

# interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

January 1982

Volume 10 Number 1

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# interpretation

Volume 10 number 1

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# The Lion and the Ass:

## A Commentary on the Book of Genesis (Chapters 21–24)

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### CHAPTER XXI

1. *And the Lord visited Sarah as He had said, and the Lord did unto Sarah as He had spoken.*
2. *For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set of time of which God had spoken to him.*
3. *And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto him, whom Sarah bare to him, Isaac.*

The name *Isaac* comes from the word meaning *to laugh*. Since the verb will appear several times in the present chapter, under rather ambiguous circumstances, it will become crucial that we understand the full range of its meaning, not only as it is used by the author but as it occurs in the whole of Biblical literature.

The Hebrew language is a much more formal language than the Western ear is used to. Each verb and most nouns which are not of foreign origin are built on a root of three letters. But oftentimes these roots themselves are interrelated. In the Book of Genesis there is a constant play among four roots which sound nearly alike. In each case the first letter of the root is one of the letters related to the family in which our 's' and 'z' belong, and in every case the last letter has a very hard 'k' sound. In two cases the middle letter is a very soft guttural whereas in the other two it is a very hard guttural. The words with the soft middle letter mean *playing* (*saḥaq*) and *laughing* (*šaḥaq*) whereas those with the hard middle letter mean *crying* (*ša'aq*) or *complaining* (*ʿa'aq*). In any case the four words sound much alike, as if originally the ideas were all one and people began to soften their voices or make them hard depending upon their feelings and the slight distinctions which they wished to express. As we shall see, it is important that the Hebrew word for *laughter* is related to words meaning *crying* and *yelling* rather than to words for *happiness* or *joviality*. Needless to say Hebrew has no counterpart of the word *joviality* itself. Of the two words which have the soft middle letter and hence mean laughter, one begins with a hard 's' sound and the other with a soft 's' sound. The latter can also mean *to play*. Given this introduction let us consider more deeply the separate ways in which the words are used.

The roots with the hard middle letter appear six times in the Book of Genesis. Justly or unjustly there is a cry of pain and hence a cry for help. *The*

*voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground* (Gen. 4:10). When he discovered that he had lost his birthright, *Esau cried with a great and exceeding bitter cry* (Gen. 27:34), and when they had no bread *The people cried to pharaoh for bread* (Gen. 41:55). In this sense it is often used in connection with the Children of Israel during the years which they spent in the desert. Sometimes the verb is also used to mean the wild cries of a violent mob, such as occurred in Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:21; 19:13).

In almost every instance in the Bible the words for *laughter* are closely related to crying and appear either as derision or as the *laughter* of a wild man. Sarah and Abraham laugh derisively when the angel predicts the birth of a son (Gen. 17:17 and 18:12). Lot's sons-in-law take his warning to be mere *laughter* or mockery (Gen. 19:14). Sarah is constantly afraid that people will *laugh* at her (Gen. 21:6). Potiphar's wife accuses Joseph of *making fun* of her (Gen. 39:14,17). The Children of Israel *laugh* before the Golden Calf (Ex. 32:6), and the *Philistines called for Samson out of the prison house; And he made them sport* (Judg. 16:25). The other word for *laughing* or *making sport* which uses the softer first letter is used by Jeremiah in the same derogatory sense: *I sat not in the assembly of the mockers* (Jer. 15:17).

In the early books it is sometimes used in the sense of innocent play. Isaac innocently *plays* with his wife Rebekah, and at the end of the war between the forces of Saul and the forces of David the two armies decide to *play* war games, but in both cases the result is disastrous. In the one case Abimelech discovers that Isaac is Rebekah's husband (Gen. 26:8), and in the other case the men do not know how to *play* and the war begins again (II Sam. 2:14).

Only in the character of David, the poet king, does *playing* find a new role among men. The story of how this came about is very long and begins in the third chapter of the Book of Joshua.

Moses was dead, and the Children of Israel were about to cross the Jordan River. The Ark of the Covenant was transferred across the river with great and sober circumstance. No less than the space of two thousand cubits, about half a mile, was left between the Ark and the people (Josh. 3:4). As we remember, this formal separation between the people and the Ark derives from God's decision to remain apart from the people because of the sin of the Golden Calf (Ex. 33:3, compare with Chapter Thirty-two).

Joshua was the first to carry the Ark into battle. It was used with great pomp and ceremony when the people walked seven times around the city of Jericho (Josh. 6:4). After the battle the Ark was finally erected in what was intended to be its permanent home on Mount Ebal (Josh. 8:30-33). During the period of the Judges the Ark was in the House of the Lord, which may be either a reference to the town of Beth-el or more probably a reference to the city of Shiloh (Josh. 18:1).

During the first Philistine war the people decided to bring the Ark into the camp as their protection. While this was done in imitation of Joshua's actions it

was severely against God's decision to remain outside of the camp (I Sam. 4:3). The event proved disastrous, and the Ark was captured by the Philistines (I Sam. 4:11). However, the Ark proved to be equally disastrous to the Philistines.

It was first carried to the city of Ashdod and placed by the statue of Dagon. In the morning the statue of Dagon was found fallen on its face in front of the Ark. The men of Gath, who will play a very special role in this story, immediately saw the implications and suggested that the Ark be returned to Israel. But their suggestion was not listened to, and one by one all the cities of Philistia fell under a plague. At last the Ark was returned and found its way to Beit Shemesh (I Sam. 6:12).

After the Ark was established in Beit Shemesh, God *smote the men of Beit Shemesh because they looked into the ark of the Lord, even He smote of the people fifty thousand and three score and ten men* (I Sam. 6:19). The demand for separation was still enforced, but the men of Kirjath-Jearim were willing to accept the Ark and treat it with due respect (I Sam. 7:1,2).

After the first intimations that he had lost favor with the Lord (I Sam. 13:14) Saul again attempted to take the Ark into battle against the Philistines, but during the battle he almost lost his son, Jonathan.

When David established his capital at Jerusalem he made a cart to transfer the Ark to the new capital. This procession, unlike the solemn occasion when the Ark was brought across the River Jordan, was accompanied by much festivity. Musical instruments such as harps, cornets and timbrels were *played*. The Hebrew word for playing is our word, the one we have been discussing all the time. During the procession the Ark wobbled and was about to fall when a man named Uzzah tried to prevent the fall by steadying it with his hand. God became angry because of the prohibition against touching the Ark. The man was struck and died in front of the Ark (II Sam. 6:7).

David's plans to transfer the Ark to the new capital were then abandoned, and it was left at the home of Obed-Edom the Gittite, a Philistine who was among David's followers from the days he was a vassal of King Achish in Ziklag.

We have already noted that it was Obed-Edom's fellow townsmen, the men of Gath, who were the first among the Philistines to recognize the powers of the Ark. On the other hand Gath is the city in which the character of the Philistines is most clearly portrayed since it was also the home of the giants. This strange combination is one way of presenting the problem which we are about to face insofar as it affects King David.

Although David abandoned his plans for transferring the Ark, he became angry with the Lord for the obvious injustice done to the man who tried to steady the Ark in all good will (II Sam. 6:8).

Sometime later, word came to David that the house of Obed-Edom had prospered because of the presence of the Ark, and he decided to continue with

his original plan of bringing the Ark to the new city. On this occasion the procession was even more frolicsome than the first, and David danced in front of the people as they entered the city (II Sam. 6:14). As King David entered the city leaping and dancing before the Lord, his wife, Michal, saw him through a window and was disgusted. According to her account, the dance of David, King of Israel, was done in the nude. The tendencies one may have to share Michal's feelings may not be completely modern prejudices since her position seems even more mild than the position which God Himself had taken only thirteen verses earlier when He killed the man who had touched the Ark. But apparently God had seen a certain justice in David's complaint and hence a necessity for modifying His position with regard to the relation between the Ark and the people.

