



God's unfolding Covenant with Abraham

(Reflections on Genesis 15:1-6 in view of Zvi Leonhard's painting of Abraham contemplating the stars)

When God appeared to Abraham ⁽¹⁾ one night in a vision near the Oaks of Mamre (Hebron, El Khalil today) he had been living as a nomad already for ten years. As a Chaldean of 75 he had left Ur with the promise that he would become an important man, the ancestor of a great nation, he would be blessed and become the source of blessing for all of mankind. Whoever blessed him would be blessed and whoever cursed him would be cursed. Consequently he had left Mesopotamia. With him was his beautiful wife Sarah – his half-sister – his nephew Lot, his servants, the oldest of which was Eliezer, and their flock of cattle. He had built his first altar near Shechem (Nablus) at Mamre where God promised him the land of Canaan. Not far from there he built another altar between Bethel and Ai to God the Creator of Heaven and Earth who had called him on this adventurous journey to Canaan. God the Creator was worshipped in that part of Canaan already which is why the area of Bethel is of such importance in the story of the birthright of Israel. It was only recently that the three-armed Shin, the first letter of 'Ha Shem,' of the sacred name of God engraved in the topography of Bethel was discovered in a satellite picture of the area of Bethel ⁽²⁾. It was here that God's promise was repeated to Jacob when he dreamt of the ladder into heaven (Gen 28:17). Abraham then had moved south to the Negev. Because of a famine he had moved from Shechem to Egypt where he nearly lost his wife to Pharaoh. From there he returned to his second altar between Bethel and Ai. By that time their cattle had become so numerous that he separated himself from Lot. It was after that separation near Bethel that God repeated his promise of land and descendants for the second time. This time God told him they would be **"as numerous as the sand on the seashore."**

Since Lot had chosen to live in the fertile Jordan valley, the area that was later covered by the Dead Sea, Abraham had to rescue him from the decadent population of Sodom and Gomorrah and in the process had to fight numerous kings of that region. He had the encounter with the mysterious king Melchizedek of Jerusalem who blessed him with victory over all his enemies in the land. With this blessing Abraham returned to the oaks of Mamre. Now we reach Genesis 15 and are not surprised that Abraham wondered how God would ever fulfill the promise of descendants. He had already been waiting for ten years (16:3) when God repeated his promise again:

'After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, saying, "Do not fear, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward shall be very great." Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And

Abram said, "Since you have given no offspring to me, one born in my house is my heir." Then behold, the word of the LORD came to him, saying, "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.' (Genesis 15:1-6)

The questions that this painting raises:

What is the significance of this painting (the first of those that are to cover Gen 15) in Israel's history?

1. What did this vision of descendants mean to Abraham in view of his preceding experiences?
2. What did God want to communicate through it? How do we need to interpret it?
3. Abraham had no knowledge of the concept of 'the seed of the woman' (Gen 3:15) nor of the concept of "the remnant" – how can we reconcile these concepts with the vision?
4. What are the deeper implications as seen from today's context of the conflict in the Middle-East?

1. The significance of this painting

God's unfolding covenant with Abraham is foundational for the understanding of the Biblical theology of history, of the history of salvation, of Israel in prophecy. (Genesis 15 consists of two parts: Genesis 15:1-6 – repeating the promise of descendants, followed by God's oath in the form of the blood-covenant of Gen 15:7-21 - the promise of the land) ⁽³⁾ Without the background of the theology of history, today's conflict in the Middle-East is so confusing that it makes no sense, for the conflict is tied up with the question as to who are the legitimate descendants of Abraham. The promise of descendants forms the introduction to this eternal covenant. It is an unconditional covenant in that Abraham and his true descendants need to do nothing but 'to believe,' to love God with their whole heart, soul and might (Deut 6:5), not in a ritualistic-religious sense but in a spiritual one.

God reveals himself to Abraham as his protector and as the One who will reward his faith. The opening scene of Genesis 15 challenges him to continue to exercise faith. Could it be that Abraham had some doubts in his mind when he complained, "O Lord GOD, what will You give me, since I am childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" (Gen 15:2) Abraham's character was not totally perfect. He wanted to get away with a half-truth in Egypt. When Sarah suggested he make the promise happen through her servant Hagar as a surrogate wife, he had no objection. When Hagar bore him Ishmael he was 86. He still had to wait until he was 99 before the promise was fulfilled that Sarah would bear him a son. She was 10 years younger than he, a wife beyond child-bearing age. After Sarah had died Abraham married Keturah. He produced further offspring from her even though his heart's desire to receive the promised son had been fulfilled. Despite of his imperfections he put his trust in God's promise and God counted it to him as righteousness.

