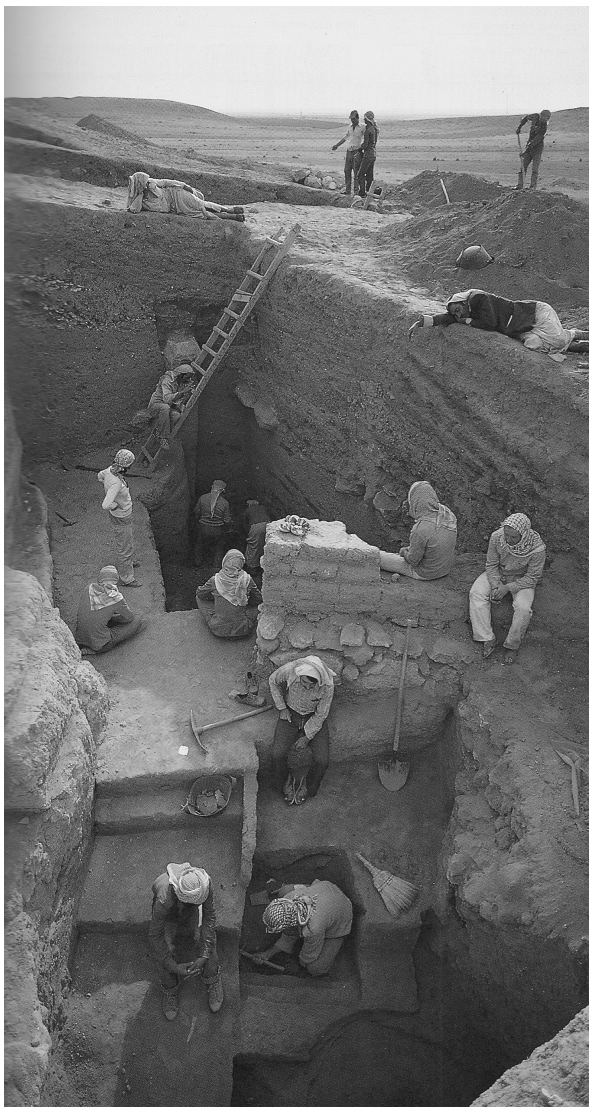


OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 6 (Part 2)

Abraham, Archaeology, and History



Bulldozers are great! There is nothing quite like clearing a piece of land of debris, timber, and other growth, and especially buildings, all with a heavy duty, diesel burning, track-rolling bulldozer! Bulldozers rumble, purr like a kitten—ok, maybe more like a hundred Harleys in unison—and scrape land clean with incredible thoroughness.