Now in spite of David's dance he, more than any man, may have seen the full implication of the need for respecting the Ark, at least from one point of view. Throughout its history the misuse of the Ark had always been connected with the Philistines (I Sam. 4 and 14). On the other hand the Philistines themselves somehow saw the proper position of the Ark more clearly than did Israel herself. It was the men of Gath who immediately perceived the implications of the fall of Dagon and the necessity of returning the Ark, and the only man within the borders of Israel who was able to keep the Ark in safety was Obed-Edom, a Philistine.

In the revolution under Absalom, Zadok, the priest, offered to bring the Ark of God into battle, but David, being wiser than Saul, refused the assistance of the Ark and ordered him to return it to the Lord. His exact words were: *If I find favor in the eyes of the Lord, He will bring me back and let me see both it and His habitation; but if He says, I have no pleasure in you, behold, here I am, let Him do to me what seems good to Him* (II Sam. 15:25,26).

It may seem strange at first that David, the poet king who could take part in the wild dance, should also be the most sensitive to the use and abuse of the Ark. Judging by the history of the Ark on the one hand and the picture we have seen of the Philistines on the other, this combination of opposites would seem to be the legacy which David received from his tutelage to the Philistines while serving under King Achish. It is almost as if no leader could be fully aware of the limitations of order without having been schooled, at least for a time, beyond its limits.

Michal's feeling of disgust as she watched David dance before the Ark seems to be no more than a milder form of the Lord's reaction to Uzzah's touching the Ark. Although we can understand and perhaps even admire Michal, she was punished by barrenness for apparently following the ways of the Lord. This seeming injustice is related to the main thread of the Bible, as we have seen it develop from the beginning. In accepting David's dance, God established a new relation between man and the Ark. But, once it had become acknowledged that a new foundation was required, any attempt to remain within the confines of the old foundation became sinful. Consider not only the

actions of Ham and Cain's desire to return to the Garden, but any attempt on the part of a Jew to live a decent life without the Law of Moses, perhaps even such a life as Abraham had lived, after the Law had been given.

The total rejection of older ways, however, could not be maintained completely. Too much of Israel's present rests upon her past. The past, though it cannot be relived, must upon occasion be recaptured in a sacred and holy way. During the Feast of Tabernacles, Succoth, the Children of Israel are invited to remember their flight from Egypt and the time before they placed their security in cities (see Lev. 23:33-44).

In the Book of Deuteronomy this holy time, in which the Children of Israel spend seven days living in booths as they had during those forty years in the desert, is presented as a joyous time that ushers in the year of redemption in which the Hebrew slaves are freed and the original equality of the people is reestablished, though not in the complete sense of the Jubilee Year (Deut. 16:13 and 31:10). The sacred recollection of pastoral times seems to be a prerequisite for the recapture of that equality which existed in precivil times.

Even before David's dance which momentarily placed laughter and playing on a new level, joy, as distinguished from laughter, had often been praised in the Book of Deuteronomy. However, under special circumstances laughter, too, is ultimately praised, but not in terms of the life which all of us presently live. The innocent laughter of children is not totally unknown to the Prophets (see Zach. 8:5), but it belongs to another day and is only a dream of the future. Rarely, if ever, does the Bible show us innocent laughter as a thing happening in front of our eyes (see Jer. 30:19). But there is one outstanding use of the word *play* which goes well beyond any other passage.

In the commentary to Gen. 16:12 we had occasion to speak about the end of the Book of Job and the true chaos from which God protects us. At that time God, in speaking of the Leviathan, says *will thou play with him as a bird?* God's greatest activity is protecting mankind from the chaotic world of the Leviathan. From His own point of view, however, this activity, like *playing*, is an activity done for its own sake. God does it because it is enjoyable and not for the sake of its consequences (Job 41:5).

4. *And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac being eight days old, as God had commanded him.*
5. *And Abraham was an hundred years old, when his son Isaac was born unto him.*
6. *And Sarah said, God hath made me to laugh, so that all that hear will laugh with me.*
7. *And she said, Who shall recite of Abraham that Sarah has given children suck? For I have born him a son in his old age.*

The word which I have translated *recite* is often used of people who tell of the great deeds of the Lord (Ps. 106:2). Sarah's fear of laughter is also a

fear of poetry. All poetry shares with laughter the ability to put things aside for the moment. Even the most horrible can be mediated through the beauties of speech, but for Sarah, to put aside necessarily means to put down. In spite of her laughter, Sarah has no sense of humor.

For our remarks on circumcision see the commentary to Gen. 17:6.

8. *And the child grew, and was weaned: and Abraham made a great feast the same day that Isaac was weaned.*  
 9. *And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking.*

The word translated as *feast* comes from the word *to drink* and implies that wine was served. It is more than likely that Ishmael was laughing because of his merriment over the wine, and given Sarah's fear of laughter she may simply have misjudged the boy's intentions. At least this would seem to be the case if it is true that the wild ass, though he has many faults from the point of view of the New Way, is not guilty of malice (see commentary to Gen. 16:12).

10. *Wherefore she said unto Abraham, Cast out this bondwoman and her son: for the son of this bondwoman shall not be heir with my son, even with Isaac.*  
 11. *And the thing was very grievous in Abraham's sight because of his son.*  
 12. *And God said unto Abraham, Let it not be grievous in thy sight because of the lad, and because of thy bondwoman; in all that Sarah hath said unto thee, hearken unto her voice; for in Isaac shall thy seed be called.*  
 13. *And also of the son of the bondwoman will I make a nation, because he is thy seed.*

Sarah's reaction, while it is not commendable, is certainly sufficient to reveal Ishmael's inadequacy as a father of the New Way. To the extent that Sarah's actions are unjust they reveal a need for law, but Ishmael, as the *Wild Ass*, would be incapable of carrying on such a tradition.

14. *And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and took bread, and a bottle of water, and gave it unto Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, and the child, and sent her away: and she departed, and wandered in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.*  
 15. *And the water was spent in the bottle, and she cast the child under one of the shrubs.*  
 16. *And she went, and sat her down over against him a good way off, as it were a bowshot: for she said, Let me not see the death of the child. And she sat over against him, and lift up her voice, and wept.*

Hagar's concern for her child is intended to be compared with Sarah's concern for her child in Verse Ten. It is not always the case that the more noble passion is the more fitting passion as the foundation of the chosen way.

17. *And God heard the voice of the lad; and the angel of God called to Hagar out of heaven, and said unto her, What aileth thee, Hagar? fear not; for God hath heard the voice of the lad where he is.*

For the discussion on angels see the commentaries to Gen. 22:11 and 28:12.

18. *Arise, lift up the lad, and hold him in thine hand; for I will make him a great nation.*

19. *And God opened her eyes, and she saw a well of water; and she went, and filled the bottle with water, and gave the lad drink.*

20. *And God was with the lad; and he grew, and dwelt in the wilderness, and became an archer.*

21. *And he dwelt in the wilderness of Paran: and his mother took him a wife out of the land of Egypt.*

22. *And it came to pass at that time, that Abimelech and Phichol the chief captain of his host spake unto Abraham, saying, God is with thee in all that thou doest:*

After the birth of Isaac the story of Abimelech continues. He seems to be more impressed by the birth of Isaac than by any of the divine interventions we witnessed in Chapter Nineteen.

23. *Now therefore swear unto me here by God that thou wilt not deal falsely with me, nor with my son, nor with my son's son: but according to the kindness that I have done unto thee, thou shalt do unto me, and to the land wherein thou hast sojourned.*

24. *And Abraham said, I will swear.*

Abimelech does not use the normal word for son. The words he uses imply distant relations and sons of many generations to come. They will only be used twice again in the Bible and in both cases will be used in a time of total destruction when the author wishes to emphasize that not even a shred is left.

