leaving home is a valuable and fruitful loss. God pro­vides the road map, in a code he must learn to decipher.

Abraham’s actions might seem to resemble those of the thou­sands who flocked to America’s still unsettled Western lands, hearkening to the call “Go West!,” and the countless peoples who have uprooted their families in search of a better life in a new and unknown place. But it is not the pursuit of wealth or power or adventure that seems to motivate Abraham, rather his faith in God. His reward is the promise of the future, the divine blessing granted through him to his descendants. However, God’s words are cloaked in mystery, for he and Sarah are old and childless when they leave Charan.

Why does God select an older man as the conduit of his bless­ing? Perhaps God sees a blend of enlightenment and openness in Abraham, who has reached elderhood, which Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi characterizes as “the time for harvesting the wisdom of a lifetime.” Perhaps it is Abraham’s life experience and his accumulated memory that enable him not only to hear God’s call but to act on it.

*Do we, the many descendants of Abraham, continue to hear God’s voice?* Are there certain times of life when God’s voice is clearest? Do we need to be in solitude—or is it possible to be called by God while on a crowded city street? Are there calls that we sometimes just don’t hear? Or don’t want to hear? In contempo­rary times, some speak of their “calling” as a message of voca­tion; they view their choice of life’s work as God-inspired. Some people encounter God’s words in their personal lives. According to the Midrash, it was God, “Life of all worlds,” who “illumined Abraham’s path wherever he went.”

In our own lives, those moments of clarity—when, perhaps, divinity is our light and compass—are the most significant sign­posts on our journeys.

Abraham could not have known God so deeply had he stayed home. The call comes to us—that is the blessing of God’s grace. We rise to answer the call—that is the blessing of human engage­ment.

# Ivri: naming ourselves

### Shammai Engelmayer[[1]](#footnote-1)

We think of ourselves as “Jews.” So others call us and so we call ourselves. Appearing as יהודים (*y’hudim*) in Hebrew, the designation derives from Judah (יהודה, y*’hudah*), Jacob’s fourth son and the eponymous ancestor of Israel’s largest tribe. The Bible, however, has other names for us beginning with עברי (*ivri*, Hebrew). Israelite is the most common name; it derives from בני ישראל (*b’nai yisrael,* children of Israel), a name that came into being when the patriarch Jacob’s name was changed to Israel. Names are powerful markers. These names—*ivri*, *y’hudi* and *ben yisra’el*, an Israelite—are often used as synonyms, with ivri probably being the oldest designation. Yet what “Hebrew” actually means and how it was originally applied remain elusive. This paper argues that ivri was never intended as a synonym for either *y’hudi* or *ben yisrael*. Rather, it proposes a more complex definition for *ivri*, one that colors the worldview of Israel itself.

While both *y’hudi* or *ben yisrael* clearly identify from whom or where a person came, unlike *ivri*, they do not predicate the reason for why that person is.

Y’hudi most likely was first used to identify a member of the tribe of Judah, although we have no instance of such use recorded. The name eventually attached to all residents of the kingdom that Judah came to dominate. Regardless of whether a citizen of the kingdom was a true Judahite (Simeon, for example, was subsumed by Judah), he was a Judahite (*y’hudi*) nevertheless. The use of Judahite in this way dates back at least to the breakup of the Davidic Kingdom of Israel following Solomon’s death (if not to the days before David united the kingdom) and is first used in 2 Kings 16.6. By the time of the first exile, it came to designate all of Israel’s remnant, with “Jew” eventually emerging as the diminutive form. Thus, in Esther 2.5, Mordechai is identified both as a *y’hudi*—being a refugee from Judah—and a Benjaminite, designating his tribal ancestry. Throughout the book, his people are all designated as *y’hudim*, with no regard to their actual lineages. (This discussion does not take into account the issues of parentage that play a role in the modern “who is a Jew” debate. Such discussion is beyond the scope of this paper. That discussion, however, may yet be informed by the definition of Hebrew proposed here.)

“Israelite” is older than Jew, and designates all of Jacob’s descendants.[[2]](#footnote-2) Today, the terms are interchangeable, although “Jew” is more common.

From biblical times to this, many people, Jews and non-Jews alike, have used “Hebrew” as yet another synonym. Thus, in 1873, the Reform movement in the United States named its new congregational arm the Union of American Hebrew Congregations.[[3]](#footnote-3) The word also is used to identify the traditional language of the Jewish people (*ivrit*).[[4]](#footnote-4) That *ivri* is not a perfect synonym for Israelite and Jew, however, is clear from how the word is used in the Bible. All Hebrews are Israelites and Jews, but I would argue not all Israelites and Jews are Hebrews.

Defining *ivri* could be seen as an esoteric exercise since none of the definitions proposed to date influence Judaism in any way, nor do they add to our understanding of the worldview that Israel developed. What, then, does it matter what *ivri* designates? On the other hand, if *ivri* helps explain the biblical attitude towards Israel—in the words of the pagan prophet Balaam, as “a people that dwells apart, not reckoned among the nations”[[5]](#footnote-5)—the exercise is no longer esoteric, but substantive. Such a definition is proposed here. Balaam’s words[[6]](#footnote-6) echo Israel’s own understanding of God’s intent. As King Solomon is quoted as saying, “For You, O Lord God, have set them apart for Yourself from all the peoples of the earth as Your very own, as You promised through Moses Your servant when You freed our fathers from Egypt.”[[7]](#footnote-7)

Being a nation separate and apart is consistent with the “mission” of Israel, as God is quoted as describing it. ואתם תהיו־לי ממלכת כהנים וגוי קדוש (*v’a-tem tih-yu-li mam-le-khet ko-ha-nim ve-goi ka-dosh*; “but you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation”).[[8]](#footnote-8)

Priesthood requires exclusivity of some kind. The Encyclopaedia Britannica notes that

[I]n certain types of societies, the office and functions of the priest may be limited to those having a particular ancestry, those belonging to certain tribes (such as the Levites in Judaism), families (such as the Eumolpids of the Eleusinian mystery religion of Greece), or castes (such as the Brahmans in Hinduism), and those initiated into certain professional orders (such as the cure doctors among the Maya).[[9]](#footnote-9)

As a people meant to be separate and apart from other nations, Israel has certain rules regarding who may (or may not) become a part of this “kingdom of priests and holy nation.” In the definition proposed here, the term Hebrew anticipates these rules and may be the inspiration for them.

Specifically, a Hebrew is the progeny of a familial descendant of Eber who married another descendant of Eber *and whose house adheres to an exclusive belief in God*. While this would seem to imply a notion of familial superiority, such a notion neither is warranted nor borne out by the facts of Israelite history. The definition, however, does anticipate exclusivity of a sort.

Before expanding the implications of this definition, however, a brief review of the most often cited current definitions is in order.

One definition, the most obvious, is that the term designates those who have descended from Eber (עבר), the grandson of Shem son of Noah, founder of the Semitic line. The Torah, however, apparently prefers the designation בני־עבר (*b’nei e-ver*; the Descendants of Eber) for these people.[[10]](#footnote-10) Also, not every descendant of Eber is called Hebrew. Both Ishmael and Esau, sons of Abraham and Isaac respectively, were descendants of Eber, but were never designated as Hebrew or self-identified as such.

A second suggestion is rooted in the fact that Eber also means, among other things, to traverse or cross over. In this instance, it would mean a person who comes מעבר הנהר (*me-e-ver ha-nahar*; from across “the river,” the Bible’s preferred way of referring to the Euphrates).[[11]](#footnote-11)

A verse in the Book of Joshua seems to offer support for this suggestion. It states, “And I took your father Abraham *me-e-ver ha-nahar*.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Since Abraham came from עבר the Euphrates, he is an *ivri*. The verse, however, merely may be stating a fact. Indeed, it does not seem likely that a term meant to memorialize Abraham’s having crossed the Euphrates would continue to be applied to future generations, none of whom came “from across the river.” It also is unlikely that it would be a recognizable designation in such faraway nations as Egypt.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The possibility also exists that the term is an ethnic designation. Hebrew as a label was first encountered in Genesis 14.13. *va-ya-vo ha-paleet va-ya-ged le-av-ram ha-iv-ri*, a fugitive brought the news to Abram the Hebrew. In that verse, we also encounter Mamre the Amorite, an ethnic designation. For ivri also to be ethnic, it would have to apply to more than just one person or family. Clearly, it does not.

Yet another suggestion is that Hebrew is the transliterated form of Apiru, a term that designates groups of troublesome vagabonds who appear throughout the Near East. How one becomes an Apiru is uncertain, but its association with ivri is tenuous, at best.

Is there an identifiable characteristic among those called ivri that could explain its meaning? In other words, what is there about Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that they share, but that such others as Isaac’s half-brother, Ishmael, and Jacob’s elder twin brother, Esau, do not?

What is clear is that the Patriarchs are the progeny of family members who themselves were products of unions among family members who, in turn, married family members. Abraham married Sarah, by his claim his half-sister (although we do not know who her mother was). Isaac married Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel, Abraham’s nephew, son of his brother Nahor, who had married Lot’s sister Milcah.[[14]](#footnote-14) Isaac and Rebekah gave birth to Jacob, who in turn marries two of his mother’s nieces.

Given the frequency with which these biblical personages marry within their family, it is fair to assume the patriarchal family’s tendency was endogamous—they married in, albeit not exclusively so, as in the cases of Abraham and Jacob. This assumption receives further support from the urgency with which Abraham in Isaac’s case, and Isaac and Rebekah in Jacob’s case insist that the sons marry in. The negative examples involve the pointed references to those of the family who “marry out,” notably Ishmael, Esau, and Judah.