(Note that in himself he was not righteous. Righteousness was 'imputed' to him! This was not an exchange transaction in which righteous was exchanged in return of faith. Righteousness is God's free gift: "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast." Eph 2:8-9)

As Genesis 22 (the sacrifice of Isaac) will show later, Abraham's faith is 'faith in action' even though between 'action' and 'doing it yourself' there is a fine distinction (see also Galatians 4). James in his

New Testament Letter seeks to correct the false notion that faith is merely a religion, a cognitive affair. Writing about Abraham he has this to say:

You see that faith was working with his works, and as a result of the works, faith was perfected; and the Scripture was **fulfilled** which says, "AND ABRAHAM BELIEVED GOD, AND IT WAS RECKONED TO HIM AS RIGHTEOUSNESS," and he was called the friend of God.
You see that a man is justified by works and not by faith alone. (James 2:22-24)

If Abraham agreed to Sarah's culturally justified suggestion of making things happen through a surrogate wife, one may even wonder whether God really counted it to him as unbelief. Was Abraham an adulterer by following Sarah's advice? After all, Abraham lived long before the time of Moses and did not have the commandment:

"Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, 'I am the LORD your God. 'You shall not do what is done in the land of Egypt where you lived, nor are you to do what is done in the land of Canaan where I am bringing you; **you shall not walk in their statutes**. 'You are to perform My judgments and keep My statutes, to live in accord with them; I am the LORD your God. 'So you shall keep My statutes and My judgments, by which a man may live if he does them; I am the LORD.'" (Leviticus 18:2-5)

God did not want Abraham to follow the culturally acceptable norm, but rather the spiritual way. According to archeological evidence the Nuzu culture in Iraq made provisions for the case of infertility of someone's wife. It was permitted to have offspring with the help of a concubine. What Sarah did "was in full accord with the prevailing local customs in northern Mesopotamia." (According to Abraham's native culture it was also permitted to exchange the right of the first-born. This must have prompted Esau to sell it to his brother Jacob who was the second of the twins who had left Rebecca's womb.) ⁽⁴⁾

2. What did this vision of descendants mean to Abraham in view of his preceding experiences?

Abraham had seen those stars thousands of nights before. To him they were evidence for the existence of the Creator who had made the heavens and the earth. His belief in Him was why he obeyed his calling and was probably also why he first settled in the area of Bethel and now returned to it, a place in Canaan where there was evidence that this God was worshipped even prior to his arrival. God had given him the promise that his offspring would be "as the dust of the earth" (Gen 13:16). Why did God not use that comparison again but asked him this time to gaze at the nightly firmament?

The painter, Zvi, could have displayed the stars as constellations as an astronomer would have done. Instead he put the emphasis on the far-away beauty that was to represent his numerous offspring. Compared to the dust of the earth or the sand on the sea-shore (Gen 22:17) his offspring was to be numerous and exquisite at the same time. There may be a hint to the answer in Israel's history when the Holy Spirit came upon the Seer Balaam in the wilderness and caused him to pronounce a blessing upon Israel for the third time instead of a curse that the King of Syria expected him to pronounce upon his enemies:

"How fair are your tents, O Jacob, Your dwellings, O Israel! Like valleys that stretch out, like gardens beside the river, like aloes planted by the LORD, like cedars beside the waters. Water will flow from his buckets, and his seed *will be* by many waters, and his king shall be higher

than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted. God brings him out of Egypt, he is for him like the horns of the wild ox. He will devour the nations *who are* his adversaries, and will crush their bones in pieces, and shatter *them* with his arrows. He couches, he lies down as a lion, and as a lion, who dares rouse him? Blessed is everyone who blesses you, and cursed is everyone who curses you." (Numbers 24:5-9)

God's intention for his people is also found at the end of the book of Daniel:

"Those who have insight will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, and those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever." (Daniel 12:3)

The beauty of His offspring is a theme that occurs throughout the Scriptures. The Hebrew prophets expressed it in many metaphors as in Psalm 50:2, "Out of Zion, the perfection of beauty, God has shone forth." The relationship between God and his people, Abraham's descendants, is compared to that of a bridegroom with his bride. The moral beauty of the bride according to Paul's Letter to the Ephesians is to be 'without spot or wrinkle.' (Eph 5:27)

Abraham was to believe God's promise that he and Sarah would have offspring not only as numerous but also as glorious as the stars that he could count with his naked eye. It is said that in his time what Abraham must have seen in the unpolluted sky was in the order of six to eight thousand stars, too many to be counted.

The double comparison is taken up in the Letter to the Hebrews:

"By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised. Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, *as many descendants AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN IN NUMBER, AND INNUMERABLE AS THE SAND WHICH IS BY THE SEASHORE.*" (Hebrews 11:11)

There is reason to believe that Abraham saw more than just the optical beauty of the stars.

There is more to the meaning of this prophecy than the literal one. The Apostle Paul writes to the Church in Corinth:

"There is one glory of the sun, and another glory of the moon, and another glory of the **stars**; for star differs from star in glory." (1 Corinthians 15:41)

Abraham in this painting seems to gaze into the direction of the sky that must have caught his attention because it seems brighter than the rest. What did Abraham think of the brightest star that he saw in the sky? Could there be a mysterious connection to 'the morning star?'