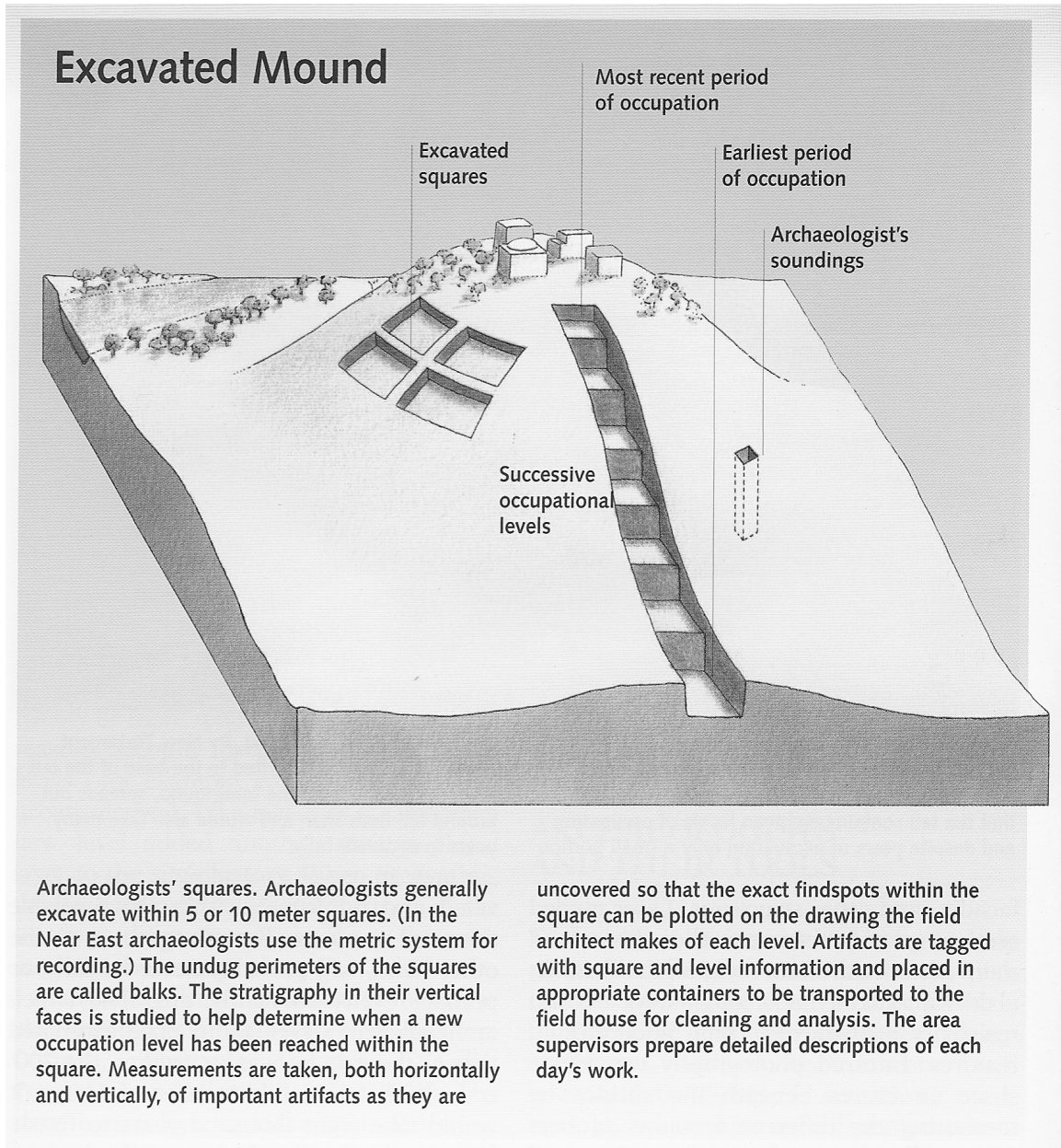
However, tractor bulldozers are a relatively new invention of the last 110 years. Going back into early civilization, when houses and even cities were razed, burned, or destroyed, they were not scraped off the ground for new construction. Instead, the new construction generally went on top of the old. Over time, this produced small hills for the cities and towns. When these towns were abandoned, those hills would accumulate dirt and eventually become solid hills that covered any history of ever existing as a community.

There is a Hebrew word "*tell*" which means, "hill" or "mound." This is the word used for archaeological sites that are earthen mounds that cover earlier civilizations.¹ There are thousands and thousands of tells in the Middle East. Each one can contain many layers of civilization that stretch through thousands of

¹ The photograph is of an actual excavation at Tell Mardikh. Roaf, Michael, *Cultural Atlas of Mesopotamia and the Ancient Near East*, (Andromeda Oxford 1990) at 18.

years of time. Only in the mid-1800's did scholars discover that the mounds that were found all over in the Middle East were in fact more than true dirt mounds. That is when archaeology took a new and significant turn.

At first, archaeologists were rather inept at recovering the history contained in the mounds. Rather quickly, though, they developed some rigid rules that helped dissect the past while documenting it in ways that allowed further studies.



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² Hoerth and McRay, *Bible Archaeology: An Exploration of the History and Culture of Early Civilizations*, (Baker 1977) at 18.

The problems they faced make sense as we consider what had to happen. The excavation of the tells, commonly called “digs” needed to go layer at a time. Yet as each successive layer was peeled off, that layer was lost to history for good, outside of the photographs, charts, drawings, and measurements, and retained artifacts.

Within the framework of these digs, scholars have a variety of tools to help date the various layers, including pottery types, radio carbon dating, known historical events, and dating of other artifacts.³

As we work through archaeology of Abraham’s time period, we begin to consider certain materials found at various ancient digs. The limited nature of the digs necessarily limits the available material. Still, there is more than enough to enrich our understanding of Abraham, as well as to confirm our belief in the historical timeliness of the stories as told in Scripture.

ABRAHAM AND LOT, THE AFTERSTORY

As we previously discussed, after marauding kings captured Lot and his possessions, Abraham rode to Lot’s rescue. It was after that rescue that Abram met Melchizedek and received Melchizedek’s blessing as “priest of God Most High.” This was subject of our lesson on the Christological imagery found in the life of Abraham (Lesson 5).