Thus, we have a possible definition for Hebrew that takes into consideration the textual suggestions of ethnicity and also overcomes the problem posed by the designation “the descendants of Eber”: An ivri is a full familial descendant of Eber, meaning both parents are descendants of Eber, and who continues the line by marrying another descendant of Eber. In other words, both his/her father and his/her mother were of full Ivri descent, as were their parents, and their parents before them, and so on; and so will at least some of his/her children be. While the designation appears exclusionary, it had a practical purpose, as I will elaborate in a moment.

There are problems anew, however, beginning with Sarah: Who is she? More important, who is her mother?

Perhaps the question really should be, who was her father? Abraham claims that it was his own father, Terach,[[15]](#footnote-15) but just as Nahor married Milcah, the daughter of his deceased brother, so Terach could have adopted another of his late brother’s daughters, Sarah. Indeed, Josephus, Targum Yonatan and the Talmud all identify Iscah (Milcah’s sister) with Sarah. In such case, half-sister and adopted sister would be interchangeable.

Whether Sarah was actually Terach’s daughter or Charan’s, of course, is irrelevant if her mother is not known. An inference can be made, however, from Genesis 11.29 and elsewhere that “marrying in” was the Eber family custom. Why else let us know that Nahor married a family member and why tell us in Genesis 20.12 that Sarah really was at the least a blood relation of her husband’s, if not truly his half-sister?

In the stories of the betrothal of Rebekah to Isaac and the marriages of Jacob to Rachel and Leah, similar themes occur. The parental goal is for the son to marry within the family. Says Abraham to his servant, “go to the land of my birth and get a wife for my son Isaac.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Clearly, it is not that Abraham merely wants to prevent his son from marrying a Canaanite; he also does not want him to marry just anyone, whether in Canaan, Paddan-aram or elsewhere.[[17]](#footnote-17) Abraham wants only a family member from a specific branch of the family for a daughter-in-law, and that is why he sends the servant to his nephew, Bethuel.

Isaac is more specific in his charge to Jacob[[18]](#footnote-18): “So Isaac sent for Jacob and blessed him. He instructed him, saying, ‘You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women. Up, go to Paddan-aram, to the house of Bethuel, your mother’s father, and take a wife there from among the daughters of Laban, your mother’s brother.’“ On the other hand, the Torah seems to go out of its way to tell us that Isaac’s half-brother Ishmael married out and that Jacob’s twin, Esau, did the same. In Esau’s case, however, there was at least an effort to rectify this once he understood it as a problem.[[19]](#footnote-19)

The fact of Esau’s marriages and the negative references associated with them are evidence of a strong tendency in the Eber-to-Abraham line to marry in. If so, then Sarah’s mother was most likely a family member, and this is probably true for all the mothers in that line from the time of Eber. Thus, the same would hold true for Rebekah’s mother; Bethuel, too, stuck with tradition and married in, as his father had done. If not, why did Abraham send his servant there for Isaac’s bride? Why specify that the bride could come only from Bethuel’s family, and not Paddan-aram generally? Similarly, Rebekah could have sent Jacob anywhere to find refuge from Esau’s anger. Yet, she sent him to her home. Thus, there is no reason to doubt that she also wanted him to marry in, which is the reason Isaac gives him for sending him to Laban’s house.[[20]](#footnote-20)

The real problem with accepting “the progeny of those who marry in” as the definition for Hebrew comes with the sons of Jacob. Only eight were born of mothers who were family members (Leah and Rachel). Four are the children of servants (and thus, presumably, not family members). Those four would not be *ivrim*, Hebrews, under this definition.[[21]](#footnote-21) Judah, Simeon and Joseph all married out. Their children, too, would not be Hebrews as defined here.

As for the other five brothers, there is no information given about their spouses. Considering that in other cases when someone marries out that fact is highlighted in some way, it is fair to assume that these brothers married in, but just as easily, they could have married the daughters of the four sons of Bilhah and Zilpah. Even if their children would be classified as Hebrews, can the same be said of their children? Regardless, at best only two-thirds of Jacob’s children qualify as Hebrews under this definition and even fewer of his grandchildren. Yet the Egyptians refer to all of them as Hebrews. This would seem to call for a rejection of my view.

This need not be so, however. The first references to Jacob’s sons as Hebrews are made by an Egyptian[[22]](#footnote-22) and the reference is a proper one because the “Hebrew” in question is Joseph, a self-designating Hebrew, son of Rachel, Laban’s daughter and Bethuel’s granddaughter (and, as yet, unmarried). Joseph himself says he comes “from the land of the Hebrews,”[[23]](#footnote-23) thus acknowledging what he is. He probably never hid his heritage, in any case.

Only one reference exists in Genesis to Jacob’s entire brood of children as Hebrews and it appears from the vantage point of the Egyptians.[[24]](#footnote-24) No claim is made by any of Jacob’s sons other than Joseph to being a Hebrew (and, in truth, he never actually calls himself a Hebrew, although others do). It would be only natural, however, for a stranger to the Jacob family to assume that if one brother is a Hebrew, then all must be.

Thus, to Egyptians unaware of the nuance (or confused by it), if Joseph was a Hebrew, so were his brothers. And so would their progeny be Hebrews in Egyptian eyes.

This would seem to be borne out by the Torah itself, where the only other references to the descendants of Jacob being Hebrews can be found in the first 10 chapters of Exodus (with one notable, and perhaps telling, exception to be discussed below).

By then, however, the Egyptian identification of Joseph’s brothers as Hebrews was so ingrained that the descendants of the 12 brothers became accustomed to using the term when talking to outsiders, especially Egyptians. Internally, however, they used another identifying term, “the Children of Israel.”

Even God adopted this method. In dictating to Moses the speeches he was to deliver to Pharaoh, God often used the phrase “the God of the Hebrews,” but otherwise He never referred to Himself that way. And He never used “Hebrews” as a substitute for “Children of Israel” when talking to Moses about internal Israelite matters.

Thus, for example, we hear God referring to “Israel” when speaking to Moses at the burning bush: “Come, therefore, I will send you to Pharaoh and you shall free My people, the Israelites, from Egypt.”[[25]](#footnote-25) This is followed by a specific instruction to Moses regarding the make-up of the delegation to Pharaoh—”you shall go and the elders of Israel”—and what Moses should say when they arrived there: “the God of the Hebrews manifested Himself to us.”[[26]](#footnote-26)

It is said by some that the use of Hebrew in the Exodus story is a device to distinguish Israel from Egypt. The text, however, seems more pointed. Hebrew is a term readily understood by the Egyptians; on the other hand, they have had little or no experience with the “Israelites,” hence the use of Hebrew even by God in preparing speeches to be delivered to Egyptians. In other words, the references to Jacob’s children and descendants as Hebrews need not negate the validity of the proposed definition. They did not consider themselves Hebrews; the Egyptians did.

That begs the question: If Hebrew is such a narrowly defined term, how did the Egyptians ever come to use it? The first use of the term in Joseph’s case comes not from him, but from Potiphar’s wife, who complains of her husband, *he-vi la-nu ish iv-ri*, he had to bring us a Hebrew.[[27]](#footnote-27) The Bible, however, already supplied an answer. Abraham had been in Egypt years earlier and that visit had consequences serious enough to have made a lasting and unfavorable impression on the Egyptians.[[28]](#footnote-28)

This leaves two problems: Joseph’s “land of the Hebrews” claim and the concept of the “Hebrew slave.”

Joseph’s reference to a “land of the Hebrews”[[29]](#footnote-29) makes it appear as though the term Hebrew is indeed geographical. This is obviously not the case, however, since there were only a handful of Hebrews in all of Canaan, making a “land of the Hebrews” absurd as a geographical reference as far as the Egyptians were concerned. To them, Canaan belonged to the various peoples who dominated that land at the time, and the Hebrews were not among these. To Joseph, who believed in God’s promise, Canaan was indeed the “land of the Hebrews,” in the sense that God gave it to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, all Hebrews. However, he may have used the term as a geographical one, to say that he comes from Abraham’s land, which the Egyptians would understand.[[30]](#footnote-30)

This also could explain why the Egyptians would not dine with a Hebrew. Considering the grief that a single social contact with Abraham caused, it is not surprising that Egypt would want to prevent any further social contacts with “the Hebrew.”

Just as likely, however, the law did not specify the Hebrews, but was of a more general nature, prohibiting an Egyptian from dining with any alien whose practices offended their own codes of behavior and/or religious beliefs. Monotheistic shepherds, for example, easily fit into that category.[[31]](#footnote-31) Alternatively, it may be a result of the rule of the so-called Hyksos, the Semitic pharaohs of the 15th and 16th dynasties (one of whom almost certainly was Jacob).

That leaves us with the “Hebrew slave,”[[32]](#footnote-32) as distinguished from an ordinary slave. It is not the distinction that is unusual—the Israelites surely would want to distinguish between how to treat their kin who are enslaved and the foreigner, possibly a former enemy—but the phrase is not used to make that distinction. Since the Israelites never refer to themselves as Hebrews, why refer to a “Hebrew slave,” rather than an “Israelite slave”? Even in Deuteronomy, which is set 40 years after the Exodus, that distinction is kept alive. Thus, Deuteronomy 15.12 states, “If a fellow Hebrew, man or woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall set him free.”

That the term was used once, immediately following the Revelation at Mount Sinai, could be explained by the proximity of that event to the Exodus, a mere seven weeks. In such case, it could be argued that the term is meant to highlight the fact that former slaves should know how not to treat the slaves they acquire. The use of “Hebrew” here thus may be meant to recall how the Egyptians treated the Israelites, whom they called Hebrews.