There is something ironic and even sad about Abimelech. His name means the *father of kings*; he is concerned about his most distant progeny, and yet none of his descendants will ever be mentioned in the Bible, just as there is no indication who his fathers were. While the problem is still not yet solved this irony begins to give us some insight into why Abraham rather than Abimelech became the chosen one. It also explains why Abimelech was more impressed by the birth of Isaac than he was by anything that had happened to him in Chapter Twenty.

25. *And Abraham reprov'd Abimelech because of a well of water, which Abimelech's servants had violently taken away.*

26. *And Abimelech said, I wot not who hath done this thing: neither didst thou tell me, neither yet I heard of it, but today.*

Part of the answer to the problem is now clear. Noble as Abimelech is, his followers are all thieves. Abimelech's virtue is not a teachable virtue, and therefore he cannot be a teacher of virtue in the sense of a founder.

Abimelech does not understand Abraham's anger because he cannot understand why he should have known that his men were unjust. He is a man who lacks all suspicion and was incapable of suspecting Abraham of trickery in presenting Sarah as his sister.

27. *And Abraham took sheep and oxen, and gave them unto Abimelech: and both of them made a covenant.*
28. *And Abraham set seven ewe lambs of the flock by themselves.*
29. *And Abimelech said unto Abraham, What mean these seven ewe lambs which thou hast set by themselves?*
30. *And he said, for these seven ewe lambs shalt thou take of my hand, that they may be a witness unto me, that I have digged this well.*
31. *Wherefore he called that place Beersheba; because there they sware both of them.*

While Abimelech decides to make a covenant with Abraham, he is bewildered by Abraham's activity. The nobility of his own nature entails a certain naïveté and hides from him the need for any convention which goes beyond nature. He has a certain kinship with the men who built the Tower of Babel in that he, too, denies the need for any foundation beyond what is at hand. But in his case his innate nobility allows him to live a worthy life in a foundationless world even though it cannot be communicated to others.

32. *Thus they made a covenant at Beersheba: then Abimelech rose up, and Phichol the chief captain of his host, and they returned into the land of the Philistines.*

So, all is clear. Abimelech came from the land of the Philistines, the country most like the waters which are above the heavens. Abimelech's virtue is a purely private virtue. It is neither caused by its surroundings, which are the symbol of chaos, nor does it in any way affect his surroundings since his men will continue to be thieves. He is rather like the *fish* that live in the water and receive a blessing. They were the only animals which were able to live through the Flood without the help of the Ark.

Out of deference to Abimelech the city of Gerar is never mentioned as an enemy of Israel in the early books of the Prophets. However, as one might have expected, the author of the Book of Chronicles, who has little patience for giants and water and such nonsense as that, does mention such a battle (II Chron. 14:13).

33. *And Abraham planted a grove in Beer-sheba, and called there on the name of the Lord, the ever-lasting God.*  
34. *And Abraham sojourned in the Philistines' land many days.*

Abraham, when alone, performs a second sign for the Covenant. The grove he plants now will be trees when his children return to the land. It is a new kind of covenant and serves as an introduction to the next two chapters.

## CHAPTER XXII

1. *And it came to pass after these things, that God did test Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am.*

The chapter begins with a phrase that underlines its connection to the preceding one where that relation is not readily apparent. Abraham's superiority to Abimelech lay in his having a son in the fullest sense of the word. He will now be asked to give up that son.

The single word translated as *Here I am* is a strong exclamation, full of intent and determination. These words point back to the speaker as one who is *present* and on whom one may depend. They echo and re-echo through the labyrinth of Genesis, each time answering themselves: they are God's first words as He announces His decision to annihilate the world by a flood (Gen. 6:17), but they are also the words with which He brings His Covenant (Gen. 9:9).

They will appear three times in the present chapter. Later, Esau, when he is called by his father to receive the blessing, will announce his readiness to accept that blessing by these words (Gen. 27:1), but they will again appear when Jacob first receives the fruits of that blessing (Gen. 31:11). Joseph will repeat them when Israel sends him to bring word of his brothers, who will capture him and sell him into slavery (Gen. 37:13). They are also the very last words which any human being will speak to God in the Book of Genesis (Gen. 46:2). As a counterpart to the whole of Genesis they will be the first words spoken by any man to God after four hundred years of silence (Ex. 3:3).

2. *And He said, Please take thy son, thine only son, whom thou lovest, even Isaac, and get thee into the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.*

The passage is elegant in its simplicity. Its tone comes from the gradual build-up of seven short phrases which pound and pound again. Søren Kierkegaard wrote a book called *Fear And Trembling*. It is the story of an old man who had spent many years thinking about the present chapter. He looks at it from

many sides, and his final thoughts were something like this: Abraham had been promised the seed, and that seed could only come through his chosen son, Isaac. On the other hand, God has commanded that the boy die. Abraham, in order to maintain his faith in God, must believe both that the promise would be kept and that the son would die. The old man reaches the conclusion that it is human reason itself which was placed on the altar that day so many years ago in the land of Moriah.

Kierkegaard, who considers himself a master of irony, at one point says, *If the old man had known Hebrew perhaps he would have understood the chapter better.* It is a pity for the modern world that Kierkegaard did not understand the true irony of that statement. If he had, he would have seen that the old man's lack of Hebrew was indeed the cause of his misunderstanding of the text. The irony of the statement lies not in its falsity, as Kierkegaard thought, but rather in its truth.

The word *please* in Hebrew is a short word and is often ignored by translators, but when it appears in the words of God spoken to a human being it certainly cannot be overlooked. God uses the word in four other places, but in all of them it is used in the sense of inviting someone to accept a gift (Gen. 13:14; 15:5; and 31:12). To no other person aside from Abraham does God say *please* in the whole of the Bible.

God and Abraham had made a Covenant. God would give Abraham a son and make his name great if Abraham were willing to devote that seed to the establishment of the New Way. He asked Abraham whether he would be willing to give up that seed and the Covenant. The question is whether Abraham would be willing to relinquish the seed while remaining perfect in the sense discussed in the beginning of Chapter Seventeen.

God's request was dangerous on both sides. But suppose Abraham had refused? Killing Abraham would have been of little help, and yet how could the two of them ever face each other again? Could God have nullified the Covenant? Perhaps, but then God's word would be meaningless, and what man could ever trust Him again?

So long as there was no command there was no contradiction, and Kierkegaard, in his sacrifice of reason, became more like the followers of Moloch than like Abraham.

The present chapter appears in sharp contrast to God's discussion with Abraham prior to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. In that case Abraham was willing to argue with God as any man might argue with another, but here he says nothing.

These two poles may not be so different as first appears. God may have the right to request that which even He has no right to demand. If God had commanded the death of Isaac it is by no means clear that Abraham would have complied. The most that can be said is that Abraham is willing to argue with God in order to save the lives of men whom he does not know while he is

willing to be silent when the destruction touches him personally. In the whole of the discussion about Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot's name was never mentioned. In a strange way the present passage speaks more about God's faith in Abraham than Abraham's faith in God. If Abraham had refused, God would still be forced to keep His promise, but the relationship between Him and Abraham would have become unbearable. As it is Abraham and God will never speak with each other again after the present chapter.

*Get thee:* The words ring a distant but clear bell in the old man's head. These were the words which God first addressed to him many years ago at the beginning of his travels, and now they will be the last words that God will ever speak to Abraham. The end seems complete and final. When Isaac is dead there will be no people, and Abraham will be left alone trying to live according to the perfect way spoken of in Chapter Seventeen. When God first took Abraham, He said *Get thee to the land which I shall shew thee* (Gen. 12:1). Now He says *Get thee to the land of Moriah; and offer him there upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of*. Again we seem to be at an opposite pole. Abraham's position has been reduced from one who *sees* to one who *hears*.

3. *And Abraham rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass, and took two of his young men with him, and Isaac his son, and clave the wood for the burnt offering, and rose up, and went unto the place of which God had told him.*

This verse is composed of six short sentences spoken sharply and clearly. Like all Biblical sacrifices the description is mechanical and precise, and there is barely any room for passion. It reminds the reader of the time he was trying to follow the intricacies of the precise measurements of an ark while all the world was coming to an end. The details recall another occasion when Abraham *rose up early*. Abraham had another son who was also sent away *Early in the Morning* (Gen. 21:14).