"So we have the prophetic word *made* more sure, to which you do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts." (2 Peter 1:19)

"I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star." (Revelation 22:16)

We do not know at what time of the night Abraham was told to look into the sky. The painter seems to have chosen a time toward dawn. Abraham's face shows more than just familiarity. At the sight of the star-lit firmament his descendant King David later on put his own amazement into these unforgettable words:

"When I consider Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You have ordained; what is man that You take thought of him, and the son of man that You care for him?" (Psalm 8:3-4)

Abraham is struck with awe. Could this perhaps be the answer to the mysterious statement during Jesus' confrontation with the Pharisees?

In John chapter 8 Jesus confronts the Pharisees with the startling revelation, "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw *it* and was glad." Although there is no textual evidence to document this statement, Abraham who had already encountered the mysterious King of Jerusalem, Melchizedek, the King of Righteousness, must have seen into the transcendent distance. He sensed that his offspring would one day climax in the arrival of the ultimate descendant, the King of the Jews. The writers of the Gospels record his royal descent in their genealogies as the offspring of Abraham (Matt 1 and Luke 3). The Letter to the Hebrews confirms that Abraham must have seen far into the future. Concerning the patriarchs we read, "All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance,..." (Heb 11:13). This must be the explanation why Abraham when he was about to offer Isaac on Mt. Moria – where the Temple was to be built later on – uttered the prophetic reply: "God will provide for Himself the lamb for the burnt offering, my son." (Gen 22:8)

Since the Jewish theologians of John chapter 8 were spiritually blind and could not understand who Jesus was they replied, "You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?" Jesus in response revealed his preexistence and divine nature by using the Father's own name "I Am (who I AM)": "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am." (John 8:56-58) His opponents understood the veiled allusion to equality with YHWH and wanted to stone him for what to them appeared as blasphemy.

3. What did God want to communicate through it? How do we need to interpret it?

Look at the bearded old man in this painting! His eyes are wide open and full of childlike trust. They indicate that he has understood that the Creator of the Universe who asks him to look at his handiwork is far more than an unimaginably powerful, super-intelligent and imaginative being. This God loves beauty, unity in diversity. He is worthy of worship as the 'Pantocrator'. Abraham's outstretched and open hands express a mixture of awe, amazement and readiness to embrace this moment of revelation. He knows that the Creator is a moral being. The beauty of the sky – one way to reveal himself in creation – belongs to a moral universe, one in which there is blessing and curse.

Painting Abraham with outstretched arms and open hands is the precise expression of what an African language uses for a righteous person, 'onye pfulberu eka oto' (person with outstretched open arms/hands) – someone who has nothing to hide.

Gazing at the stars is possible in two ways. According to Genesis 1:4 the celestial bodies function as the indicators of the times and seasons on the annual calendar ⁽⁵⁾. In addition together with His word they serve God to proclaim his glory: "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; and their expanse is declaring the work of His hands" (Psalm 19:1). Later another of Abraham's descendants, the apostle Paul of Tarsus argues:

"For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse." (Rom 1:20)

The celestial bodies witness to the Creator's omnipotence and majesty, to his intelligence and love for beauty, unity in harmony. They are the proof of the existence of a creator. Consequently nobody can argue that there is no God who deserves our adoration.

Furthermore, the stars witness to the truthfulness and faithfulness of the Creator whose cosmic order points to his eternal existence. It is amazing to realize that for the same reason when Abraham's descendants later in their history break the covenant of the Sinai again and again God links the promises of the new covenant to the existence of the celestial bodies when he gives Jeremiah these words to write:

Thus says the LORD, who gives the sun for light by day and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night, who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar; the LORD of hosts is His name: "if this fixed order departs from before Me," declares the LORD, "then the offspring of Israel also will cease from being a nation before Me forever... If the heavens above can be measured and the foundations of the earth searched out below, then I will also cast off all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done," declares the LORD." (Jeremiah 31:35-37)

It is wrong if man worships the creature instead of the Creator (Romans 1). Moses warned Israel not to follow the way of the nations:

"And *beware* not to lift up your eyes to heaven and see the sun and the moon and the stars, all the host of heaven, and be drawn away and worship them and serve them, those which the LORD your God has allotted to all the peoples under the whole heaven." (Deut 4:19)

Israel faced the threat of death penalty for watching the stars for the worship of the stars:

"If there is found in your midst, in any of your towns, which the LORD your God is giving you, a man or a woman who does what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, by transgressing His covenant, and has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, or the sun or the moon or any of the heavenly host, which I have not commanded,...then you shall bring out that man or that woman who has done this evil deed to your gates, *that is*, the man or the woman, and you shall stone them to death." (Deut 17:2-3, 5)

Abraham was to gaze at the stars for the purpose of a making a comparison: his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. When he was put to the test on Mount Moria where God asked him to sacrifice his only son (!) God confirmed His promise again, including the promise of land:

"Then the angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time from heaven, and said, "By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, **your only son**, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies." (Gen 22: 15-17)

"Numerous as the sand on the seashore" was a common metaphor in Hebrew usage. It is also used with regard to the number of soldiers fighting against Israel (Joshua 1:4) and the intellectual interests of King Solomon:

"...God gave Solomon wisdom and very great discernment and breadth of mind, like **the sand that is on the seashore.**" (1Kings 4:29)

Although there seems to be a parallelism between the sand on the seashore and the stars of heaven, Scripture seems to imply more than just a comparison. The same promise is transferred to Isaac:

"I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; because Abraham obeyed Me and kept My charge, My commandments, My statutes and My laws." (Gen 26:4-5)

Referring back to Abraham's vision, Moses sums up the literal fulfillment of this promise in the book of Deuteronomy:

"Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons *in all*, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven." (Deut 10:22)

Solomon in his famous prayer provides evidence that he too is conscious of the numerical fulfillment of the promise:

"Your servant is in the midst of Your people which You have chosen, a great people who are too many to be numbered or counted." (1Kg 3:8)

as the writer of 1 Kings confirms in his summary:

"Judah and Israel *were* as numerous as the sand that is on the seashore in abundance; *they* were eating and drinking and rejoicing." (1Kgs 4:20)

The message in all of this, however, is not only that God keeps his promises but also that Abraham's faith was counted to him as righteousness:

And He took him outside and said, "Now look toward the heavens, and count the stars, if you are able to count them." And He said to him, "So shall your descendants be." Then he believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Gen 15:5-6)

How do we know that this was indeed the message? There is support in Psalm 106 where the same phrase is used as a comment on the faithfulness underlying the zeal for God's honor that Phinehas had shown:

"Then Phinehas stood up and interposed, and so the plague was stayed. And it was reckoned to him for righteousness, to all generations forever." (Psalm 106:30-31)

This declaration is also made in the prophet Habakkuk who was tormented by the question of why he had to see so much injustice. God gave him the answer to wait:

"For the vision is yet for the appointed time; it hastens toward the goal and it will not fail. Though it tarries, wait for it; for it will certainly come, it will not delay. "Behold, as for the proud one, His soul is not right within him; but the righteous will live by his faith." (Habakkuk 2:3-4)

The Hebrew term for 'faith' (emunah) may be translated as *faith* or *faithfulness* just as its Greek term 'pistis':

"For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it *the* righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "**but the righteous man shall live by faith.**" (Rom 1:16-17)

To the Galatians Paul writes the same message:

"Now that no one is justified by the Law before God is evident; for, "the righteous man shall live by faith." (Gal 3:11)

In the introduction to the famous chapter 11 on faith in the Letter to the Hebrews we read:

"For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For yet in a very little while, he who is coming will come, and will not delay. But **my righteous one shall live by faith**; and if he shrinks back, my soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul." (Heb 10:36-39)

In short, what God communicates through this comparison is not just that He is faithful in keeping his promises but that he counts as righteous the one who is faithful to him. God is the one who declares the faithful ones to be just.

Does this mean that there are two ways of being declared just before God, one by keeping His law (for the Jews) and one by accepting His grace (for the Christians)? No, the Bible does not teach a dual covenant theology! Besides, Abraham received God's approval before the nation received the law at Sinai. There is only one message here: Righteousness is the result of an active trust in God. It does not allow self-righteousness or righteousness by merit. "Adonai Tsidkenu" (God is our righteousness, Jeremiah 23:6-8) is the same message as Jesus/Yeshua our righteousness .

"But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption," (1Cor 1:30)

It is only through Jesus' substitutionary sacrifice that the OT sacrifices received their efficacy. As someone put it: "Abraham was saved by faith in the One who was to come; we are saved by faith through the One who has come."

"Every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered **one sacrifice for sins for all time**, sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time onward until his enemies be made a footstool for his feet." (Heb 10:11-13)

Yeshua/Jesus is our righteousness because he himself is righteous. Because He was going to die for all his righteousness was imputed to Abraham who received it by faith. Yeshua/Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of the promise of Genesis 15:4 that Abraham would have a son of his own. That son was Isaac was Isaac – a pre-figuration of Yeshua/Jesus. The birth of Isaac as well as the birth of Yeshua/Jesus was the result of God's miraculous intervention.

4) Abraham had no knowledge of the concept of 'the seed of the woman' (Gen 3:15) – nor of "the remnant" - how can we reconcile these concepts with the vision?

The Hebrew term for descendant/s in Gen 3:15 and in 15:5 is 'zera' (seed) which may be translated descendant or descendants. The implications of this grammatical point are profound (See also D.H. Stern, JNT, Gal 3:16).

"Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, and to seeds, as of many; but as of one, and to thy seed, which is Christ." (Gal 3:16)

It follows that the countless stars refer to the descendants of the son of promise (Isaac) and ultimately to the descendants of Jesus/Yeshua – in whom God's promises have been fulfilled. It is through the Son that all the other 'sons' would be counted righteous. Abraham's family (Isaac, Jacob and their offspring) is the prototype of God's family, of God's 'chosen' people. After all, the stars of heaven in Abraham's perspective, in all their glory represent only a 'remnant' of those who are compared to the sand of the seashore. This is confirmed in the OT by the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah (Isaiah 6:13; Jeremiah 44:14; 50:20) and in the NT in Romans 9. It clearly refers to the remnant of the Jews as well as to the remnant of the non-Jews:

6 But *it is* not as though the word of God has failed. For **they are not all Israel who are descended from Israel;**

7 nor are they all children because they are Abraham's descendants, but: "**through Isaac your descendants will be named.**"

8 That is, it is not the children of the flesh who are children of God, but the children of the promise are regarded as descendants.