It was after these things that we have God’s first expressed covenant with Abraham (set out in Genesis 15).

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:
"Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."
But Abram said, "O Lord GOD⁴, what will you give me, for I
continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of

³ A splendid basic explanation of the process and tolls involved can be found in Hoerth and McRay at 10ff.

⁴ We have noted before that when the Old Testament is translating the “name” of God (the Hebrew letters of “*Yhwh*”), most modern English translations give it as “LORD” making the word with large and small capital letters. The King James uses instead the word “Jehovah” for translation. Here, we read “Lord GOD” with Lord written normally and God written in the large and small capital letters. That is because two Hebrew words are together and the translators are faced with “*Adonai Yhwh*.” *Adonai* is translated as “Lord” when applied to God, with lower case lettering to distinguish it from LORD, the lettering for *Yhwh*. Because both words typically translate with the English “Lord” and “LORD,” and because both are present here, the translators opt for using “GOD” in all upper case letters to translate *Yhwh* here rather than “LORD.” This prevents the awkward appearance of the translation, “Lord LORD...”

Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir." And behold, the word of the LORD came to him: "This man shall not be your heir; your very own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness (Gen. 15:1-6).

The story of covenant then continues with Abram taking several animals, cutting all but the birds in half setting them out on the ground. As night fell, Abram fell asleep and the LORD confirmed that Abram would have offspring that would live in a foreign land for four generations before returning to Canaan once the "iniquity of the Amorites" was "complete."

The text then speaks of a smoking pot and flaming torch passing between the split carcasses. The LORD then specified the land given Abram and his descendants as a part of the covenant.

Two sections of this narrative are better understood in light of archaeological finds: (1) the legal obligations and opportunities of descendants, and (2) the process and nature of covenants. To best understand each one, we need to combine the expressions of these facets of Abram's life with the similar incidents that come later in his life. First, we consider the descendants issues, then the covenant issues.

Abraham and his Descendants

Our 21st century existence in Western civilization is marked by government involvement and assurance in the aging process. As we get older, we have a safety net of social security that ensures some measure of medical care and expenses for living. Of course, history tells us this is a rarity in civilization. Certainly in the time of Abraham, there was no such governmental security.

In Abraham's day, and throughout most of history as people aged, they were dependant upon their offspring for care. There were no annuities, no retirement homes, and no insurance. Because not every family could always produce offspring, some of the earliest legal procedures known in civilization were those of adoption and other means of providing for offspring.

In Abraham's case these issues come to the forefront in multiple ways and at multiple times. First, we know that Abraham and the wife of his youth (Sarai) were unable to have children on their own. Well into old age, Sarai was barren. For this reason, Sarai made the decision to give Abram an Egyptian servant to mother his children.

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, had borne him no children. She had a female Egyptian servant whose name was Hagar. And Sarai said to Abram, "Behold now, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Go in to my servant; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her servant, and gave her to Abram her husband as a wife. And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived (Gen. 16:1-3).

This situation came after Abram had complained to God over the lack of a child, noting that his heir was a servant's:

But Abram said, "O Lord GOD, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, you have given me no offspring, and a member of my household will be my heir" (Gen. 15:2-3).

We have legal texts that explain the rules typically applied in situations involving childless couples that needed heirs to tend to them in old age, as well as to take over and continue the family line. These texts apply to the two approaches Abram and Sarai used to get substitute children.

The first method was getting an heir by an early equivalent of adoption. The Code of Hammurabi, a set of laws that date from approximately 1790 BC, was discovered in 1901. It is slightly over seven-foot tall rock slab containing 282 laws of King Hammurabi written in the language Akkadian. Hammurabi ruled Babylon from 1792 to 1750 BC.

A number of the 282 laws deal with adoption rights. For example, law 185 confirms the rights of an adoptive father:

If a man take in his name a young child as a son and rear him, one may not bring claim for that adopted son.⁵

Other similar laws existed under other authorities in the time range.⁶

A second legally authorized kind of substitute parentage was having an heir by proxy. Scholars apply this label to children produced by a designated substitute woman. In Abraham's case, the substitute was the Egyptian slave Hagar.

⁵ *The Code of Hammurabi*, translated by Robert Francis Harper (Univ. of Chi. 1904) at 87.

⁶ See citations and discussion by Kitchen at 325ff.