4. *Then on the third day Abraham lifted up his eyes, and saw the place afar off.*

Abraham's three-day journey, so beautifully described by Kierkegaard, is mentioned in only one short sentence, nor are we a party to his private thoughts during those long three days.

In the Book of Exodus there is another *three-day journey* which will also lead to the death of a first-born son. Moses requested Pharaoh to allow the Children of Israel to leave Egypt for a *three-day journey* to sacrifice to their God (Ex. 3:18). The request was denied, and the result was the death of every Egyptian first-born. Was that, too, some kind of a sacrifice of the first-born?

5. *And Abraham said unto his young men, Sit yourselves down here with the ass; and I and the lad will go yonder and bow down and return to you.*

Throughout these three long days Abraham has retained his nobility. He speaks to the servants in a voice difficult to catch in English. Even to his servants he uses the mild form of the imperative. The normal imperative is a shortened and harsh form of the imperfect. But Abraham uses a much gentler form which adds a syllable to the verb.

These words reflect Abraham's concern for the comfort of his servants in spite of what he believes he is about to do. His nobility will not allow him to forget that the world will go on and that he must remain a part of it.

6. *And Abraham took the wood of the burnt offering and laid it upon Isaac his son; and he took the fire in his hand, and a knife; and they went both of them together.*

This is the same simple construction we saw in Verse Three—four simple declarative sentences. The words are clear, their effect impressive. Unfortunately, the English translation cannot reproduce the effect since the English word *and* tends to connect and draw together more strongly than its Hebrew counterpart. Perhaps it would have been more accurate to drop the word completely by beginning a new sentence each time.

The word *knife* only occurs once again in the Torah and the Early Prophets. The passage is worth discussing since it almost reads as a horrid and twisted parody of the same notions which lie behind the present chapter, and yet perhaps the twisted account may reveal aspects of the problem which are not readily open to sight in the more formal account.

In the days before Israel had a king there was an unnamed Levite from Mount Ephraim who had a concubine from Bethlehem. When the concubine left him, he returned to fetch her back and, after being hospitably entertained by her father, returned to his own country. Since it was a two-day journey lodgings had to be provided, and the Levite's servant suggested spending the night in Jerusalem, which at that time was still in the hands of the Jebusites. The Levite himself decided to spend the night in Gibeah, which had already been conquered by the Benjaminites. During the night the Benjaminites attacked the house, and the story from that point on reads like the story of Lot and the men of Sodom, but in the Book of Judges there were no angels to save the man. The concubine was taken and, after a night of horrible abuse, died. The Levite dismembered her body with a *knife*, sending part of the remains to each of the tribes of Israel. This sacrifice unified the people into an almost surrealistic attempt to reestablish justice.

For the first time in well over three hundred years the people of all the tribes banded together in order to wipe out the daughters of Benjamin. Then, after a

sober moment in which they realized the consequences of their act, they attempted to find wives for the Benjaminites in order *that a tribe be not destroyed out of Israel* (Judg. 21:17).

Now at the time of the battle all the cities had sworn not to give their daughters as wives to the Benjaminites. Only the city of Shiloh which had not been present did not make the oath. The Ark was in Shiloh in those days, and every year the women of Shiloh performed a great dance. In order to uphold their oath the men of Israel lay in wait during the dance and on signal killed the men of Shiloh and captured their daughters as wives for the men of Benjamin.

What began as a sober attempt to act strictly within the bounds of legal justice again led to a twisted parody of justice which the author, in accordance with his delicacy, retold simply and impassionately. The whole of his reflections are summed up in the last line of the book—a line which had recurred often throughout the book but whose full force only became visible at this moment: *Because there was not yet a king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes* (Judg. 21:25).

The Book of Judges, which began with the praise of a loosely connected league of tribes, ends by showing the need for kingship. This need was demonstrated by means of a story concerning a Levite from Ephraim, a concubine from Bethlehem, a servant who wanted to spend the night in Jerusalem, the Benjaminites of Gibeah, and the women of Shiloh. A frightful story it was, and yet out of the nightmare seemed to arise an answer.

All had begun so well; and now Israel, God's Chosen People, needed a king. But how could Israel give unlimited power into the hands of a man, a being such as themselves? Some kind of divine limitation would be needed. At that time, the Prophets, or the Seers as they were called, were appointed by God to implement those limitations. The first of these men was Samuel. He too was a *Levite from Ephraim*. He was the son of Hanna, who had prayed for his birth before the Lord in the city of *Shiloh*. The first King to be appointed was Saul. He, like the men in our story, was a *Benjaminite from Gibeah*. When he proved false, the kingship was permanently established by David, a young man from *Bethlehem*, who finally captured the *Jebusite city of Jerusalem*.

Many years later Nahash the Ammonite attacked the city of Jabesh-Gilead, and Saul, who was in the process of becoming the first king of Israel, was sent for. Saul at that time was living in Gibeah, the site of the earlier story from the Book of Judges, and had just come from among the Prophets, prophesying (see commentary to Gen. 20:7).

*And he took a yoke of oxen and hewed them into pieces and sent them throughout the coast of Israel by the hand of a messenger, saying, Whosoever cometh not forth after Saul and after Samuel, so shall it be done unto his oxen. And the fear of the Lord fell upon the People, and they came out as one man.* (I Sam. 11:7)

The chapter ends with the verse:

*And all the people went to Gilgal; and there they made Saul king before the Lord in Gilgal; and there they sacrificed sacrifices and peace offerings before the Lord; and there Saul and all the men of Israel rejoiced greatly. (I Sam. 11:15)*

For the second time a horrible sacrifice has taken place in the city of Gibeah, and again that sacrifice brought the people together.

Back in the days of Joshua, the Hivites, who were living in Gibeon, heard of the great success of the Israelite army and tricked Joshua into signing a covenant with them (Josh. Chap. 9). Their relations to Israel went smoothly enough until the great famine near the end of David's reign which, according to the Lord, was caused *by Saul and his bloody house because he slew the Gibeonites* (II Sam. 21:1). Perhaps this verse refers to an incident which was not recorded in the Bible, but the Biblical author is usually careful about such matters. Gibeon was never mentioned during the reign of Saul. But after his death it became the scene of the mock battle which turned out so disastrously between the men of Saul under Abner and the forces of Joab (see II Sam. Chap. 2, and commentary to Gen. 21:3).

This battle seems to have been the cause of the great famine. At any rate the Hivites who lived in Gibeon during the end of David's reign demanded that seven descendants of the House of Saul, men of Gibeah, the scene of our earlier stories, be hung in requite. The famine was thereby abated, and immediately afterward the men of David fought their last great battle with the Philistines.

Three times in its history the city of Gibeah was the scene of a bloody massacre. For good or for ill each of these massacres unified the people. Horrible and twisted as it was, the story from the Book of Judges was the first time in almost three hundred years that Israel had come together.

The reader can best judge for himself the relevance of these accounts for the present text.

7. *And Isaac spake unto Abraham his father, and said, My father: and he said, Here am I, my son, and he said Behold the fire and wood: but where is the lamb for a burnt offering?*

The seventh verse of Chapter Twenty-two is the only conversation between Abraham and his son that ever appears in the Bible. Abraham will take great care in arranging a marriage and settling a way of life for Isaac, but the two of them will never meet again, nor will Isaac ever see his father again until he buries him in the Cave of Machpelah (Gen. 25:9). The elegant simplicity of the dialogue gives it an aspect of eternity which makes it seem to last the whole of their lives. Very few dialogues in literature bring men so close together. Throughout their conversation the words *father* and *son* are stressed, and Abraham repeats to his son the reassuring phrase *here am I* which was discussed at length in the commentary to Verse One. At this point we can begin to understand the force of the connection between the present chapter and the chapter

which preceded it. Abraham seemed to be lacking when measured by the standard of Abimelech and insensitive towards individuals. The present verse shows a deep sensitivity, and yet it is not clear whether that sensitivity, which arises in the time of sacrifice, is adequate for the more mundane problem implied in his failure to distinguish between Pharaoh and Abimelech. No matter how the problem is to be solved the necessary lack is not within the realm of insensitivity.