9 For this is the word of promise: "**at this time I will come, and Sarah shall have a son.**"

10 And not only this, but there was Rebekah also, when she had conceived *twins* by one man, our father Isaac;

11 for though *the twins* were not yet born and had not done anything good or bad, so that God's purpose according to *His* choice would stand, not because of works but because of Him who calls,

12 it was said to her, "**the older will serve the younger.**"

13 Just as it is written, "**Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.**" (Romans 9:6-13)

...

"...24 *even* us, whom He also called, not from among Jews only, but also from among Gentiles.

25 As He says also in Hosea, "I will call those who were not my people, 'my people,' and her who was not beloved, 'beloved.'"

26 "and it shall be that in the place where it was said to them, 'you are not my people,' there they shall be called sons of the living God."

27 Isaiah cries out concerning Israel, "**though the number of the sons of Israel be like the sand of the sea, it is the remnant that will be saved;**

28 for the Lord will execute his word on the earth, thoroughly and quickly."

29 and just as Isaiah foretold, "unless the Lord of Sabaoth had left to us a posterity, we would have become like Sodom, and would have resembled Gomorrah."

30 What shall we say then? That Gentiles, who did not pursue righteousness, attained righteousness, even the righteousness which is by faith;

31 but Israel, pursuing a law of righteousness, did not arrive at *that* law.

32 Why? Because *they did* not *pursue it* by faith, but as though *it were* by works. They stumbled over the stumbling stone,
33 just as it is written, "behold, I lay in Zion a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense, and he who believes in him will not be disappointed." (Romans 9:24-33)

Just as in Abraham's time God did not consider Ishmael as the son of promise so it is in our time: only those who meet the condition of faith, those who are borne of the Spirit because they renounce their self-righteousness and receive His righteousness by faith are counted as Abraham's descendants, be they Jews or Gentiles. Ishmael was not the product of obedience by trust in God's veracity and faithfulness. The reason why the original promise in the end results in a much smaller number than it would appear at the beginning of Abraham's story is widespread disobedience among his physical descendants. We need not be surprised. Moses predicted what the consequence of disobedience would be:

"And you shall be left few in number, whereas you were as the stars of heaven for multitude; because you would not obey the voice of the LORD thy God." (Deut 28:62)

This spiritual law is exemplified in Israel's wilderness experience when a whole generation did not get into the promised land because of their disobedience:

"Surely all the men who have seen My glory and My signs which I performed in Egypt and in the wilderness, yet have put Me to the test these ten times and have not listened to My voice, shall by no means see the land which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who spurned Me see it. (Numbers 14:22-23)

By extension the same principle applies to the multitudes of Gentiles who accepted the Gospel but then lost their love for their Savior and Redeemer Jesus Christ, Yeshua the Messiah. Compared with the ideal – that everyone would be counted as descendants,

"Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; For I am God, and there is no other" (Isa 45:22) and ... "God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1Ti 2:4)

– the true descendants will only be few. The biblical term for them is 'the remnant' ...'only a remnant will be saved.' According to Matthew 22:14 Jesus sums it up in concise form: "For many are called, but few *are* chosen" and Jesus predicts in Matthew 24:12-13, "Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold." But the one who endures to the end, he will be saved."

No wonder the Letter to the Hebrews uses the wilderness experience as a warning for every generation:

"So we see that they were not able to enter (the promised land/salvation) because of unbelief. Therefore, let us fear if, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you may seem to have come short of it" (Heb 3:19-4:1)

Abraham may not have realized all the implications of his vision. But somehow, mysteriously, there is an indication in the letter to the Hebrews that he must have understood more than meets the eye:

"8 By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going.

9 By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign *land*, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, **fellow heirs of the same promise**;

10 for he was looking for **the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God**.

11 By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised.

12 Therefore there was born even of one man, and him as good as dead at that, *as many descendants* AS THE STARS OF HEAVEN IN NUMBER, AND INNUMERABLE AS THE SAND WHICH IS BY THE SEASHORE.

13 **All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.**

14 For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own.

15 And indeed if they had been thinking of that *country* from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return.

16 But as it is, they desire a better *country*, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them. (Heb11:8-16)

In all these promises the descendants and their land are inseparably coupled. The promise of the land will be the focus of the remainder of Genesis 15. The point here is that Abraham believed without having seen the fulfillment of a countless offspring.