The fact that the term returns in Deuteronomy, however, after a passage of four decades during which the word Hebrew is never used to describe Israel or an Israelite, suggests another possibility: that there were two distinct classes of Israelite, the Hebrew and the rest of Israel. In other words, the term “Hebrew slave” designates an Israelite slave from that portion of Israelite society that remains Hebrew and, as a result, is somehow deserving of distinctive treatment. That a Hebrew can be enslaved, however, undercuts any suggestion that this distinctive treatment is based on any caste-like superiority.

That such a distinction existed also appears to be suggested by Exodus 2.11, “and he saw an Egyptian man beating a Hebrew man from among his brothers,” which may be the only time in Exodus where the reference to Hebrew is in connection with the perception of an Israelite, rather than an Egyptian. The Israelite in this case is Moses. The verse could be saying that to the Egyptian beating the slave, the man being beaten was a Hebrew and that Moses, too, viewed him this way because, at this point, Moses is still a prince of Egypt. However, it could also be indicating that to Moses, the man being beaten was not just an Israelite, but an Israelite who also was a Hebrew, as he himself was. That this is the more likely explanation is suggested by the final word in the sentence. It is already established that Moses is a Levite, son of both a Levite father and Levite mother, leading to the possibility that they also were Hebrew Israelites. By telling us that Moses “saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew *mei-eh-chav*, literally meaning “from among his brothers,” we also are being told that the man being beaten was not just an Israelite, but a Hebrew Israelite.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Others beside the Egyptians (and perhaps because of them) confused the term Hebrew with Israelite. This is clear from 1 Samuel, where the term appears several times, almost always from the perception of the Philistines. In one case, however, Hebrew is used in contrast to Israelite. “And the Hebrews who had previously sided with the Philistines, who had come up with them in the army [from] round about—they too joined the Israelites who were with Saul and Jonathan.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

Such a distinction, if indeed it existed within Israel itself, would eliminate the possibility of either geography or simple genealogy as a definition for Hebrew. That distinction, based on the emphasis placed by the patriarchs on “marrying in,” would be that a Hebrew is the progeny of a full descendant of Eber who married another full descendant of Eber.

This, of course, would also include Esau (but not Ishmael, whose mother, Hagar, was an Egyptian), at least until his marriages. This would explain why Isaac and Rebekah were so distressed by Esau’s marrying out, whereas Abraham seems as unconcerned regarding Ishmael’s marriage to an Egyptian woman[[35]](#footnote-35) as he is concerned about Isaac marrying only someone from his nephew’s immediate family.

That Esau is not called Hebrew could only be because he married out. In other words, that his progeny would not be Hebrews was sufficient to remove the designation from him, as well.

Is a Hebrew, then, nothing more than a full descendant of Eber who continues the line?

The lack of information (the names and lineages of all the wives of all of the descendants of Eber in the Abrahamic line) remains the only barrier to accepting such a definition. It should be noted that, if this is the definition, then the term “Hebrew” could have begun as an internal one, used by the family to distinguish those who remained true to the family tradition of marrying in. Any external use accrued because of the activities of Abraham and his descendants.

Such a solution, however, remains unsatisfying because it does not explain what motivated the Hebrews to marry in. If it was simply a desire for genealogical purity, it would seem likely that it would include all of Eber’s descendants, and not just one branch. After all, the entire family shares the same DNA. It also would not have been a “temporary” measure, meant to lose its urgency within a few generations; from Jacob onward, it is clear that a racially pure blood line was never intended. Our solution, then, is incomplete as so far proposed.

This “Jacob factor” also helps narrow our search for the missing element and provides a clue to it. All of Jacob’s descendants remain “the house of Jacob..., the children of Israel,”[[36]](#footnote-36) provided they were Israelites by birth or through acceptance of the basic belief system of “Israel.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

In other words, the search must be limited to what made a person a Hebrew from Eber to Isaac. One possible element that is consistent with the history of this family is that a Hebrew differed from his perfect E*b’rit*e cousin in an essential, defining way: He held to a belief not shared by the others, namely belief in Eber’s God. Only by excluding outsiders could “Hebrews” feel certain that this belief would not be diluted in future generations by intermarriage. This also would explain why others identified all of Jacob’s family as Hebrews even though only a part of the clan could rightfully be called by that name: because they, the outsiders, interpreted Hebrew as referring to the belief system alone, and this was shared by all of the Israelites.[[38]](#footnote-38)

What would seem to work against this answer is Laban, who would have had to marry in for his daughters to be acceptable as wives for Jacob, yet he and his father are described as Aramaeans, not Hebrews.[[39]](#footnote-39) There is sufficient evidence, however, that both Laban and Bethuel were, in fact, believers in God, albeit not exclusively.[[40]](#footnote-40) Their daughters, however, may not have supported the apostasy.[[41]](#footnote-41)

While the text does not state this, it does offer up the possibility that this was the case. Thus, Bethuel would have been born into a home in which God was known and worshipped. Certainly, in this scenario and Laban’s own statement, Bethuel’s father Nahor was so raised.

Working against this is Joshua 24.2-3, which states, “Then Joshua said to all the people, ‘Thus said the Lord, the God of Israel: In olden times, your forefathers—Terach, father of Abraham and father of Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and worshiped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from beyond the Euphrates and led him through the whole land of Canaan and multiplied his offspring.’“

Terach, then, was an idol-worshipper, according to Joshua. This obviously conflicts with Laban’s statement in Genesis 31.53 that Abraham’s God was also “the God of Nahor [and] the God of their father,” meaning Terach.[[42]](#footnote-42)

One way to reconcile the two is to suggest that Terach was a God-worshipper, but he had begun to slip, seeking out the support of “other gods” in addition to the God of his family. God then orders him to take his family and move to Canaan, presumably to eliminate the influence Aramaean paganism is having on them. Nahor stays behind, but Terach sets out for Canaan.[[43]](#footnote-43) The pagan influence, however, is too great on him and, before reaching his goal, Terach settles in Charan. God then transfers the call to Abraham.

To sum up, a Hebrew is the progeny of a full descendant of Eber who married another full descendant of Eber and whose house adheres to an exclusive belief in Eber’s God.[[44]](#footnote-44)

As the family of Abraham grew into a nation, the need for “marrying in” lessened and, eventually, disappeared. Thus, unlike Abraham and Isaac before him, Jacob makes no effort to continue the line with his children. That was important only when the Hebrews were few and far between; Jacob’s large brood meant that there were more God-fearers immediately at hand from among whom he could choose spouses for his grandchildren.

The rationale for the Hebrew line, however, remained valid. Moses, therefore, uses the same justification to explain why marriages between Israelites and the inhabitants of Canaan are prohibited. “You shall not intermarry with them: do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. For they will turn your children away from Me to worship other gods, and the Lord’s anger will blaze forth against you and He will promptly wipe you out.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

It should be noted that, while the need for a unique Hebrew line disappeared even as early as Jacob’s day, at least through the end of the first Temple period, a segment of Israelite society remained Hebrews. Old traditions die hard, especially among Jews.

My argument is not directed to familial superiority. The emphasis on the definition is not solely on the bloodline, but on the belief system that went with it and was the motive for it.

This is confirmed, as well, in the laws of Israel, which make no distinction between a Hebrew and other Israelites save in the case of the Hebrew slave—and that distinction would seem to be rooted in history, not familial or racial superiority. Because to the Egyptians the people they enslaved were Hebrews, the legal distinction serves as yet another reinforcement for Israel of that enslavement and of the Exodus. Such reinforcement is common in Israel’s laws.

# About Melchizedek

### James L. Kugel, The Bible As It Was

After his return to Canaan, Abraham suddenly found himself drawn into a great war: Lot, Abraham’s nephew, had been taken prisoner, and Abraham intervened to save him, taking a band of men with him. They succeeded in freeing Lot; afterward Abraham returned home. It was then that he encoun­tered a certain Melchizedek, the king of Salem. Melchizedek brought out bread and wine; he was “a priest of God Most High.” Melchizedek blessed Abraham, and he gave him a tithe (tenth) of his possessions.

Melchizedek is something of an enigma in the Bible. We are not told the name of his father or his mother, or anything about his family. He is not mentioned anywhere in the various lists of Noah’s descendants. We are not told when he was born—nor even that he *was* born—and the Bible is equally silent about his death. Nor, for that matter, is the location of his kingdom, Salem, known for sure. Thus, almost everything about him was mysterious for ancient interpreters.

His encounter with Abraham certainly seemed designed to impart some lesson—but what exactly was it? Nothing really happened in this meeting, save that Melchizedek brought out food and then blessed Abraham (as priests were later to bless people who came to the Jerusalem Temple). Abraham then apparently gave him a tithe[[46]](#footnote-46) (as people were also to bring tithes to the Temple).

But these very details were what was most intriguing in the story, for Melchizedek thus seemed to be a priest. How could that be? The priesthood itself had not yet been established, nor had the Jerusalem Temple been built. Yet here was Melchizedek, bluntly described as a “priest of God Most High.” Not only that, but Melchizedek apparently had not the slightest connection to the priesthood that would eventually be established in Israel—for that priesthood was hereditary, and its family line went back through Abraham, not Melchizedek! Who was this so-called priest?