Isaac's question is of a new kind. It is one of the few in Genesis, aside from the question which Abimelech asked (Gen. 20:9), which implies simple wonder. Yet to the reader it cannot but have the same effect that so many of the other questions gave rise to.

The *lamb* is used in a double sense, especially with regard to children. The *lamb* is the recompense which the Children of Israel pay for the death of the Children of the Egyptians (see commentary to Gen. 22:15), but it is also the animal sacrificed by the mother of any new-born child when she is prepared to re-enter society:

*But if she bear a maid child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her separation: and she shall continue in the blood of her purifying threescore and six days. And when the days of her purifying are fulfilled, for a son, or for a daughter, she shall bring a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or a turtledove, for a sin offering, unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, unto the priest. (Lev. 12:5,6)*

The sacrifice of the lamb marks the time when a mother can re-enter society. Birth is described in terms of the flux and waters of birth which constitute a momentary return to the beginning. The sacrifice of the lamb is intended to disconnect birth from nature insofar as nature is a flowing liquid.

So long as *she is in the blood of her purification* the mother remains part of the flux which was present in the beginning. By sacrificing the lamb she symbolically returns the lamb to the chaos from which the child arose, and the two of them may now enter society.

8. *And Abraham said, My son, God will provide himself a lamb for a burnt offering: so they went both of them together.*

To the child these simple words mean that God will arrange for a lamb to be on the mountain. To Abraham they mean that God had provided the lamb many years ago. But the reader who is aware of the general context knows that the boy is right.

9. *And they came to the place which God had told him of; and Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.*

10. *And Abraham stretched forth his hand, and took the knife to slay his son.*

In two verses there are seven separate acts. Seven short sentences again mark the stark and almost passionless way in which the author describes passion.

11. *And the angel of the lord called unto him out of heaven, and said, Abraham, Abraham: and he said, Here am I.*

The last conversation that will ever take place between God and Abraham is through the medium of an angel. Up to this point angels have only spoken to minor characters such as Hagar (Gen. 16:7) and Lot (Gen. 19:1). In the future, angels will appear to people like Balaam (Num. 22:31), Gideon (Judg. 6:11), and the wife of Manoa the father of Samson (Judg. 13:3). In part, the verse is meant to parallel Gen. 21:17 when the angel *called unto* Hagar, but for a fuller understanding of the relation between angels and heaven see the commentary to Gen. 28:12. For the present it will be sufficient to note that Abraham's last words to God, again declaring his preparedness to follow the Lord, are spoken through the medium of an angel.

12. *And He said, Lay not thine hand upon the lad, neither do thou any thing unto him: for now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thine only son from Me.*

The followers of Moloch would seem to be more zealous towards their god than the Children of Israel since they are willing to give him human sacrifice. It had to be made clear that the lack of human sacrifice in the New Way was not a function of the lack of willingness. The God of Abraham does not wish such sacrifice to take place.

13. *And Abraham lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold behind him a ram caught in a thicket by his horns: and Abraham went and took the ram, and offered him up for a burnt offering in the stead of his son.*

The distinction between the lamb and the ram has already been discussed in the commentary to Gen. 15:9. In Verse Four of the present chapter Isaac assumed that the offering would be a lamb, the symbol of a child, but his true replacement is the ram, the symbol of the prince.

Perhaps of more importance than the ram itself are the ram's horns. In the Bible horns are often used as a simile for that in man which aspires towards the highest (I Sam. 2:1,10, and the discussion concerning the position of Moses in commentary to Gen. 15:9,10,11). It is a strange simile because the horns, while they reach up to the sky, are rooted in the animal. But more insight into the problem can be derived from the function of horns in the architecture of the Tabernacle. As was pointed out in the commentary to Gen. 15:9-11, the artfulness of the Tabernacle was a replacement for nature as the proper sur-

roundings for sacrifice. The center of the Tabernacle, the altar, was to have four horns, one on each corner (Ex. 27:2). They were made of shittim wood overlaid with gold. The altar itself was thus transformed into an artificial animal which replaces and mitigates the natural origins of sacrifice. But human art is not sufficient to replace nature completely. For that reason some of the blood of the sacrificed animal is placed on the horns of the altar (Ex. 29:12) since the blood is understood to contain the life of the animal (Gen. 9:4).

14. *And Abraham called the name of that place Jehovah-jireh: as it is said to this day, in the mount of the Lord it shall be seen.*

The name which Abraham gives to the mountain is obviously a reference back to Verse Eight. Abraham now sees the full truth of what he had said to Isaac. Verse Eight literally reads *God shall see for Himself*, and it should be contrasted with what has been said about hearing in the commentary to Verse Two.

15. *And the angel of the Lord called unto Abraham out of Heaven the second time,*

16. *And said, By Myself have I sworn, saith the Lord, For because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son:*

17. *That in blessing I will bless thee and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies;*

18. *And in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed My voice.*

Abraham received four similar blessings, but they must be treated with some care since they are not identical. The first blessing (Gen. 13:16) was a blessing simply in terms of manyness. The simile, though profuse, is the lowest and most common, the dust of the earth. After the war of the Four Kings against the Five Kings the simile was changed to the highest of the profuse things, the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:5). The blessing given in Gen. 17:5 was a general blessing which included Ishmael, but the present blessing seems to be the most complete blessing since it incorporates both the sand and the sky. The *dust of the earth* has been changed to *the sand which is on the sea shore*. The significance of the change should be apparent. Its double meaning can be understood by comparing it with the commentary to Gen. 1:5a. By going from the *dust of the earth* to the *sand on the edge of the sea*, to translate more literally, the blessing has gone from a diverse multitude to a defined multitude which has clear limits. The limits go up to that other multitude, the waters, but no further. Again, as was discussed in the commentary to Gen. 14:4, this change in the blessing is made more explicit in the final words of Verse Seventeen. In the prior blessing no mention at all was made of enemies. That is to say, at that

time it was not mentioned that wars would have to be fought before the blessing would occur. Verse Eighteen, which at first would seem to be incompatible with the final words of Verse Seventeen, is in fact their justification.

When Abraham agreed to the sacrifice, he tacitly agreed to continue his striving for perfection as discussed in the beginning of Chapter Seventeen, even though he had relinquished the promise. In his willingness to sacrifice Isaac, he showed that he does not understand the highest political goal to be the highest goal, simply. Both the desire for political greatness and the understanding of the limitation of that goal would seem to be necessary for God's purposes.

In order not to lose the unity of this chapter we ignored a number of details to which we must now return. Thus far we have understood the chapter as Abraham's sacrifice of the Covenant, but it was also Abraham's sacrifice of his first-born. In order to understand that we must return to Verse Four and compare those two three-day journeys; the one leading to the binding of Isaac, the other to the death of the Egyptian children prior to the exodus from Egypt.

The full relationship between the deaths of the Egyptian first-born and Israel is discussed in a number of places. God had seen that the death of the Egyptian first-born would be necessary even before He sent Moses into Egypt. God had told that to Moses one verse before He threatened to kill him because he had neglected to circumcise his son.