Isaac and Ishmael buried him next to his wife in what is now the city of Hebron. If Abraham saw beyond the earthly fulfillment in terms of the promise of land – the heavenly city, the new Jerusalem - and saw Jesus'/Yeshua's day ("Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw *it* and was glad." John 8:56) – the day of the 'firstborn of the dead' (Rev 1:5), "the firstborn among many brethren" (Rom 8:29) - is it too far-fetched to believe that that he also saw in a transcendent distance the fulfillment in terms of the enlarged family – the 'spiritual temple,' 'the sons of God,' " the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" (Heb 12:23) that would fill that city as the eternal dwelling place of God? Had Abraham not been told ten years earlier that in him all the families of the earth would be blessed - families redeemed and sanctified by the blood of the lamb as foreshadowed by the sacrifice of Isaac whom he was going to present on mount Moria a few years later in Genesis 22?

The stream of blessing that poured forth from Abraham from generation to generation of Jews and eventually became visible through the source of the water of life in Jesus for all ('the fountain of living water' – Jeremiah 2:13) flows on through everyone who follows in Abraham's footsteps: "from his innermost being will flow rivers of living water" (John 7:38) through the work of the Holy Spirit.

5) What are the deeper implications as seen from today's context of the conflict in the Middle-East?

God's invitation to Abraham to step out of his tent to contemplate the multitude of stars in the sky as an adequate base of comparison for his offspring implies God's powerful sovereignty over the flow of history, over the flow of blessing. There is no chaos up there. There is structure in this diversity. As A. Fruchtenbaum points out, Abraham had eight sons by three different women. "The question is through which sons would the Abrahamic covenant be confirmed?" (6) When Isaac was chosen over Ishmael and the covenant was reconfirmed to Isaac in Genesis 26, when the covenant was reconfirmed with Isaac's son Jacob instead of with Esau, God exercised his sovereignty.

Paul answers the imaginary objection to God's choices in Romans 9 with the image of the potter and his clay:

"Who are you, O man, who answers back to God? The thing molded will not say to the molder, 'Why did you make me like this,' will it? Or does not the potter have a right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for common use?" (Romans 9:20-21)

Whoever associates God's choice as an act of unfairness or as a reason for superiority has misunderstood Genesis 15:1-6. To make Abraham a source of jealousy and division is perverting God's intention and is playing into the hands of God's arch-enemy, for God chose Abraham and his offspring to be a blessing to the nations, a blessing for all the earth. Blessing is the first key element in the Abrahamic covenant. The self-righteousness of Judaism, "the Christian sin of suppressionism" ⁽⁷⁾ in claiming that the Church is the replacement for Israel as well as the anti-Semitic contention of Islam that the line of heredity passes through Ishmael rather than Isaac are misinterpretations and falsifications of Genesis 15:1-6 ⁽⁸⁾. Neither Jews nor Christians nor Muslims have a right to question God the Creator why he alone has the right to define who Abraham's descendants are to be. ⁽⁹⁾

The promise to Abraham was ultimately fulfilled in the birth of the Jewish Messiah who represents God's chosen nation. As Hosea 11:1 refers to the nation of Israel,

"When Israel was a youth I loved him, and out of Egypt I called **My son**."

Matthew 2:14-15 interprets this same statement as applying to Jesus:

"So Joseph got up and took the Child and His mother while it was still night, and left for Egypt. He remained there until the death of Herod. *This was* to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet (Hosea): "out of Egypt **I called my son**."

It is in this son, Abraham's seed, God's only Son, that all the promises find their "Yes" (2Cor 1:20). This does not mean that the promises given to Abraham 'ended' with Yeshua's/Jesus' life on earth for He will return to gather Abraham's descendants to set up His kingdom. The fulfillment of Abraham's promises is still incomplete today. His descendants still live by 'faith' as for instance the Letter to the Hebrews clearly teaches it. Abraham's vision in Gen 12:3 was a general one, the opening of the 'covenant'. It begun with Abraham in 12:1-3 in Haran, was unfolded on the way and was reconfirmed to Isaac in Gen 26: 3-5 and to Jacob in Bethel in Gen 28:14 and Gen 35:11-12 where God revealed even more details. The prophets among his descendants announced further particulars of the progressive revelation about Himself, about the coming of THE SON and the plan that would unfold until the end of time. It is in this sense that all the unfolding promises are "Amen" in Yeshua/Jesus.

It is in Him that God has blessed, blesses and will bless mankind. The prophet Isaiah in chapter 19 prophesies that one day Abraham's descendants, Isaac and Ishmael, Israel and Egypt/Assyria (Jewish and Arab believers in Yeshua the Messiah) will be reconciled and will be a blessing in all the earth:

"22 The LORD will strike Egypt, striking but healing; so they will return to the LORD, and He will respond to them and will heal them.

"In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and the Assyrians will come into Egypt and the Egyptians into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians. In that day Israel will be the third *party* with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, "Blessed is Egypt My people, and Assyria the work of My hands, and Israel My inheritance." (Isa 19:23-25)

There is hope for the offspring of Isaac as there is hope for the offspring of Ishmael. Even if God did not make the covenant with him he blessed him. Ishmael also received the sign of the covenant at the same time as Abraham and all his servants:

20 "As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I will bless him, and will make him fruitful and will multiply him exceedingly. He shall become the father of twelve princes, and I will make him a great nation.