We know that this was a common practice in the area for a number of Hammurabi's laws speak to it as well. Law 146 states:

If a man take a wife and she give a maid servant to her husband, and that maid servant bear children and afterwards would take rank with her mistress; because she has borne children, her mistress may not sell her for money, but she may reduce her to bondage and count her among the maid servants.⁷

If we consider what happened in the life of Abraham and Sarah, then we see some enactment of the type of situation contemplated in the Code of Hammurabi:

And he went in to Hagar, and she conceived. And when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. And Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my servant to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the LORD judge between you and me!" But Abram said to Sarai, "Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her (Gen. 16:4-6).

Sarai's dealt harshly enough with Hagar that Hagar fled. God instructed Hagar to return and she did so, but not for long. For after Sarah gave birth to Isaac, she again ran Hagar away from the family, this time with Hagar and Abraham's son, Ishmael.

Hagar sought God for help and received it, along with the promise of blessing on Ishmael and his offspring.

Abraham and Covenants with God

The Genesis 15 passage set out earlier contains an early covenant of Abram with God. A second covenantal experience is found in Genesis 17:1-14. In Genesis 17, Abram was 99 years old, and the LORD appeared to him saying:

I am God Almighty, walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly (Gen. 17:1-2).

Abram's reaction was one of worship as he fell on his face. God then uttered the words that not only explained the covenant further, but also proclaimed Abram's new name:

⁷ *The Code of Hammurabi*, translated by Robert Francis Harper (Univ. of Chi. 1904) at 69.

"Behold, my covenant is with you, and you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. No longer shall your name be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham, for I have made you the father of a multitude of nations. I will make you exceedingly fruitful, and I will make you into nations, and kings shall come from you. And I will establish my covenant between me and you and your offspring after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your offspring after you. And I will give to you and to your offspring after you the land of your sojournings, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession, and I will be their God" (Gen. 17:4-8).

God then set out Abraham's responsibilities under the covenant:

As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised (Gen. 17:9-10).

In this covenant, God supplied Abraham with another promise:

And God said to Abraham, "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her." Then Abraham fell on his face and laughed and said to himself, "Shall a child be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" And Abraham said to God, "Oh that Ishmael might live before you!" God said, "No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year" (Gen. 17:15-21).

These covenants with God are not the only covenants Abraham made. He also made covenants with other men. In Genesis 22:22ff, we read of Abraham and King Abimelech of Gerar. The King gets Abraham to swear that he would not "deal falsely" with the king or his descendants. Following this event, one of the king's servants wrongly seized one of Abraham's water wells. When Abraham complains to the king, the king denies knowledge. It is at this point the two men execute their covenant.

So Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech, and the two men made a covenant. Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock apart. And Abimelech said to Abraham, "What is the meaning of these seven ewe lambs that you have set apart?" He said, "These seven ewe lambs you will take from my hand, that this may be a witness for me that I dug this well." Therefore that place was called Beersheba, because there both of them swore an oath. So they made a covenant at Beersheba. Then Abimelech and Phicol the commander of his army rose up and returned to the land of the Philistines. Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God. And Abraham sojourned many days in the land of the Philistines (Gen. 21:27-34).

When we read of "covenant," we might fairly start by considering what a "covenant" really was. The Hebrew word for "covenant" is *berit*. Scholars debate where the word came from and where it derives its meaning as a covenant, but at its core it references "that which bound two parties together."⁸

At this time in history, covenants were commonly made between people and between nations. Until recently, however, not many of those covenants have come to light. It was popular for scholars to question the idea that Abraham could have really had such treaties and covenants if in fact he was living in the 2,000-1,500 BC time range. These scholars frequently point to the Biblical reference to Abraham as coming from "Ur of the Chaldees" and note that the Chaldees did not exist until after 1000 BC. Thus, any reference to them means that the writing is of a date post-1000 BC. We have previously suggested that the reference "of the Chaldees" was a later add by a prophet under the authority of God to differentiate for later readers, which Ur was Abraham's early home. There were at least three different Urs and the addition enabled later readers to have an accurate understanding.

Contrary to our understanding, a good number of scholars deduce from the Chaldees reference (as well as other citations which are beyond the scope of this lesson⁹) that the entire Abraham story must be of a late date, adding that Abraham and the other patriarchs are fictionalized creations of a post-1000 BC story teller.