*21. And the Lord said unto Moses, When thou goest to return into Egypt, see that thou do all those wonders before Pharaoh, which I have put in thine hand: but I will harden his heart, that he shall not let the people go. 22. And thou shalt say unto Pharaoh, Thus saith the Lord, Isra-el is My son, even My firstborn: 23. And I say unto thee, Let My son go, that he may serve Me; and if thou refuse to let him go, behold I will slay thy son, even thy firstborn. 24. And it came to pass by the way in the inn, that the Lord met him, and sought to kill him. 25. Then Zipporah took a sharp stone, and cut off the foreskin of her son, and cast it at his feet, and said, Surely a bloody husband art thou to me. 26. So he let him go: then she said, A bloody husband thou art, because of the circumcision. (Ex. 4:21-26)*

Moses' neglect of the circumcision is explained by Zipporah. She evidently understands circumcision as a mitigated form of filicide. By juxtaposing the first three verses with the last three the author tactfully admits that Zipporah is right. Moses' neglect of the circumcision would then stem from his hope that the measures spoken of in the first three verses would not be necessary. But God's words in the first verse imply that such a solution is not available. In order to understand them we must look at the next relevant passage.

*And I, behold, I have taken the Levites from among the Children of Israel instead of all the firstborn that openeth the matrix among the Children of Israel; therefore the children of Levi shall be Mine; because all the firstborn are Mine, for on the day that I smote all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I hallowed unto Me all the first-born of Israel both man and beast; Mine shall they be: I am the Lord. (Num. 3:12,13)*

In these verses God lays claim to every first-born among the Children of Israel because of the death of the Egyptian first-born. This practice is intended as a repayment of the debt that Israel owes because of the death of those children. The Bible is keenly aware of the fact that many personal injustices will at times be necessary if any ultimate foundation for justice is to be established. The difficulty may be seen more clearly in the following way.

There can be no doubt that Pharaoh's daughter is noble. She could not have been unaware of the consequences to herself had her activities in relation to Moses become known to her father. As we shall see in the commentary to Gen. 45:12, the author will go out of his way to present most of the Egyptians we shall meet as decent people, with the exception of Pharaoh and his army. Even at the time of the plagues the Egyptian people treated the Jews not unkindly and provided them with the material means for their escape.

*And the Children of Israel did according to the word of Moses; and they borrowed of the Egyptians jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment: and the Lord gave the people favour in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they lent unto them such things as they required. And they spoiled the Egyptians. (Ex. 12:35,36)*

The slaying of the Egyptian first-born would appear to be thoroughly unjust, and yet without it there was no possibility of delivering the Children of Israel from slavery; and slavery, too, is unjust. The destruction seemed inevitable if any form of justice was ever to arise, and yet it is admirable that the author of the Book of Exodus is willing to face the problem directly.

Nations often find themselves at war with other nations for reasons which have very little to do with the personal relations of the two soldiers who happen to be facing each other on the battlefield. Pharaoh has kept the people slaves, and so an individual Israelite is forced to kill an individual Egyptian. But how could the individual Israelite bring himself to kill the Egyptian if he did not hate him? He must either force himself to believe that the individual Egyptian deserved death or accept the debt of that death in some form. By dedicating *all the firstborn that openeth the matrix* he acknowledges the debt in the sense of no longer feeling hatred toward the Egyptian, while he understands the situation and hence feels no guilt. By accepting the debt Israel rejects that almost necessary form of hatred.

Ultimately the debt of the first-born is transformed into the service which the sons of Levi pay by their role in the Temple. The temple service becomes a constant reminder that strict justice in the sense of giving to each what is his due cannot always be accomplished because of legitimate conflict.

That however is not the only root of the sacrifice of the first-born among the animals. The other root is extremely complicated and has already been partly described in the commentary to Verse Six. We shall, however, add a few details.

Deuteronomy 15:19 relates the sacrifice of the first-born of the animals to

the year of redemption in which all Hebrew slaves are released from slavery. When freedom is restored to them their masters are to give them their means of self-support. The end towards which this sacrifice points reminds us strikingly of the discussion concerning the Jubilee Year back in the commentary to Gen. 15:17. Deut. 15:11 reads: *For the poor shall never cease out of the land: therefore I command thee, saying, thou shalt open thine hand wide unto thy brother, to thy poor, and to thy needy, in thy land.* Rather than a final solution, this sacrifice presents a permanent means of dealing with an eternal problem. The symbol itself is a wasteful sacrifice. Unlike the sacrifice of the Jubilee Year it is not enjoyed together with the community as a whole but is merely burnt. The point of the sacrifice described in Deut. 15:19 can be seen by comparing it with the final words concerning the year of redemption described in Deut. 15:18, one verse earlier: *It shall not seem hard unto thee, when thou sendest him away free from thee: for he hath been worth a double hired servant to thee, in serving thee six years: and the Lord thy God shall bless thee in all that thou doest.* The wastefulness of the sacrifice prepares a man's soul to give up the servant without compensation. It promotes a *largess of soul* which places it above the concern for *things*.

19. *So Abraham returned unto the young men, and they rose up and went together to Beer-sheba; and Abraham dwelt at Beer-sheba.*

The two young men are still with Abraham. He has not lost touch with his fellow men, but Isaac is no longer with him. Despite the care which Abraham takes in arranging his son's life in Chapter Twenty-four the two of them will never see each other again.

Beer-Sheba is a particularly appropriate place for Abraham to live after his last conversation with God. It is also the last place in which any man will speak with God in the Book of Genesis (Gen. 46:1). It is used twenty-three times in the Bible to describe a border, four of those in the famous phrase *from Dan to Beer-Sheba*, and three times in the Book of Chronicles in the phrase *from Beer-Sheba to Dan*. The phrase became so universal that it was often used to describe the borders of Israel even during the periods in which the borders were actually much larger, and it was from Beer-Sheba that Elijah left to go into the desert (I Kings 19:3). Beer-Sheba is constantly used to mark the edge or limits of a land or of a way. The sons of Eli, who were the last judges before the rise of kingship, had a seat of their judgment in Beer-Sheba (I Sam. 8:2). Both Abraham and Isaac go to Beer-Sheba after their meetings with Abimelech. In this case, too, Beer-Sheba represents a border since Abimelech was understood to be the one man capable of retaining his nobility even though he lived beyond all borders in the watery land of the Philistines.

20. *And it came to pass after these things, that it was told Abraham, saying, Behold Milcha, she hath also born children unto thy brother Nahor;*

21. *Uz his firstborn, and Buz his brother, and Kemuel the father of Aram.*
22. *And Chesed, and Hazo, and Pildash, and Jodlaph, and Bethuel.*
23. *And Bethuel begat Rebekah: these eight Milcah did bear to Nahor, Abraham's brother.*
24. *And his concubine, whose name was Reumah, she bare also Tebah, and Gaham, and Thahash, and Maachah.*

The tension built up by the account of the binding of Isaac is broken by the news that the woman who is to be his wife has been born.

### CHAPTER XXIII

1. *And Sarah was an hundred and seven and twenty years old: these were the years of the life of Sarah.*
2. *And Sarah died in Kirjath-arba; the same is Hebron in the land of Canaan:*

Sarah died in the city of Hebron, where she will be buried in a bit of land that Abraham will buy for her grave, and it will be the only property connecting the Children of Israel to Canaan for many years. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob will all be buried there, and when the Children of Israel return after years of slavery in Egypt, Hebron will be the first city the spies see when they cross into the new land (Num. 13:22). But the giants will be living there then, and after little more than a first glance the Children of Israel will be forced to retreat and take the longer route. When Hebron was finally taken it was awarded to Caleb for his great prowess in facing the giants, and this city of the fathers became the center of the New Way.

It was one of the few cities to become both a city of refuge and a city consecrated to the Levites (Josh. 20:7; 21:13).

It was lost for a time, and God's first commandment to David after Saul's death was to conquer Hebron (II Sam. 2:1). And it was there that David was made king.

Thus far the story makes sense. Sarah and Abraham settled in the land, and on their graves the edifice would stand.

In spite of this careful preparation everything suddenly changed. One day, David decided to capture Jerusalem and make it his new capital in place of Hebron. In the following pages we shall try to discover what lay in back of David's decision. There is a traditional explanation which is extremely helpful, but in order to understand it we shall have to consider the political situation in the country prior to David's decision.

