

## Chapter 15

The story of God, Abram, and Sarai span decades. God's promises are not fulfilled overnight, not even within the year, as a result God reiterates the promises again and again as encouragement for Abram over the years. In chapter 15, God first makes the promises into an official covenant. Abram complains to God that after so many years he still remains childless and his chief servant, Eliezer of Damascus, is currently his heir since he has no children. God promises that no one but Abram's very own issue will be his heir (note, in this section Sarai is not mentioned as being part of the promise). God now connects the promise with the image of the stars in the sky, that's how numerous Abram's descendants could be. Vs. 6 is very important for us as Christians, even before Abram had done anything to be deserving of such promises, even before he was circumcised, he trusted that God would do what God promised and was therefore justified (made righteous/saved) in God's sight. St. Paul would later use this verse as a proof for allowing uncircumcised Gentiles into the church, if Abram was good enough for God before he was circumcised (his faith is what made him righteous), then surely that argument works for Gentiles who believe in Jesus as the Messiah!

God promises Abram both numerous descendants and the land that he now resides in, but Abram asks for further encouragement/guidance, "How am I to know that I will possess it?" And here God establishes an unconditional covenant with Abram. God asks Abram to set up an elaborate ancient covenant ceremony. Normally, the parties making the promises would walk down the center of the animal pieces as a sign that "may this happen to me, may I be cut in half, if I break my promise." Abram sets up the ceremony, but only God walks down the center (as the smoking fire pot and flaming torch), because this is an unconditional promise that God is making to Abram. In this vision, God shares with Abram some important information: the promise of land will be fulfilled, but not in your lifetime! Abram will live to a ripe old age and be buried in peace, but it will take 400 years, and slavery and freedom from Egypt, before Abram's descendants will return to this land and then receive it from God.

## Chapter 16

Because Sarai has yet to be mentioned as part of God's promise to Abram, Sarai takes matters into her own hands to help God's promises along. Without a word from God to the contrary, she assumes that since she's well past childbearing age and after all this time God has not made her conceive, that perhaps they have to think outside of the box. So, she gives her slave to Abram as a second wife to conceive children for her (this was a common and accepted practice in this time). Hagar did conceive, and then we're told that "she looked with contempt on her mistress." Did she really think herself better than Sarai or was it all in Sarai's jealous head? We'll never know. But, likely Sarai's jealousy of Hagar drove her to

treat her harshly (the Hebrew word here is “oppress” just like the Egyptians would later oppress the Israelite slaves, this passage shows that the Israelites are not immune to treating others oppressively). Hagar flees from such harsh treatment to the wilderness. This is a very vulnerable position for a woman -let alone a pregnant, foreign woman- to find herself in. But, God hears the cries of the oppressed, God found her in the wilderness and spoke to her, “What are you doing out here?” And urged her to return to her home with Abram and Sarai, and promised that her son -Abram’s first born- would indeed be the father of a multitude. Ishmael means “God hears.” And Hagar named God “The one who sees” -this is the only example in all of the Old Testament of a human giving a name to God (usually God reveals God’s name to the human).

## Chapter 17

Fourteen years later, God further encourages Abram in the promises God made to Abram, but now includes Sarai in those promises. God re-names Abram and Sarai to Abraham and Sarah to mark the importance of this new promise, and their vocation as the patriarch and matriarch of the multitude. God now says that not only will those descendants be numerous, but that **KINGS** will come from you! This covenant of descendants and land is to be not just for Abraham, but an eternal covenant with all of Abraham’s offspring. Now, God makes a conditional covenant with Abraham and his descendants, God will do all that God has promised, and the sign that Abraham and his family trusts in that relationship with God will be circumcision of every male within their household now, and every future baby boy on the 8<sup>th</sup> day. The sign of the covenant will be in the flesh of the penis -the very body part that will be used in producing this multitude of descendants.

God now promises that Sarah will be the mother of a multitude, the mother of kings, and Abraham laughs because she is 90 years old! He says “how can a 90 year old woman even have the stamina to give birth?!” Abraham advocates for his 13 year old son, Ishmael (an advocacy that perhaps wouldn’t have happened if Hagar had not returned home to rear her son in Abram’s house). And so, while God establishes the covenant with Abraham through the son he would have with Sarah, God also makes bold promises of blessing to Ishmael and his descendants. Ishmael will be exceedingly fruitful, will be made a great nation, will even be the father of 12 princes, but Sarah will be the mother of kings.

To this day both Jews and Muslims are circumcised as a sign of their relationship with God and their trust in God’s promises.