## A Generous Host, a Righteous King, a Divinely Appointed Priest

Many ancient interpreters supposed that, if the Bible had gone out of its way to describe this puzzling (and apparently inconsequential) episode, it must be that Melchizedek had nevertheless done something significant. The main thing he did, according to the biblical account, was to “bring out bread and wine,” although the text does not say for whom. Perhaps, in charac­teristically understated fashion, the Bible here was alluding to an extraordi­nary act of generosity, the providing of food and drink (and wine at that!) to Abraham’s entire army. In any case, a number of writers specified what the Bible did not, that the food and drink were given to Abraham’s whole com­pany.

Other things, however, suggested that Melchizedek must have been a note­worthy figure in his own right. To begin with, Melchizedek seems to mean something like “king of righteousness” or “king of justice” in Hebrew. It occurred to some that this might be not his real name but—like “king of Salem” and “priest of God Most High”—a title, one that might hold the key to his real importance. Perhaps he was an extraordinarily just and righteous king.

Moreover, since “Salem” corresponded to the last part of the name “Jerusa­lem,” some interpreters concluded that Melchizedek had been Jerusalem’s first king and founder. Indeed, if he was a “priest,” perhaps he had also founded some sort of sanctuary in Jerusalem, a forerunner of the great temple to be built there centuries later.

There was, however, another factor that bore on Melchizedek’s true identity. The name “Melchizedek” appears in one other place in the Hebrew Bible, in a passing reference in Psalm 110. The language of this psalm is somewhat obscure in Hebrew; here is one modern translation of its opening lines:

The Lord says to my lord: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter. Rule in the midst of your foes! Your people will offer themselves freely on the day you lead your host upon the holy mountains. From the womb of the morning like dew your youth will come to you. The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ***“You are a priest forever, after the line of Melchizedek.”***—Psalms 110.1-4

Ancient readers of the story of Abraham and Melchizedek in Genesis looked to this psalm to help clarify its significance. But that meant first deciding to whom the highlighted words were addressed and what they meant. Here, the poten­tially ambiguous writing system of biblical Hebrew played a crucial role: several of the Hebrew words that correspond to the highlighted words above could be read and understood in two radically different fashions. This led to the development of two different schools of thought on the identity of Mel­chizedek among the Bible’s ancient interpreters.

One way of understanding the highlighted words in Psalms 110.4 was: “You are a priest forever by my order [or “on my account”], O Melchizedek.” If this is the right translation, then it is Melchizedek who is being addressed through­out the psalm, and everything else in the psalm that refers to “you” must therefore be talking about Melchizedek. The psalm would thus seem to re­count that Melchizedek had been appointed to the priesthood by God Himself (since the whole of verse 4 would now be: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever by my order, O Melchizedek’”). This would, of course, correspond to his description in Genesis as a “priest of God Most High”—indeed, a priest who was personally appointed by God must have been no ordinary priest, but an ancient forerunner to the exalted office of high priest:

When the high priest of God Most High saw him [Abraham] ap­proaching and bearing his spoils. —Philo, On Abraham 235

You [O God] are the one who appointed Melchizedek as a high priest in Your service.—Apostolic Constitutions 8.12.23

And Melchizedek, the king of Jerusalem , was a priest serving in the high priesthood before God Most High.—Targum Neophyti Genesis 14.18

## The Heavenly Melchizedek

But interpreting Abraham’s encounter with Melchizedek in the light of Psalm 110 led to other, more radical conclusions. After all, the Melchizedek described in the psalm seemed in some ways superhuman. His royal scepter had come from God Himself (“The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty scepter”). In fact, Melchizedek is apparently the “lord” referred to in the first line, who was commanded by God to “sit at my right hand” like some sort of angel or divine being.

It is from this interpretation of Psalm 110 that there emerged the figure of a heavenly Melchizedek, an angelic being who sits next to the divine throne. Such a Melchizedek is found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, where (in a text going back to the early 1st or 2nd century B.C.E.) he is said to be ready to punish the guilty and save the righteous in the great day of reckoning:

Melchizedek will carry out the vengeance of the laws of Go[d on that day and he will sa]v[e them from] Belial and from all his k[indred spirits,] and to his aid will (come) all the “gods’” of [justice and] he [Melchizedek] is the one w[ho will stand on that day over] all the sons of God and will ord[ain] this [asse]mbly.

This is the Day of P[eace, a]bout which [God] spoke [of old in the words of] the prophet [Isai]ah, who said “[How] beautiful on the mountains are the messen[ger]’s feet, [pr]oclaiming peace.”—(l1QI3) *Melchizedek Text* 2.13-16

It may be that the interpretation of the name “Melchizedek” had a role in the understanding of this angel’s precise functions: he is the “king of justice” in the sense that he “will carry out the vengeance of God’s laws.” This under­standing also corresponds to the psalm’s assertion that “he will execute judgment among the nations” (Psalms 110.6). Some identified this angelic Melchizedek with the archangel Michael.

Another crucial ambiguity found in Psalm 110 also contributed to the identification of Melchizedek as an angel or heavenly being. It is the verse translated above as, “From the womb of the morning like dew your youth will come to you.” This could be translated in a radically different way—and was. The Septuagint translation of this verse reads:

From the womb, before the morning star, I have begotten you.—Septuagint Psalms 110.5

If these words were spoken by God to Melchizedek (as they seemed to be in context), then they meant that Melchizedek is God’s “son.” Now, “sons of God” was a phrase elsewhere understood as referring spe­cifically to the angels. If so, then this “son of God” who sits at God’s right hand must have been an angel charged with executing divine justice on earth, the angelic “king of justice.”

A somewhat related Melchizedek appears in the work called 2 Enoch, which may go back to the early 1st century CE. In this text, Melchizedek seems to be born to Sopanim (or “Sothonim”), the wife of Noah’s (mythical) brother Nir, without any prior act of sexual intercourse (2 Enoch 71.2). The idea that Melchizedek was so conceived may be in keeping with the interpre­tation of Psalms 110.5 just seen: God’s words “I have begotten you” meant that Melchizedek was begotten without any human progenitor. In any case, God promises Nir that, although a great flood is coming to destroy the earth, Melchizedek will be safe:

Behold, I plan now to send down a great destruction onto the earth. But concerning the child [Melchizedek], do not be anxious, Nir, be­cause I in a short while shall send my archangel Gabriel. And he will take the child and put him in the Garden of Eden, and he will not perish with those who must perish. And Melchizedek will be my priest to all priests, and I will sanctify him and I will change him into a great people who will sanctify me.—2 Enoch (A) 71.27—29

However much this Melchizedek had a human mother, he nonetheless seems to have acquired superhuman traits: miraculously saved from the flood, he is actually permitted to reenter Eden, and will go on to become some sort of “priest to all priests”—in keeping with Melchizedek’s title in Genesis, “a priest [directly] to God Most High.”

## The Christian “Order of Melchizedek”

But there was a second way of reading the crucial verse Psalms 110.4. Instead of indicating the person being spoken to (that is, “You are a priest forever by my order, O Melchizedek”), the word “Melchizedek” could be understood as part of the previous phrase; then the verse would read, “You are a priest forever, after the order of [or “for the sake of,” “on account of”] Melchizedek.” If so, then the psalm was addressed not to Melchizedek, but to some undefined “you,” a “you” who is also being referred to in the first line of the psalm as “my lord.”

Early Christians interpreted this “you” as Jesus. (Indeed, the fact that Psalm 110 began “The Lord said to my lord” was offered as proof that there were indeed two heavenly “Lords”; see Mark 12.35-37 and parallels, Acts 2. 34-36). Consequently, the psalm seemed to be saying that Jesus was in fact a priest:

Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was ap­pointed by Him who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you,” as it also says elsewhere [in the same psalm], “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.” In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications and he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the [war] and blessed him, and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by trans­lation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. He is without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God, he continues a priest forever.—Hebrews 5.5-10, 7.1-3

For the author of Hebrews, it was certainly important that the Melchizedek of Genesis 14.17-20 was a “priest to God Most High” without having been from the traditional priestly line. For, this meant that the “you” of Psalm 110—by this interpretation, Jesus—could likewise be appointed a high priest without being of priestly descent (see Hebrews 9.11-12). That is what “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek” meant to this author—a priest directly ap­pointed by God.

It was not a big step to interpret the person of Melchizedek as a foreshadowing [of] other elements of Christianity, including the Eucharist:

“Salem” means specifically “peace,” of which our Savior is said to be king. For concerning him does Moses say, “Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of God Most High.” He offers him “bread and wine” [Genesis 14.18], holy food, as a prefiguring of the eucharist. It is true that the name “Melchizedek” means “just king,” but justice and peace are synonyms.—Clement of Alexandria, Miscellanies 4.161, 3

## An Uncircumcised Priest?

At the same time, the fact that Melchizedek was a priest without the usual genealogy, and that he had apparently not undergone circumcision nor followed other Jewish laws and practices, was taken by Christians from an early period as a biblical proof that such things were not important.

For if [circumcision] were necessary, as you think, God would not have formed Adam uncircumcised, nor would He have looked with favor upon the gifts of Abel, who offered sacrifices but was not circum­cised, nor would Enoch, who was not circumcised, have pleased him. The priest of God Most High, Melchizedek, was without circumci­sion, and he had tithes given him by Abraham as offerings. Abraham was the first to receive circumcision in the fleshly sense, and yet he was blessed by Melchizedek [the uncircumcised], after whose order God has announced by David [for example, in Psalm 110] that He would establish the eternal Priest.—Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 19.3-4

Likewise Melchizedek, priest of God Most High, was not circumcised and did not keep the sabbath, yet he was chosen for the priesthood of God.—Tertullian, *Against the Jews* 2

Others maintained the opposite:

Likewise, [Melchizedek] was born circumcised, as it says “And Mel­chizedek, king of Salem” [interpreted as the king who was *shalem*, “complete” or “perfect,” hence, circumcised). —Abot de Rabbi Natan (A) 2

He was righteous and he was born circumcised.—Genesis Rabba 26.3

## Melchizedek in Samaria

As we have already glimpsed, Jewish sources generally held that Melchizedek’s kingdom, Salem, was simply a shortened form of the name “Jerusalem.”