After the death of King Saul, Abner, captain of his armies, had Saul's son, Ish-bosheth, declared king in the city of Mahanaim. Abner thus gained control over all of the northern tribes leaving only Judah in the hands of David. In II

Sam. 3:1 it becomes clear that Ish-bosheth was merely a figurehead and that Abner himself held the real power. Soon however, Abner, perceiving that he was unable to manage affairs with Ish-bosheth, decided to turn his forces over to David but was prevented from doing so by David's general, Joab.

It would be almost impossible to have a complete view of the establishment of David's kingdom without a full understanding of this very strange character. Joab was a ruthless man but a man who *knew the heart of David* (II Sam. 14:1) and in some way even loved him. Their relationship seems to go back to the days when David was a vassal of King Achish in Ziklag prior to the death of King Saul. At any rate, the first time we meet him face to face is at the war games which were discussed in the commentary to Gen. 21:3. Soon after the games Joab murdered Abner. On the surface the murder of Abner would seem unjust. In the battle which broke out after the war games Joab's youngest brother, Asahel, an impetuous and green youth, in poor imitation of young David, attacked the well-seasoned soldier. Abner pleaded with the young man to find an adversary more fitting his years and experience, but the young man would not listen and Abner was forced to kill him. Joab presents this occasion as his justification for the murder of Abner. However this justification seems neither fitting nor sufficient either in terms of justice or in terms of Joab's character. Two very different causes seem to be playing a role in Joab's actions. On the one hand Joab had good cause for believing that David was about to replace him with Abner. However Joab's fears for the safety of his own position may not have been the only motivating force. Under the reign of Ish-bosheth, Abner had tried to place himself in the position of ruler, and it is likely that he would have tried to gain the same position under King David. At least Joab had such suspicions, and those suspicions were by no means unfounded (II Sam. 3:6ff. and 3:25). On the other hand the Bible makes it quite clear that when Joab himself was presented with an immediate opportunity to threaten David's position and perhaps gain control for himself, his respect and love for David prevented him from doing so (II Sam. 12:26ff.).

After the death of Abner, Ish-bosheth was killed by two of his Amorite followers, from the town of Beeroth, who brought his head to David, expecting a large reward (II Sam. 4:2ff.). David however was able to regain favor in the north by punishing the murderers of their one-time king (II Sam. 4:8-11) and making great public display of his mourning over the death of Abner (II Sam. 3:33-39). Nonetheless this original split in the kingdom posed a constant threat throughout David's reign.

David's own son, Absalom, was the second man to gain partial control of the country and establish himself as king, this time in the original capital of Hebron (II Sam. 15:10). Absalom took Jerusalem without battle, and David fled north setting up his kingdom in Mahanaim, the one-time capital of his first rival, Ish-bosheth (II Sam. 2:8). David, partly because he had at his command the Philistine forces under Ittai the Gittite (II Sam. 15:18), and partly because

he was able to gather the affections of those around him, was always able to retain at least one part of the country, but the lack of internal unity made it difficult for him to maintain the whole.

When the men of Judah who had followed Absalom returned to David they still thought of themselves as separate from Israel and claimed David as one of their own on the personal grounds that David was their kinsman. Israel on the other hand claimed David on the political grounds that they represented ten tribes whereas Judah was only one (II Sam. 19:40–43). This division allowed an otherwise completely unknown man named Bichri to gather the dissonant forces of Israel and foment a third revolution, this time back in the north.

At the conclusion of Absalom's revolt David had made an agreement with Amasa, a nephew of Joab, whom Absalom had made captain of his forces. In order to reunify the country David appointed Amasa head of his forces and dispatched him to put down the revolution under Bichri. However, Amasa never reached Bichri because of the intervention of Joab.

Throughout his reign David made several attempts to get rid of Joab, but none of them were successful. Joab, partly in fear of his own position and partly in fear that Amasa would ultimately prove dangerous to David, rendered it impossible for David to fulfill his part of the agreement by arranging Amasa's demise.

By reasserting his absolute obedience to David in a great cry to the people Joab was able to regain control of Amasa's men and put down the revolution under Bichri without great difficulty, ending for a time the struggle between north and south.

According to most modern scholars David's decision to leave Hebron and establish the kingdom in Jerusalem was made for geographical reasons. Jerusalem, a city situated on a high hill which could be defended with ease, was still in the hands of the Jebusites. Since it was on the border between north and south and as yet claimed by neither it was by far the most advantageous site for the new capital. This understanding of David's sudden decision to leave Hebron makes a great deal of sense and undoubtedly played a role in his decision. However it does not account for the strange circumstances under which the decision was made (II Sam. 5:6–8).

This decision appears in an obscure passage. I shall present two translations, an old one from King James and a new translation by H. W. Hertzberg. The grammar of the sentence is quite complicated, and the present author is not certain which of the interpretations is intended:

6. *And the King and his men went to Jerusalem unto the Jebusites, the inhabitants of the land; which spake unto David, saying, Except thou take away the blind and the lame, thou shalt not come in hither: thinking, David cannot come in hither.*
7. *Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion: the same is the city of David.*
8. *And David said on that day, Whosoever getteth up to the gutter, and smiteth the Jebusites, and the lame and the blind, that are hated of David's soul, he shall*

*be chief and captain. Wherefore they said, The blind and the lame shall not come into the house (II Sam. 5:6–8).*

Hertzberg in his commentary on First and Second Samuel translates the crucial passage this way:

*6. And the King and his men went to Jerusalem against the Jebusites, and the inhabitants of the land, who said to David, 'You will not come in here, but the blind and the lame will ward you off'—saying, 'David cannot come in here.' 7. Nevertheless David took the stronghold of Zion; that became the city of David. 8. And David said on that day, 'Whoever smites the Jebusites and reaches the shaft—and (smites) the blind and the lame, who are hated by David because they say, 'The blind and the lame shall not come into the house—(He shall become chief!' And Joab the son of Zeruiah went up first so as to become chief.)'\**

The two translations are quite different. Nonetheless from Verse Eight it is clear that David's decision to take the city was related to his attitude towards *The lame and the blind*. The word *lame* appears infrequently in the Bible—no more than thirteen times—and yet it happens to appear in an important passage in Chapter Four, immediately preceding David's decision to capture Jerusalem.

At the time of Ish-bosheth's death, Jonathan's son, Mephibosheth, was five years old. His nurse, fearing that David would try to kill the boy, attempted to flee the country, but in the flight Mephibosheth fell and became lame. Some time later, after a relative amount of stability had been established in the country, David sent for one of Saul's servants named Ziba in order to discover whether there were any living relatives of Saul who should by rights be reinstated into their lands. Now the servant, Ziba, had become master of Saul's lands after the flight of Mephibosheth, but when the royal decision to reinstate Mephibosheth was published Ziba was forced to return to the life of a servant (II Sam. 4). Ziba pretended to be pleased at the king's decision, but some time later when the country was in turmoil because of the revolution under Absalom, Ziba returned to David claiming that Mephibosheth had taken advantage of the situation to revive the House of Saul by proclaiming himself king. David then rescinded his earlier orders, and the lands reverted back to Ziba (II Sam. 16:1–4).

After the war Mephibosheth arrived and explained to David that Ziba had lied in order to gain control of the lands and that he, Mephibosheth, was a true servant of David.

The passage reads as follows:

*24. Mephibosheth the son of Saul came down to meet the King, and had neither dressed his feet, nor trimmed his beard, nor washed his clothes, from the day*

\*As Mr. Hertzberg mentions in a footnote, all words included within the parentheses have been taken from I Chron. 11:6 and do not appear in the Book of Samuel.