21 "But My covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you at this season next year."

22 When He finished talking with him, God went up from Abraham.

23 Then Abraham took Ishmael his son, and all *the servants* who were born in his house and all who were bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's household, and circumcised the flesh of their foreskin in the very same day, as God had said to him.

24 Now Abraham was ninety-nine years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

25 And Ishmael his son was thirteen years old when he was circumcised in the flesh of his foreskin.

26 In the very same day Abraham was circumcised, and Ishmael his son." (Gen 17:20-26)

To this day Muslims follow this practice whereas Jews circumcise on the eighth day. Abraham would probably not have sent Ishmael away had it not been for the pride of his mother Hagar. Abraham loved Ishmael. Although she obeyed and returned to humble herself under Sarah she was sent away at Sarah's request when Isaac had been born and jealousy developed in this first family in Israel's history. Her rejection must have affected her young teenage son who must have longed for his father. Ishmael went south and married an Egyptian wife. Could it be that Muslims have inherited this feeling of Hagar's rejection? Could it be that they still long after their father Abraham? The time will come when Isaac and Ishmael according to Isaiah 19 will one day be reconciled.

As we have mentioned, Abraham did not see the fulfillment of the promise but in his vision of faith he looked forward beyond what his earthly eyes could see to the heavenly city "whose architect and builder is God." What he could not see in his time was what the Holy Spirit almost 2000 years later revealed to the apostle Paul, that the wall that divides the descendants of Abraham into the descendants of Isaac and the descendants of Ishmael would be broken down when Yeshua the Messiah of the Jews unites Abraham's true offspring into the one people of God, a people that the Letter to the Ephesians calls 'the One New Man.'

"For He Himself is our peace, who made both *groups into* one and broke down the barrier of the dividing wall, by abolishing in His flesh the enmity, *which is* the Law of commandments *contained* in ordinances, so that in Himself He might make the two into one new man, *thus* establishing peace," (Eph 2:14-15)

The family-conflict in the Middle-East will come to an end when 'Isaac' and 'Ishmael' will understand three fundamental truths: first of all that God blessed both patriarchs – Isaac and Ishmael - together with their descendants and their respective nations. Perhaps even all of them are destined together to become a blessing for the whole earth (Gen 12:3; Gen 17:19-20; Isaiah 19); secondly that God in his inscrutable sovereignty determined to attribute a special calling to nations of his choice as a call for service and thirdly that the true descendants of Abraham are those who receive their righteousness by faith.

Concerning God's election it is important to remember that both Isaac and Ishmael and their offspring as Jews and Arabs, who in the context of Islam claim to be descendants of Ishmael, need to understand that God already before the foundation of the world has elected everyone who receives his Son Jesus/Yeshua as his or her personal Savior (Eph 1:4) but that God in his Sovereignty has elected Israel as a nation for a unique purpose (Israel as the servant of God and the light for the nations) before it even existed as a nation (Isa 41:8-9; 42:6; Exod 19:4-5; Deut 4:6-8; Exod 26:19; Psalm 147:19-20; Rom 3:2 & 9:4-5).

In order that this threefold basic understanding may take root, it is equally necessary that the descendants of Isaac and Ishmael realize that all have been misled to believe that they are the true offspring of Abraham although neither of them really shared Abraham's faith in his God, in short, it will be necessary that both accept the Good News that Jesus/Yeshua is the true promised descendant in whom alone forgiveness and reconciliation are possible.

(1) Abraham, Father of many, until circumcision as the sign of the covenant in Gen 17 is called Abram, the eminent Father. Stephen, the first messianic-Jewish believer who was stoned by Jewish theologians in Jerusalem after he had presented his summary of some 2000 years of Jewish history (Acts 7, 2-60) did not differentiate between the two names. Neither did the former Pharisee Saul/Paul who had heard Stephen's account and had approved of what happened. Abraham is the name that counts even if this first patriarch had the name Abram when he had received his calling (see the letters to the Galatians, to the Romans and to the Hebrews. The only exceptions are the chronologies 1Chron 1:27 and Nehemia 9:7).

(2) Rabbi Yehuda Bohrer, Ph.D., *The Geographic Codes of the Bible*, Studio Bat Ami, Bet-El, Nisan 5767 (2006), 256pp, Ancient Luz to become Bet-El, p. 42; chapters 3 & 4 as monograph, 2008, Luz Bet-El of Old Reborn. p. 8, (hbohrer@arutzsheva.org)

(3) Technically, compared with other covenants, this one is called a 'cutting covenant' because in the Hebrew language this covenant is 'cut.' This practice was known for covenants of Suzereins: "The house of Judah and the house of Israel refer to all of the descendants of Abraham. The covenants that God made with mankind are described in a manner similar to that made by a conquering king. Referred to as a suzerain covenant, it is one where the covenant is made by the conquering king who retains all sovereignty as he sets forth the rules of the agreement." http://www.biblicaltheology.com/jer/jer_31_27.html

"The suzerain covenant-treaty form commonly utilized in the Hebrew Scriptures and also echoed at times in the Greek NT (Greer, 2002; adapted from Kline, 1963): ...