Some interpreters, however, thought otherwise. A tradition existed that iden­tified “Salem” as a site at or near Shechem, the capital of Samaria (formerly the northern kingdom of Israel). A fragment attributed to (Pseudo-)Eupole­mus (who may or may not have been a Samaritan) actually mentions Melchizedek in retelling the story of Abraham. However, this text says that Mel­chizedek served as a priest in a temple on the Samaritan mountain, Mt. Gerizim, near Shechem.

The idea that Salem was at or near Shechem would have been very useful to the Samaritans. For in later times, too, they considered Mt. Gerizim to be sacred and, indeed, the real site intended by God for His temple (not Jerusa­lem). If Melchizedek had been a priest of God in their territory way back in the time of Abraham, here was biblical proof that their claims for the sanctity of their own temple and its priests were truly valid.

## Melchizedek Was Shem

Many Jews must have found such uses of the story of Melchizedek disturbing. No doubt the situation was eased somewhat by a contrary tradition that held that “Melchizedek” was simply an honorific name of Shem, Noah’s son. “Likewise Shem was born circumcised, as it says, ‘And Melchizedek, king of Salem’ [interpreted as the king who was *shalem*, “complete” or “perfect,” hence, circumcised],: as *Abot de Rabbi Natan* puts it. Or, “This Melchizedek was Shem,” according to the early Christian theologian Ephraem the Syrian in his commentary. Then there is this:

The [Jews] say that he [Melchizedek] was Shem, Noah’s son, and counting up the total years of his lifetime [800 years, ac­cording to Genesis 11.11], they demonstrate that he would have lived up to [the time of] Isaac [and so certainly could have encountered Abraham in Genesis 14.18-21].—Jerome, *Questions in Genesis*, Genesis 14.18

This identification—while probably of ancient origin—must have helped to “domesticate” Melchizedek in the face of some of the claims made regarding his true identity. For if Melchizedek was indeed Shem, a distant ancestor of the Jews, and if his high priesthood was associated with the very site on which the great temple was to be built (Salem, understood as Jerusalem), then here was really only another indication that Jerusalem had always been God’s chosen spot for His sanctuary and that the Jewish people, even in the time of their remotest ancestors, had already been chosen by God to supply that sanctuary with its priests.

## Services No Longer Needed tomorrow yeah

Nevertheless, a later rabbinic tradition proposed a rather different under­standing of Abraham’s meeting with this mysterious figure. According to this interpretation, the whole significance of the biblical story can be grasped only by considering the wording of the blessing that Melchizedek offers. He says:

Blessed be Abram to God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hands.—Genesis 14.19-20

In these lines the Rabbis saw a crucial mistake on Melchizedek’s part: he blessed Abraham *before* blessing God, which was a great sacrilege. As a result, they concluded, God must have decided that Melchizedek was not a very good choice for the priesthood after all:

R. Zechariah said in the name of R. Ishma’el: God at first wished to have the priesthood come from Shem [that is, Melchizedek], as it is written, “and he was a priest to God Most High” [Genesis 14.18]. But when he [Melchizedek] put Abraham’s blessing before God’s own, God resolved to have the priesthood descend from Abraham instead. And thus it says, “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek’ [Psalms 110.4].” [“After the order,” *al dibrati*, should be interpreted as] “be­cause of the words [*al dibburo*] of Melchizedek.” Likewise it says, “and he was a priest to God Most High”—he was a priest, but not his descendants.—Babylonian Talmud tractate Nedarim 32b

According to this interpretation, the words in Psalm 110, “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek,” were not spoken to Melchizedek but to his replacement, who was to found the priestly dynasty in Israel. Mel­chizedek himself had proven to be an unsuitable priest: if the Bible says, “he was a priest,” it means to imply by this “he alone”: his descendants would not inherit the job from him.

In short: Melchizedek provided bread and wine to Abraham and all of his troops. He was king of Jerusalem and perhaps its founder; his name meant “king of righteousness” (or “justice”). He served there as a priest, perhaps a divinely appointed high priest. Indeed, some interpreters concluded that Melchizedek was in reality an angel or semidivine being. Early Christians further saw in him a foreshadowing of Jesus—a priest by divine appointment rather than through priestly pedigree, whose gift of bread and wine foreshad­owed the Eucharist and whose uncircumcised state demonstrated that cir­cumcision was not necessary. Another tradition, however, held that “Mel­chizedek” was simply an honorific title for Noah’s son Shem, who had inherited the priesthood from him; the priesthood was taken away from him because of his defective blessing.

# Covenants

### James Kugel, How to read the Bible

One important biblical institution has, however, undeniably been illumi­nated by research into Abraham and the ancient Near East, and that is the institution of "covenant" (in Hebrew, *b’rit*). "Covenant" is just a fancy English term for an agreement, and that is precisely what a *b’rit* was: "treaty" or "charter" might likewise be appropriate translations. Normally, a *b’rit* was concluded between two or more individuals, or between individ­uals representing their larger groups, as seems to be the case with the covenant between Abraham and Avimelech (Genesis 21.27).

A *b’rit* was differ­ent from modern-day agreements in one respect, however. Nowadays, when we make a solemn agreement with someone, it is usually followed by a par­ticular act: a piece of paper with some writing on it is put in front of the agreeing parties, and each party then takes a pen (not a pencil!) and puts some squiggles on a blank line at the bottom of the document. People explain this ceremony by saying that it is required because, should some doubt later arise about the agreement's validity, an expert can be called in to make sure the two signatures actually are those of the agreeing parties.

This may, on rare occasions, happen. In my experience, however, disputes rarely arise about the validity of the signatures; usually, the dispute is about the meaning of the words that were printed on the page before either party signed it.

Still, the signatures are deemed crucial—indeed, sometimes the signing has to be witnessed and even attested by a licensed notary. Why all this fuss? A cultural anthropologist would probably say the real function of the signing cer­emony is largely symbolic: it is a ritual—a ceremony designed to make the agreement official and put it into effect. After signing, both parties agree, there is no turning back.

In the ancient Near East, they, of course, had documents—at first, clay tablets; these were inscribed with hatch marks from a wedge­-shaped marker while the clay was still wet. (This is the writing system known as cuneiform, from the Latin *cuneus*, "wedge.") These clay tablets could be stored for future use and even authenticated in some fashion.

But agreements were not generally solemnized and put into effect by being written down and authenticated (though they were often committed to writing at some point). Instead, there was a different sort of ceremony—or rather, a range of differ­ent sorts of ceremonies; one of the most common involved the killing and cut­ting up of an animal or animals, often leading to a festive meal. After the animals were slaughtered in the presence of the agreeing parties, the agreement was deemed to have gone into effect. Such covenants were known through­out the ancient Near East; they were called by different names, but the element of slaughtering an animal was basically the same. In Akkadian, "Let's go slaughter a donkey" was an idiom meaning, "Let us make an agreement."

What the killing of the animal was meant to imply is difficult to say.

Some texts unambiguously assert that the killing and dismemberment was intended to be a not-too-veiled threat. "Just as this calf is cut up, so may Matiel be cut up," says an Aramaic treaty of the 8th century B.C.E., implying that such is the penalty for breach of contract. Another document testifies: "Abba-AN swore to Yarim-lim the oath of the gods and cut the neck of a lamb, (saying): If I take back what I gave you.” Similarly: "If Mati'ilu violates the covenant and oath to the gods, then as the head of this ram shall be struck off, so shall his head be struck off."

But such explanations may merely represent (as was the case with ordinary sacrifices) a later attempt to find a rationale for a long-established ritual whose original rationale lay shrouded in hoary antiquity. Whatever the true reason, the act of cutting up animals was apparently a big part of the original idea: in biblical Hebrew, covenants are usually "cut," and this seems to bespeak the centrality of this ritual act.

##### "O Lord, Can I Get That in Writing?"

After Abraham has journeyed from Ur to Charan and from Charan on to Canaan, the Bible reports, God appeared to him in a vision, saying to him, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am granting you a very great reward" (Genesis 15.1). Abraham is skeptical—what good will it do to him to be rewarded if he has no heirs? God reassures him on this score: He will indeed have descen­dants, in fact, as numerous as the stars.

Then He said to him: "I am the Lord who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess." But he said, "O Lord, my Master, how can I know that I will possess it?" He said to him: "Bring me a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a young pigeon." He brought Him all of these, and then cut them in two, laying each half over against the other.... (Genesis 15.7-10)

Until the 20th century, this passage, like so many in the Bible, must have seemed somewhat mysterious. What was the point of cutting up these ani­mals? Now, in the light of everything that is known about ancient Near East­ern covenants and treaties, scholars believe that Abraham's pious-sounding question, "O Lord, my Master, how can I know that I will possess it?" might better be reworded: "O Lord, do you think I could have that in writ­ing?"

What Abraham is really asking is that God's promise to give him "this land to possess" be made official—and God obliges:

“When the sun had gone down and it was dark, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces [of animals]. On that day, the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land." (Genesis 15.17-18)

The fire and torch, modern scholars say, are apparently intended to represent God's physical presence here, and by walking between the cut-up animal carcasses, God was doing exactly what the text says He was doing (and what an ordinary human being would be doing by the same action), making a covenant with Abraham. Henceforth, the land would belong to his descen­dants.