⁸ Bromiley, Geoffrey, ed., *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, (Eerdmans 1979) Vol. 1 at 790

⁹ For example, a number of scholars cite the references in Genesis to Abraham having camels as proof of a fictionalized account. Finkelstein and Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archaeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origin of its Sacred Texts*, (Simon and Schuster 2001) at 36ff call the mention of camels an anachronism claiming, "We now know through archaeological research that camels were not domesticated as beasts of burden earlier than the late second millennium and were not widely used in that capacity in the ancient Near East until well after

In the last three decades, however, archaeology has expanded the understanding of scholars about covenants in the time range the Bible assigns to Abraham (this archaeological evidence will come into play in even more significance once we reach the covenant between God and Israel entered into at the hands of Moses' ministry.) Examples of the treaty/covenant knowledge of Abraham's era have come from a number of documents at the ancient digs of Mari¹⁰ and Tell Leilan.¹¹ Scholars are able to securely date these tablets to the Middle Bronze Age (the time era of Abraham).



1000 BCE.” Interestingly, Finkelstein and Silberman do not offer any footnotes to reference their claims, yet we can go to Kitchen and find meticulous footnotes supporting his refutations showing a camel skull from a stage in Egypt that dates somewhere between 2000 and 1400 BC, a figure of a kneeling (domesticated) camel from Canaan in the 19th or 18th century BC, a camel jaw from a Middle Bronze tomb (1900-1550 BC.), and more. Clearly, the arguments of camels being an anachronism have difficulty in light of archaeological finds.

¹⁰ While Mari was discovered in 1933, and digs have continued since, very few of the 25,000 clay tablets unearthed thus far have actually been published. The tablets date to the time range of 1800-1759 BC. In 1759 BC Babylon's king Hammurabi, mentioned earlier in this lesson, conquered and sacked the town, giving the later date for the tablets.

¹¹ This dig was/is overseen by Yale University since it began in 1979. See the Yale website for the dig at <http://leilan.yale.edu/works/overview.html>.

The renowned British Egyptologist and Ancient Near Eastern scholar K. A. Kitchen has extensively analyzed these ancient sources, comparing them to the treaties and covenants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Kitchen takes to task those scholars who dismiss the historical accuracy of the Bible's patriarchal covenant process.

Citing recently discovered and published tablets, Kitchen demonstrates a remarkable consistency in how treaties and covenants were executed in Abraham's day. In fact, the "format is wholly distinct from those current both in the third millennium and in the middle and late second millennium, and later."¹² In other words, our archaeological research has produced good consistent evidence that the Bible is accurately describing a process that happened at the time period indicated in Scripture, which would have been unknown to Biblical writers from later in Old Testament history.

Kitchen sets out a formula the treaties followed, including: (1) witnesses to the treaties (Gen. 21:23 "swear to me here *by God*"); (2) an oath (Gen. 21:23, 24 "*swear* to me...And Abraham said, 'I will *swear*'"); (3) stipulations (Gen. 21:23 "You will not deal falsely...as I have dealt kindly with you, so you will deal with me"); and (4) ceremony (Gen. 21:27-30 has a ceremony of sheep and oxen exchange, with a follow-up oath and stipulations).

Kitchen's analysis of the four patriarchal treaties explained in Genesis brings Kitchen to conclude:

When tabulated, the content of these four treaties *does* correspond quite closely to what we find in both the process of enactment and the final documents at Mari and Tell Leilan, and *not* to what was current at other periods.¹³

In this area, archaeology has soundly challenged the skeptic's argument that Abraham was a fictionalized creation of a post- BC mindset.

We have in the life of Abraham, two covenantal expressions between God and Abraham, in addition to that between Abraham and Abimelek. The covenants between God and Abraham, are called "personal religious covenants." They are distinct from the group covenant or treaty made between Abraham and Abimelek. These covenants "consist simply of [1] a promise from deity to his human client and [2] a confirmatory sign, as witness."¹⁴

¹² Kitchen, K. A., *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, (Eerdmans 2003) at 323.

¹³ *Ibid.* at 323.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* at 324.

The two covenants between Abraham and God both follow this pattern. In Genesis 15, God promises Abraham innumerable offspring and inheritance of the land (element 1). The second element (a sign) is the smoking fire pot and flaming torch that passes between the slaughtered animals.¹⁵ In Genesis 17, God promises Abram will be the “father of a multitude of nations” (element 1). The second element, the sign, is the name change from Abram to Abraham. A further promise (element 1) is that God will bring forth kings from Abraham’s offspring, and the covenant will also follow Abraham’s offspring. This is confirmed in element 2 by the sign of circumcision.