Sacrificial ratification in 'cutting' a covenant & implied self-maledictory oath (*Gen. 15, Ex. 24*)"

<http://www.jesusinstituteforum.org/Atone-coverHS.html>

Also see Dr. Ronald G. Fanter, *The Covenant of Blood* and H. Clay Trumbull, *The Blood Covenant*

(4) Introduction to the OT, R.K. Harrison, Prof. of OT, Wycliffe College, University of Toronto, London, Tyndale Press, 1970, p.105-109

(5) Ethelbert W. Bullinger, *Witness of the Stars* (Garnd Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publishers, 1970). Bullinger's is the most elaborate book dealing with the biblical significance of the stars. Some of his interpretations may be speculative and need to be read with caution.

(6) Dr. Arnold Fruchtenbaum, *Israelology*, Ariel Ministries, 1989, p. 576

(7) Emil Fackenheim, Jewish author, p. 285, 305 <http://www.jewishtribalreview.org/28israe.htm> (his neologism obviously refers to supercessionism or Replacement Theology)

(8) Note that for Arab Christians and in some other languages than the Arab Bible translation the name for God is Allah. Nevertheless it needs to be understood that the Hebrew name for God is not Allah but YHWY. To equate the God of Abraham with the God of Islam is based on a linguistic and a theological misunderstanding. A comparison of the two will easily prove this case.

(9) The Roman Catholic Church in Lumen Gentium 16 claims that "the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are the Moslems: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham, and together with us they adore the one, merciful God, mankind's judge on the last day."

External interpretations of Genesis 15:1-6:

Faith Conquering Fear, Ray C. Stedman

<http://www.raystedman.org/genesis/3661.html>

Stedman mentions the view that descendants as "the dust on the earth" and "the stars of the heavens" could refer to two kinds of descendants, the natural descendants (Israel and Ishmaelite/Arab nations) and the spiritual descendants (all those who according to the Letter to the Galatians believe in Yeshua, Jews and Non-Jews alike). Yet how would one account for the faithful descendants before Yeshua came? Hebrews 11:12 uses the metaphors of stars and sand for all believing descendants.

An Exegetical Essay on Genesis 15:1-6, Paul Rayner, Jan. 12 2009

<http://www.rayneronline.com/blog/2009/01/exegetical-essay-on-genesis-15-1-6.html>

Abraham Believed God, and God Accounted it to him for Righteousness:

<http://www.growingchristians.org/rfgc/genesis/transcripts/lesson15-1.pdf>

Reformed Perspectives Magazine, Scott Lindsay, Gen 15:1-6

http://thirdmill.org/newfiles/sco_lindsay/OT.sco_lindsay.Gen.15.1_5.html

One of the Internet sermons raises the question why God may have delayed fulfilling his promise to Abraham and Sarah until it was no longer possible for them to generate offspring. Quoting Isaiah 51:1-2 "Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who gave birth to you in pain; when *he was but* one I called him, then I blessed him and multiplied him," this exegete concludes that "this new work of God in the form of a picture or shadow represents the great Gospel truth of the resurrection. God wanted to create for him a people through the resurrection." The essential point of this comparison seems to be that the new birth (John 3:3) - just as was the birth of Abraham's son of promise - is not a natural but a spiritual birth. Nicodemus according to John 3:10 ought to have made this connection from his knowledge of the Tanach (the promised new covenant involved a spiritual renewal according to Ezekiel 11:19 and 31:26).

The majority of exegetical sermons put the emphasis on the various kinds of Abraham's fears and the lesson of faith to overcome fear as the answer to God's promises. They limit themselves to the doctrine of Justification by Faith and, as important as that doctrinal point is, yet do not take account of the wider context of this passage in Chapter 15 and of the Abrahamic Covenant in God's plan of salvation as a whole. Some see it all fulfilled in Christ without significance for the original recipients anymore.

Eliezer may have been a run-away slave from Damascus whom Abraham bought on the way south. Purchasing the freedom of a slave was equivalent to adoption into one's family and could be construed as such. Abraham's concern was a cultural one.

Commentators rightly point out that Abraham's faith was based on God's promise received in the form of "propositional truth." Abraham's experience in looking at the stars may be compared to the first part of Psalm 19 which begins with a contemplation of God's creation: "The heavens are telling of the glory of God; And their expanse is declaring the work of His hands...There is no speech, nor are there words; Their voice is not heard." Such revelation is important but not really enough. This is why the second half of Psalm 19 deals with God's law expressed in terms of 'propositions.' For instance, "The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple." This statement is just as verbal as God's promise to Abraham: "This man will not be your heir; but one who will come forth from your own body, he shall be your heir." Abraham's personal faith in God was grounded on "propositional truth", not on nebulous, mystic or subjective impressions. He spoke with God and God spoke to him. There was speech and there were words. Biblical faith, the faith that God counted to him as righteousness must be grounded on propositional truth.