# Angelology

### Nahum Sarna, The JPS Torah Commentary to Genesis

The bearer of the divine word is described as “an angel of the Lord.” Hebrew *malach* (מלאך) derives from an Ugaritic stem (*lak*) meaning “to send”; *lak* is used as a verb in Ugaritic, Arabic, and Ethiopic. [It also may stem from the same root as מלאכה, *m’lachah*, which means work in Hebrew.—Shammai] *Malach*, like the Greek *angelos*, from which the English “angel” is derived, means nothing more than “messenger” [someone or something (such as a burning bush) who/that performs work on behalf of another; in other words, an agent—Shammai]. It is used of ordinary humans, as in Genesis 32.4, Judges 9.31, and I Kings 19.2, as well as of spiritual beings. A prophet or priest may also be called “an angel of the Lord,” as in Haggai 1.13 and Malachi 2.7. No special importance attaches to angels in pre-exilic biblical literature. Information about the nature of belief in them is very sparse. They are nameless; they are without any mythological qualities; they enjoy neither individuality nor free will, and there is no hierarchy among them. Their sole function is as the emissary of God to carry out His specific charge.

From several texts it is clear that the demarcation between God and His angel is often blurred. Hagar is addressed by the angel (16.7-8,9,11) but she responds directly to God (verse 13). The same interchange of speakers occurs in Genesis 22.11-12,15-18 and at the inci­dent at the burning bush in Exodus 3.2,4. At the Exodus from Egypt it is now God (Exodus 13.21), now His angel (14.9) who goes ahead of the Israelite camp. In the story of Gideon (Judges 6.11-23) God and His angel speak interchangeably.

On the other hand, angels most frequently assume human form so that the individuals to whom they appear are at first unaware of their angelic nature. Such is the case, for instance, in Genesis 18-19. The three who visit Abraham are variously described as “men” (18.1,16,22; 19.5,10,12,16) and as “angels” (19.1,15), and the Sodomites certainly perceive them to be humans (19.5,9). In the case of the mother of Samson (Judges 13), the one who appears to her is “an angel of the Lord” (verse 3) whom she describes as “a man of God” who “looked like an angel of God, very frightening” (verse 6). When the angel reappears to her husband, Manoah does not recognize him as such (verse 16) until he disappears in the flames on the altar (verses 20f.).

Several suggestions have been made to account for the presence of angelology in Israel.

Some see a borrowing from Near Eastern mythology in which deities are surrounded by ministers semi-divine, semi-human. In Ugaritic, the messenger who goes back and forth between the gods is termed *ml’k*. It is hypothesized that Israel borrowed, refined, and monotheized the notion. Another view regards the angel as the personified extension of God’s will, or the personification of His self-manifestation. A third theory sees the angel as a conceptual device to avoid anthropomorphism. He serves as a mediator between the transcendent God and His mundane world.

Angelology largely disappears with the advent of classical prophecy in the middle of the 8th century B.C.E., only to reappear in post-exilic times in highly developed and complex forms.

# Is Sarah—are women—part of the covenant?

### Ruth H. Sohn, in The Torah a Woman’s Commentary

Is Sarah part of the *b’rit* that God establishes with Abraham? While our impulse might well be: “How can you ask such a question? Of course Sarah was part of the covenant, the details of the text force the question upon us. From the opening words calling Abraham to leave his homeland, and through­out this parashah, God speaks directly with Abraham, not with Sarah. Most dramatically, the sign of the *b’rit* in Genesis 17 is circumcision, clearly a male-only ritual.

One could argue that this ritual established a covenant only between God and Abraham, and Abraham’s male descendants, and that women stood out­side this religious cult altogether. Perhaps Sarah and the other matriarchs had their own religious practices and traditions, their own way of relating to God. Or, perhaps, they were passive members of this covenant between God and the men, valued as child-bearers, but otherwise on the periphery.

Let us consider another way to read the text. The critical element of the *b’rit* is the promise that Abra­ham will be fruitful and become the father of nations. Women’s role as childbearers is therefore central to meaning of the covenant. And, while God does not address Sarah directly in Genesis 17, God refers to her and changes Sarah’s name just like Abraham’s—with the addition of the letter *hei* and with a parallel explanation: “she shall give rise to na­tions; rulers of peoples shall issue from her” (17.16).

Even when Abraham doubts Sarah’s ability to bear children and suggests that God’s covenant continue through Ishmael, God reassures him that the covenant will pass through Sarah’s son, Isaac. Thus, God makes it clear that not all of Abraham’s descendants are part of this covenant, only the ones of Sarah. This un­derscores Sarah’s crucial role; it makes Sarah and Abraham, physically speaking, equal partners in the covenant.

In a sense, the greatest “sign” of this covenant is the fulfillment of God’s promise that Sarah will bear a child. Sarah’s pregnancy and Isaac’s birth are tangible proof that God fulfills promises—and will similarly fulfill the other promises. Perhaps women after Sarah, as the ones bearing life, carry on the covenant between God and Abraham and Sarah’s descendants in the most basic, physical way. Maybe circumcision is a male ritual to include men in a physical way in the covenant that women make real in their flesh when they bear the next generation.

This view has its own problems. Women of every nation bear children; how can childbearing be an es­sential characteristic or sign of a particular covenant?

And what about women who will not bear children? Are they excluded from the covenant?

We need to look further. Scholars such as Savina Teubal argue that the world described in the Torah was preceded by a matriarchal system in which women held significant power, perhaps as priestesses. The decisive role of the matriarchs in determining the transmission of this male covenant (through Isaac and later Jacob) might be a trace from a time of greater female power (Sarah the Priestess: The First Matriarch of Genesis, 1984). Such intriguing possibilities open up different ways of understanding the Torah and our earliest history.

But regardless of its origins, Jews today understand the *b’rit* to include boys and girls, men and women. Numerous rituals have evolved to welcome baby girls into the covenant. Today, many Jews would not consider not having a *b’rit* *bat* ritual to welcome their daughter into the covenant. In some communities, a particular ritual provides the norm. In others, parents decide on the ritual, often together with the rabbi.

One covenant ceremony for girls is a simple foot­-washing ritual often referred to as *B’rit R’chitzah* (the Covenant of Washing) or *B’rit N’tilat Raglayim* (the Covenant of Washing Feet). This ritual was first imag­ined into being by a small group of female rabbis and rabbinical students at a retreat in Princeton in 1981. Eventually, this group crafted a ritual that continues to be used by individuals and commu­nities in the United States, Israel, and other countries.

This idea—of washing a baby girl’s feet to welcome her into the covenant between the Jewish people and God—grew out of our reading of Genesis 17-18. Immediately after the covenant in Genesis 17, when Abraham is circumcised, Abraham invites three visi­tors passing by for a meal (18.1-15). He washes their feet, a sign of welcome in his own day. Abraham’s guests, who prove to be God’s messengers, announce the future birth of Isaac.

Abraham’s act of washing his guests’ feet, as a sign of welcome, therefore, is closely associated with the original establishment of the *b’rit* in Genesis 17. Washing the baby’s feet allows us to introduce water into the ritual, and to make the association with Miriam’s Well, *mikveh* (ritual bath), and the healing, nurturing power of its *mayim chayim* (fresh water, literally “living waters”). The ritual includes readings and music that bring out these motifs and involves the parents, as well. Usually, the formal naming of the baby follows, with blessings over wine, as at a male circumcision. This ritual, simple and gentle, lends itself to individual adaptation and creativity.

Was Sarah part of the covenant? For centuries, Jews have looked to Sarah as the first of our foremothers. Women’s *t’khines* (petitionary prayers) have called upon the God of Sarah, and pleaded in Sarah’s name on women’s behalf. As the covenant continues to be fulfilled by the commitment of every new generation of Jews, the impassioned voices of Jewish women bring forth Sarah’s voice in our own time, with new clarity. Today, we can celebrate a rediscovered Sarah as the mother of the covenant we the Jewish people share with God.

Even if *b’rit* *bat* rituals have not always been part of Jewish tradition, they are so today. Mothers who were welcomed into the covenant with such ceremonies now perform these same rituals with their own babies. Generations from now, Jews may be surprised to learn that baby girls were not always welcomed into the covenant with a ritual *b’rit* *bat*. As contemporary men and women today, we can look forward to seeing such rituals flourish and evolve in the years ahead.

# How perfect were the matriarchs and patriarchs?

### Rabbi Lord Jonathan Sacks

In an extraordinary series of observations on Lech L’cha, Nachmanides (the Ramban), delivers harsh criticisms of Abraham and Sarah. The first has to do with Abraham’s decision, after arriving at the land of Canaan, to leave and go to Egypt because “there was a famine in the land.” On this Nachmanides says:

Know that Abraham our father unintentionally committed a great sin by bringing his righteous wife to a stumbling-block of sin on account of his fear for his life. He should have trusted that God would save him and his wife and all his belongings, for God surely has the power to help and to save. His leaving the Land concerning which he had been commanded from the beginning, on account of the famine, was also a sin he committed, for in famine God would redeem him from death. It was because of this deed that the exile in the land of Egypt at the hand of Pharaoh was decreed for his children. [Ramban, Commentary to Genesis 12.10.]

According to Ramban, Abraham should have stayed in Canaan and had faith in God that he would sustain him despite the famine. Not only was Abraham wrong to leave. He also put Sarah in a position of moral hazard because, as a result of going to Egypt, she was forced to tell a lie, that she was Abraham’s sister not his wife, and because she was taken into pharaoh’s harem where she might have been forced to commit an act of adultery. This is a very harsh judgment, made more so by Ramban’s further assertion that it was because of this lack of faith that Abraham’s children were sentenced to exile in Egypt centuries later.