In each divine covenanting, we see God as the promising party, making his promises to Abraham without regard to the obedience of Abraham. Abraham’s obedience is shown in other scenes such as the willingness to sacrifice Isaac. These scenes portray a very unilateral promise of God with the responses of Abraham being confirmatory signs, not responsive obligations that earn God’s promises.

Old Testament scholar J. B. Payne wrote that these covenant with God:

becomes God’s self-imposed obligation for the deliverance of sinners, an instrument of inheritance for effectuating God’s elective love.¹⁶

CONCLUSION

As we consider the life of Abraham, we have insights from archaeology that should enhance and confirm our confidence in the integrity of Scripture in its

¹⁵ Scholars are uncertain over the meaning of the slaughtered animals being cut in half and placed opposite each other. Some view this as particular to the prophecy at issue: Since God was going to put three generations through some ordeal, where “they shall come back here in the fourth generation” (Gen. 15:16), the three year old animals of three kinds (or alternately translated three animals of each of the three types) represents the three generations that will suffer or be torn apart. See Hirsch, *Commentary on the Torah*, (Judaica Press 1966) transl. by Isaac Levy, Vol. 1 at 278ff. Others see in the cleaving in half the early heritage of the word covenant as that which binds together. In this sense, God passes through the various halves in covenant because God and the covenant bind together the two parties represented by the two halves. Still others see the cut up carcasses as representations of what should happen to the parties, should one fail to perform. So here God is seen as “committing Himself to the covenantal threat of self-dismemberment.” Tenney, Merrill, ed., *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, (Zondervan 1976), Vol. 1 at 1002-3. See also Jer. 34:18-20. In the Mari tablets discussed above a donkey was typically killed as a part of a covenant. The phrase “to kill a donkey” was almost an idiomatic expression for making a covenant. See Bromiley at 790.

¹⁶ *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible*, vol. 1 at 1003.

claims. As our appreciation for the timeliness of the stories of Abraham grows, so should our appreciation for the underlying meanings. God had a plan. He made promises about his plan. He was trustworthy to keep his promises. He is no less reliable today in his plans for our lives.

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *“The word of the LORD came to Abram...”* (Gen. 15:1).

God has a message for his people. He speaks in a variety of ways, through Scripture, through history, through counsel, through circumstances, and even directly. When he speaks, we need to hear him and accept what he has to say.

As a practical matter, we live in an age where many people claim to have a word from the Lord, even though they do not. Many claim to have insight which is, in reality, missing. Many seem to think they have a leading of the Lord when in fact they have a random idea they choose to follow. And yet, ***God does speak!***

We are called to hear him. This involves discernment, and discernment God grows in us as we mature in his will. Discernment also comes through familiarity with Scripture. For there we hear God’s clearest voice as he instructs us.

Listen for God’s voice in your life and, through mature discernment, seek to live consistent with the words he has for you.

2. *“My covenant is with you, and you shall be...”* (Gen. 17:8).

In a song calling people to action, Bob Dylan starts out sing “God don’t make promises that he don’t keep”¹⁷ (“When You Gonna Wake Up?”). Bob is right. Take time to read your Bible this week. Write down any promises of God you find. Then prayerfully think through those promises. For “God don’t make promises that he don’t keep.” He kept his promises to Abraham, even when logic and the odds said he could not or would not. Yet God kept his promises in his way at his time. He did not need the help of Abraham or Sarah.

¹⁷ *When You Gonna Wake Up* from the album “Slow Train Running.”

3. *“Behold my covenant is with you”* (Gen 17:4).

God made covenant with Abram, but it was not his final covenant with man! Jeremiah prophesied of a new covenant coming:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people (Jer. 31:31-33).

God fulfilled this promise in Christ with the confirming Holy Spirit as a sign. We have the full covenant in Abraham’s form: God’s promise to deliver a new covenant with his law written on our hearts; and the sign and seal of the Holy Spirit indwelling the believer.

Embrace God and his covenant. Trust in his sacrifice of his Son, and receive the relationship he has planned for you and promised to you..

WANT MORE?

Take time to read Genesis 24-28 Email me and let me know your thoughts and analysis! Email is: wantmore@biblical-literacy.com.