Later in this parashah, Ramban criticizes Sarah. Despairing of having a child, she asked Abraham to sleep with her handmaid Hagar in the hope that she might bear him a child. Abraham did so, and Hagar became pregnant. The text then says that Hagar “began to despise her mistress.” Sarah complained to Abraham, and then “afflicted Hagar” who fled from her into the desert. On this, Ramban writes:

Our mother [Sarah] transgressed by this affliction, as did Abraham by allowing her to do so. So God heard her [Hagar’s] affliction and gave her a son who would be*a wild ass of a man*to afflict the seed of Abraham and Sarah with all kinds of affliction. [Commentary to Genesis 16.6]

Here the moral judgment is easier to understand. Sarah’s conduct does seem volatile and harsh. The Torah itself says that Sarah “afflicted” Hagar. Yet Ramban seems to be saying that it was this episode in the ancient past that explains Jewish suffering at the hands of Muslims (descendants of Ishmael) in a much later age.

It is not difficult to defend Abraham and Sarah in these incidents and other commentators did so. Abraham was not to know that God would perform a miracle and save him and Sarah from famine had they stayed in Canaan. Nor was he to know that the Egyptians would endanger his life and place Sarah in a moral dilemma. Neither of them had been to Egypt before. They did not know in advance what to expect.

As for Sarah and Hagar, although an angel sent Hagar back, later when Ishmael and Isaac were born, Sarah once again banished Hagar. This time, though Abraham protested, God told him to do what Sarah said. So Ramban’s criticisms are easily answered. Why then did he make them?

Ramban surely did not make these comments lightly. He was, I believe, driven by another consideration altogether, namely the justice of history. Why did the Israelites suffer exile and slavery in Egypt? Why in Ramban’s own age were Jews subject to attack by radical Islamists, the Almohades, who brought to an end the Golden Age of Spain they had enjoyed under the more tolerant rule of the Umayyads.

Ramban believed, as we say in our prayers, that “because of our sins we were exiled from our land,” but what sins had the Israelites committed in the days of Jacob that merited exile? He also believed that “the acts of the fathers are a sign for the children,” and that what happened in the lives of the patriarchs foreshadowed what would happen to their descendants. What had they done to Ishmael to earn the scorn of Muslims? A close reading of the biblical text pointed Ramban in the direction of Sarah’s treatment of Hagar.

So Ramban’s comments make sense within his reading of Jewish history, but this too is not without its difficulties. The Torah states explicitly that God may punish “the children and their children for the sin of the parents to the third and fourth generation” but not beyond. The rabbis further restricted this to cases where “the children continue the sins of the parents.” Jeremiah and Ezekiel both said that no one would any more say, “The parents have eaten sour grapes and their children’s teeth are set on edge.” The transfer of sins across the generations is problematic, Jewishly and ethically.

What is deeply interesting about Ramban’s approach to Abraham and Sarah is his willingness to point out flaws in their behavior. This answers a fundamental question as far as our understanding of the narratives of Genesis is concerned. How are we to judge the patriarchs when their behavior seems problematic: Jacob taking Esau’s blessing in disguise, for example, or Shimon and Levi’s brutality in the course of rescuing their sister Dina?

The stories of Genesis are often morally perplexing. Rarely does the Torah pass an explicit, unequivocal verdict on people’s conduct. This means that it is sometimes difficult to teach these narratives as a guide to how to behave. This led to their systematic reinterpretation by rabbinic midrash so that black and white take the place of subtle shades of grey.

So, for example, the words “Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian…mocking,” were understood by the sages to mean that the 13-year-old Ishmael was guilty of idolatry, illicit sex, or murder. This is clearly not the plain sense of the verse. It is, instead, an interpretation that would justify Sarah’s insistence that Ishmael be sent away.

Rabbi Zvi Hirsch Chajes explained that the entire tendency of midrash to make the heroes seem perfect and the villains completely evil is for educational reasons. The word *Torah* means “teaching” or “instruction,” and it is difficult to teach ethics through stories whose characters are fraught with complexity and ambiguity.

Yet the Torah *does* paint its characters in shades of grey. Why so? For three reasons:

The first is that the moral life is not something we understand in depth all at once. As children we hear stories of heroes and villains. We learn basic distinctions: right and wrong, good and bad, permitted and forbidden. As we grow, though, we begin to realize how difficult some decisions are. Do I go to Egypt? Do I stay in Canaan? Do I show compassion to my servant’s child at the risk that he may be a bad influence on my child who has been chosen by God for a sacred mission? Anyone who thinks such decisions are easy is not yet morally mature. So the best way of teaching ethics is to do so by way of stories that can be read at different levels at different times in our life.

Second, not only are decisions difficult. People are also complex. No one in the Torah is portrayed as perfect. Noah, the only person in Tanakh to be called righteous, ends drunk and disheveled. Moses, Aaron and Miriam are all punished for their sins. So is King David. Solomon, wisest of men, ends his life as a deeply compromised leader. Many of the prophets suffered dark nights of despair. “There is none so righteous on earth,” says Kohelet [Ecclesiastes], “as to do only good and never sin.” No religious literature was ever further from hagiography, idealization and hero-worship.

In the opposite direction, even the non-heroes have their saving graces. Esau is a loving son, and when he meets his brother Jacob after a long estrangement, they kiss, embrace and go their separate ways. Levi, condemned by Jacob for his violence, counts Moses, Aaron and Miriam among his grandchildren. Even Pharaoh, the man who enslaved the Israelites, had a moral heroine for a daughter. The descendants of Korach sang psalms in the Temple of Solomon. This, too, is moral maturity, light-years removed from the dualism adopted by many religions, including some Jewish sects (like the Qumran sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls), that divides humanity into children of light and children of darkness.

Lastly and most important, more than any other religious literature, the Torah makes an absolute distinction between earth and heaven, God and human beings. Because God is God, there is space for humans to be human. In Judaism, the line dividing them is never blurred. How rare this is was pointed out by Walter Kaufmann:

In India, the Jina and the Buddha, founders of two new religions in the 6th century B.C.E., came to be worshipped later by their followers. In China, Confucius and Lao-tze came to be deified. To the non-Christian, Jesus seems to represent a parallel case. In Greece, the heroes of the past were held to have been sired by a god or to have been born of goddesses, and the dividing line between gods and men became fluid. In Egypt, the Pharaoh was considered divine.

In Israel, says the biblical scholar Yechezkel Kaufmann, “no man was ever worshipped or accorded even semi-divine status. This is one of the most extraordinary facts about the religion of the Old Testament.” There never was a cult of Moses or any other biblical figure. That is why “no man knows Moses’ burial place to this day,” so that it could never become a place of pilgrimage.

No religion has held a higher view of humanity than the book that tells us we are each in the image and likeness of God. Yet none has been more honest about the failings of even the greatest. God does not ask us to be perfect. He asks us, instead, to take risks in pursuit of the right and the good, and to acknowledge the mistakes we will inevitably make.

In Judaism, the moral life is about learning and growing, knowing that even the greatest have failings and even the worst have saving graces. It calls for humility about ourselves and generosity toward others. This unique blend of idealism and realism is morality at its most demanding and mature.

1. This is a re-edited version of an article that originally appeared in *Judaism: The Journal of Jewish Life & Thought*, Issue No. 213-214, Volume 54, Numbers 1-2, Winter-Spring 2005. It appears here with permission of the American Jewish Congress, which publishes the journal. Shammai Engelmayer became editor of *Judaism* beginning with Volume 55 the following year. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Prophets and poets adopted “Jacob” as a perfect synonym for “Israel.” Even the alien seer Balaam does so, in his pronouncements in Numbers 23 and 24 (see Note No. 6 below). The “poem of Moses,” Deuteronomy 32, also uses Jacob in this way, as does the blessings section in Deuteronomy 33. This usage is not found in the opening non-prophetic historical narratives of the second section of the Hebrew bible, the Prophets, but becomes a standard synonym beginning with the Book of Isaiah. Beginning with Isaiah, too, we find “Ephraim” being used as a synonym for the secessionist kingdom, but it is not a perfect synonym, because it does not include that portion of “Jacob” that was the Kingdom of Judah. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In 2003, the name was changed to the Union for Reform Judaism. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. In 2 Kings 18.26 and 28, “Yehudit” is given as the language spoken by the Judahites, and it almost certainly refers to Hebrew (verse 26 makes it clear Yehudit is not Aramaic). Identifying the language of the Jews as Hebrew is a post-biblical development of the late Second Temple period. By then, of course, “Hebrew” had become a synonym of sorts for Jew. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Numbers 23.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. The use of “Israel” in Balaam’s story in Numbers 22-24 lends the tale a note of authenticity. Balaam himself is a real figure—perhaps the only named person in the Torah whose existence is attested to by external, non-Israelite evidence. That same evidence attests that he was indeed a professional curser for hire. In the biblical story, however, Balak, the king who hires him, does not name the people he wants cursed. Being a “mixed multitude,” they clearly were not “Hebrews,” as outsiders would understand the term, nor were they “the People Israel” of the Merneptah Stele, for the same reasons. As a “national” name, it emerges only during Saul’s reign. Balaam uses Israel (and Jacob), but only in those pronouncements which he says God dictated to him. In his own speech, he also never names the people. All other uses of Israel in these three chapters are by the biblical narrator. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. I Kings 8.53. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Exodus 19.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. “Priesthood.” Encyclopaedia Britannica. 2004. Encyclopaedia Britannica Premium Service. Visited on 11 July 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Thus, Genesis 10.21 states, *u-l’shem yu-lad gam-hu a-vi kol-b’nei-e-ver*; “Sons were also born to Shem, ancestor of all the descendants of Eber.” [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Deuteronomy 11.24, in fact, refers to “the river,” and then immediately defines it as “the river Euphrates.” [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Joshua 24.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Despite the Bible’s preference for referring to the Euphrates as “the river,” it is hard to imagine an Egyptian referring to it that way, or to identifying someone as having crossed over it. To Egyptians, there is only one river deserving of the title—the Nile. Even the Bible recognizes this. Pharaoh, we are told in Genesis 41.1, “was standing by the river,” with the JPS Tanakh appropriately substituting “Nile” in its place. It does the same for Exodus 2.5, which reports that the daughter of Pharaoh went down to “the river,” again translated by JPS as Nile, to bathe herself. Indeed, in neither instance could the reference be to any river but the Nile. An Egyptian, in fact, is likely to scoff at another of the Bible’s designations for the Euphrates, as well: “the great river.” The Euphrates is a “mere” 1,700 miles long; the Nile stretches for 4,184 miles. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. See Genesis 11.29. Lot and Milcah were the children of Charan, Abraham and Nahor’s other brother, who apparently died at a young age. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Genesis 20.12 states, “she is in truth my sister, my father’s daughter though not my mother’s.” [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Genesis 24.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Indeed, he warns his servant never to bring Isaac back to Paddan-aram, and he does so with great urgency. “On no account must you take my son back there!,” he emphatically states in Genesis 24.6. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Genesis 28.1-2. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Genesis 28.8. Ishmael, by the definition proposed here, is not a Hebrew, but Esau likely misunderstood his parents’ angst, assuming that any relative would do. In fairness to Esau, he apparently was never informed of the parental preference; he learned of it only by overhearing a conversation between his parents and Jacob (Genesis 28.6). That conversation merely stated, “You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women,” and included a charge that Jacob go to a family member in search of a wife, but without any reason given for either. Esau cannot be faulted, therefore, for misunderstanding. We cannot explain why his parents never spoke to him about it even though they clearly were troubled by it. When he married two Hittite wives, after all, we were told, “and they [the wives] were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah [Genesis 26.35].” [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. This may also explain Laban’s anxiety over Leah’s spinsterhood, which led him to deceive Jacob. Here he had an opportunity to marry off both his daughters to an acceptable “in” candidate (and perhaps the only available one), Jacob. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Legally, they were the children of Leah and Rachel, because Bilhah and Zilpah were acting as surrogates. From a genealogical standpoint, however, this would not be the case. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Genesis 39.14. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Genesis 40.15. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Genesis 43.32 states, “for the Egyptians could not dine with the Hebrews, since that would be abhorrent to the Egyptians.” For whether such a law ever existed, see Note 31 below. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Exodus 3.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Exodus 3.18. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Genesis 39.14. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Genesis 12.10-20. Of special note is verse 17. “But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his household with mighty plagues on account of Sarai, the wife of Abram.” If the incident occurred, the Egyptians would have had good reason to remember their encounter with their first “Hebrew.” An aside is necessary at this point. If, as the School of Higher Biblical Criticism would have it, the Bible (especially its first five books) is the product of multiple authors writing at different times with different agendas, is it legitimate to make connections between one narrative and another? The question is a fair one, but irrelevant here. Both the wife/sister episode in Abraham’s life and the Potiphar’s wife episode in the Joseph saga are said to be the product of source J. That the continuation of that saga—Joseph’s imprisonment—is attributed to source E and that J and E alternate even within episodes as the Joseph saga plays out only demonstrate how similar in content are these two sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Genesis 40.15. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. As discussed in Chapter 7, Note 22, we tend to imagine Abraham as a lonely man of faith, walking the length and breadth of his future inheritance with just his wife and a few servants. Abraham, however, was a powerful desert sheikh who travels to and fro with well over a thousand people in his retinue. Such a person not only would be noticed, but would develop a reputation throughout the region. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. As Genesis 46.34 reports, “all shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians.” There is no record of such a law existing in Egypt, either specifically relating to Hebrews, or generally to shepherds. On the other hand, “shepherds” from “the land of the Hebrews,” meaning the Canaan area, had invaded Egypt by this time and, in fact, were now ruling it, assuming as is likely that the Joseph saga is set in the Hyksos period. A native Egyptian would consider it an abomination to eat with someone connected to the occupying power. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Exodus 21.2. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. JPS translates מאחיו as “one of his kinsmen,” which is a bit too ambiguous-sounding. If, indeed, there was such a distinction in Israel, then it clearly continued at least up until the Babylonian exile. Jeremiah talks about Israel violating the law regarding the Hebrew slave, and Jonah describes himself (Jonah 1.9) as a Hebrew, rather than as an Israelite. Whether he does so because he is, in fact, a Hebrew, or because that is what outsiders, including his interrogators, call all Israelites, is unclear. It also is possible that Jonah referred to himself as a Hebrew because he was not a Judahite, yet was uncomfortable identifying himself with the secessionist Kingdom of Israel. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. 1 Samuel 14.21. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. That lack of concern extends to Genesis itself. It pointedly names the women Esau—a born Hebrew under the definition proposed here—marries, yet never mentions the name of Ishmael’s wife. It is as if the matter is of no importance in his case. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Exodus 19.3. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. There is evidence, albeit inconclusive, that Caleb, Joshua’s staunch ally and a leader of the Tribe of Judah, and his nephew Othniel, Israel’s first judge after Joshua’s death, were not born Israelites. There also is evidence that some of Moses’ in-laws became Israelites by the time the conquest of Canaan was underway. According to I Chronicles 4.14, “Bithiah the daughter of Pharaoh,” believed to be Moses’ Egyptian “mother,” also became an Israelite. Then, of course, there is Ruth, Moabite by birth but the paradigmatic “Israelite by choice.” [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. It is also possible, of course, that as with Joseph and his brothers, the outsiders could not distinguish between a Hebrew Israelite and a non-Hebrew Israelite. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. See Genesis 25.20. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. In Genesis 31.49-53, Laban invokes the Tetragrammaton, the four-letter name of God that is unique to the Israelites and to their “Hebrew” forebears, but supposedly is not known to outsiders, and thus should not have been known to Laban if he was an outsider. He also makes it clear that Jacob’s God is the God of the family, even if Laban has abandoned Him, at least partially. It is significant, too, that Laban does not invoke any of his pagan gods to help secure the agreement with Jacob. Perhaps it indicates that Laban still considers God to be supreme, even if He is no longer the sole god in Laban’s eyes. Earlier, the response of Laban and Bethuel to the request of Abraham’s servant that Rebekah return with him to Canaan also is telling. (See Genesis 24.50-51.) There, too, the Tetragrammaton is used. More to the point, God’s will obviously carried much weight with Laban and his father. For those concerned with how the documentary hypothesis affects this analysis, it does not affect it at all. Genesis 31.49-53 is either a J text or an E text, whereas Genesis 24.50-51 is considered almost certainly by J. In Exodus, both E and J texts affirm that the Tetragrammaton is exclusive to Israel. Thus, literary consistency exists regardless of who wrote the texts. In any case, as Genesis 31 demonstrates so well, J and E are so close to each other that, in fact, they may be one and the same source, making this concern moot. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. If paganism has begun to creep into the God-worship of Bethuel’s family, if not thoroughly supplanting it, a marriage with a member of this family would seem to offer nothing. This leads to a suggestion that the women of the family remained God-fearers, even as the men sought out other gods alongside their own. There is support for this suggestion in the Tanakh. Rebekah clearly is more loyal to God than Isaac is; she, after all, seeks to prevent Isaac from passing on to Esau the blessing God said belongs to Jacob (Genesis 27). She also eagerly leaves her father’s home to go to Canaan to marry someone she has never met merely because God ordained it (Genesis 24, especially verses 50-58). Rachel put her father’s household gods “in the camel cushion and sat on them” (Genesis 31.34), a sure sign that she had no use for them. Leah joins Rachel in telling Jacob to “do just as God has told you” (Genesis 31.16), even though that means leaving her father’s home and living out her life in a loveless marriage. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. This is not the current JPS translation, although it is the old version. In fact, there is considerable debate over how the verse is to be translated. Some translations, including the current JPS version, distinguish between Abraham’s god and his brother’s. Thus, JPS now translates this as, “‘May the God of Abraham and the god of Nahor’—their ancestral deities—’judge between us,’“ thereby removing אלהי אביהם (*e-lo-hei a-vi-hem*, literally “the god of their father”) from Laban’s statement, retranslating it and turning it into an explanatory note added by the author or editor. Also, Abraham’s deity gets a capital G, whereas Nahor’s is clearly pagan because “god” is not capitalized. Others, including Everett Fox, continue to see no distinction here. Thus, in Fox’s translation, the verse reads: “May the God of Avraham and the God of Nahor keep justice between us—the God of their father.” If for no other reason than Laban’s own words just four verses earlier—”May the Lord watch between you and me, when we are out of sight of each other”—Fox, the old JPS translation and others in that vein are far more likely to accurately reflect the original text. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Genesis 11.31. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. This would explain why Abraham is a Hebrew, but neither his father nor brother is. If ever they were so designated, they lose the designation when they begin flirting with paganism. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Deuteronomy 7.3-4. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. The text says simply “he gave him a tithe” without specifically identifying who the giver or the recipient was. Since Melchizedek is a priest, however, he (like later priests and temple personnel) would normally have been the recipient and Abraham therefore the giver. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)