I. H. W. Hertzberg, *I and II Samuel*, 'The Old Testament Library,' S.C.M. Press Ltd., London, 1964, p. 266.

*the King departed until the day he came again in peace. 25. And it came to pass, when he was come to Jerusalem to meet the King, that the King said unto him, wherefore wentest not thou with me, Mephibosheth? 26. And he answered, My lord, O King, my servant deceived me: for thy servant said, I will saddle me an ass, that I may ride thereon, and go to the King; because thy servant is lame. 27. And he hath slandered thy servant unto my lord, the King; but my lord the King is an angel of God: do therefore what is good in thine eyes. 28. For all of my father's house were but dead men before my lord the King: yet didst thou set thy servant among them that did eat at thine own table. What right therefore have I yet to cry any more unto the King? 29. And the King said unto him, Why speakest thou any more of thy matters? I have said thou and Ziba divide the land. 30. And Mephibosheth said unto the King, Yea, let him take all, forasmuch as my lord the King is come again in peace unto his own house. (II Sam. 19:24–30)*

Mephibosheth was perfectly just, and Ziba should have been stripped of all the lands and severely punished. David however decreed that the lands be divided equally between Mephibosheth and Ziba. The injustice done to Mephibosheth, which he himself is too kind and gentle even to feel, seems to be David's first error related to his attitude toward the lame. David made several such errors, all of which were related to his love of beauty and hence to his hatred of the crippled. His love for Bath-sheba, which we will speak of in the commentary to Gen. 23:4, was also part of that side of David's character, but there were other problems as well.

David's love of beauty had a glorious beginning. Beautiful and ruddy-faced, he was the youngest son of Jesse and a shepherd who kept the flock while his older brothers went out to war. One day his father sent him up to the camp with some cheese and bread, and David, as any young man would, began to mosey about. He heard some talk about a giant in the Philistine camp who challenged the first comer to single combat. Eliab was not much different from any older brother when his kid brother wants to get into the marble game, and he told him to go on home. But David went right up to the king and told him that he once killed bare-handed a lion who had attacked his lambs. Perhaps the closest one gets to genuine humor in the whole book is the light-hearted way in which David faced Goliath. He would not accept Saul's armor but faced Goliath with a stick, five stones, and a sling. His beauty and the ease with which he went into combat so charmed the people that they cried *Saul hath slain his thousands and David his ten thousands* (I Sam. 18:7).

Absalom inherited his father's beauty, and as distinguished from Mephibosheth is said to have been much praised for his beauty. *From the soles of his feet even to the crown of his head, there was no blemish in him* (II Sam. 14:25ff.).

David was so entranced by the beauty of his son, that when Absalom attacked Jerusalem David was benumbed and abandoned the city—without giving battle. Even after the war in which Absalom was killed only Joab was

able to comfort David. This incident was only one in a series of events which present a constant play between David's love of beauty, which caused him to make many errors, and his ever-present Joab, the only one able to handle him in such situations.

In Chapter Thirteen David banished Absalom for the murder of his half-brother, Amnon, who had raped Absalom's sister, Tamar. But David's soul was ripped in pieces because of the love which he felt toward Absalom, in spite of the banishment. Joab was the only man sensitive enough to David's feelings to devise a plan for returning Absalom in a way that would satisfy both parts of David's mind.

Just as Joab had arranged a reconciliation between David and Absalom when such reconciliation seemed best for David, he was equally ready to kill Absalom with his own hands when times changed (II Sam. 18:14), and yet when David was caught up in the midst of almost animal-like mourning, at a time when a new revolution was threatening his reign (II Sam. 19:5), only Joab was able to bring David to his senses.

The story of Absalom, which began in Chapter Thirteen, was preceded by the death of another son of David, the first child of Bath-sheba, the wife of Uriah. As long as there was life left in the child David's mourning was so pitiful that his servants feared to tell him of the child's death.

*And it came to pass on the seventh day, that the child died. And the servants of David feared to tell him that the child was dead: for they said, Behold, while the child was yet alive, we spake unto him, and he would not hearken unto our voice: how will he then vex himself if we tell him that the child is dead? But when David saw that his servants whispered, David perceived that the child was dead: therefore David said unto his servants, Is the child dead? and they said, He is dead. Then David arose from the earth, and washed, and anointed himself, and changed his apparel, and came into the house of the Lord, and worshipped: then he came to his own house; and when he required, they set bread before him, and he did eat. Then said his servants unto him, What thing is this that thou hast done? Thou didst fast and weep for the child while it was alive: but when the child was dead, thou didst rise and eat bread. And he said, While the child was yet alive, I fasted and wept: for I said, Who can tell whether God will be gracious to me, that the child may live? But now he is dead, wherefore should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me. And David comforted Bath-sheba his wife, and went in unto her, and lay with her: and she bare a son, and he called his name Solo-mon; and the Lord loved him. (II Sam. 12:18-24)*

By placing the two stories next to each other the author forces us to contrast David's nobility at the death of Bath-sheba's son with the disintegration of his soul after Absalom's death.

Joab's ways of handling David vary from occasion to occasion. Sometimes it is merely a jest or a gentle reminder of what a true king should be (II Sam. 14:17). After Absalom's death Joab speaks with a firm voice:

5. And Joab came into the house to the King, and said, *Thou hast shamed this day the faces of all thy servants, which this day have saved thy life, and the lives of thy daughters, and the lives of thy wives, and the lives of thy concubines; 6. In that thou lovest thine enemies, and hatest thy friends. For thou hast declared this day, that thou regardest neither princes nor servants: for this day I perceive, that if Absalom had lived, and all we had died this day, then it had pleased thee well. 7. Now therefore arise, go forth, and speak comfortably unto thy servants: for I swear by the Lord, if thou go not forth, there will not tarry one with thee this night: and that will be worse unto thee than all the evil that befell thee from thy youth until now.* (II Sam. 19:4-7)

So David's love of beauty has led him to *love his enemies and hate his friends.*

The speech also reveals something about this Satanic guardian angel. Joab mentions God but rarely, and those passages must be considered in their context before we can gain any insight into the one man who could bring rationality into David's life. Joab first mentioned the name of God when he offered peace and friendship to Abner, but in the context it is clear that Joab had already planned to kill him (II Sam. 2:27). During the war against the Amonites, Israel's enemy was able to contact the Syrians, and a contingent under Hadarezer attacked Joab's army from the rear. Joab divided his army in two and sent his brother Abishai off with the following words: *Be of good courage, and let us play the man for our people, and for the cities of our God; and may the Lord do what seems good to him* (II Sam. 10:12). Joab's cry to the people encouraging them to battle mentioned God twice. Publicly it is an appeal to the men to fight for their God. At the same time the words *What seems good to him*, literally, *What is good in his eyes*, is the common Biblical expression meaning *whatever he likes*, which occurred so often in the second half of the Book of Judges. If taken in its normal sense it would imply that Joab is indifferent to God's actions and intends to win the battle in any case.

When David was an old man and near the end of his life, he decided to take a census of the people. Once again Joab used the term *the Lord*: *But Joab said to the King, May the Lord your God add to the people a hundred times as many as they are, while the eyes of my lord the king still see it; but why does my lord the King delight in this thing?* (II Sam. 24:3).

Much against his own will Joab travelled throughout the land conducting David's census. But when he returned the prophet Gad announced that there would be a seven-year famine as punishment. God's opposition to the census makes Joab's character even more difficult to comprehend. In the same passage in which Joab dissociates himself from God by speaking of *the Lord your God* he shares God's insight that the passions which lie in back of the old king's decision to take the census were beneath David's dignity.

Thus far we have followed Joab's career to the end of the Second Book of Samuel. It culminated with the scene in which Joab rejected God, and yet in

the very same verse displayed the height of his courage and wisdom in standing up to the king by condemning him for an act which both he and God knew to be wrong.

David's desire to see the fullness of his own power by taking the census was the ultimate expression of his love of beauty. In punishment for this sin the Lord sent a plague which David was able to abate only by purchasing the threshing floor of Araunah, the Jebusite, and building an altar to the Lord on the site. Hertzberg is quite right in claiming that the altar preconceives and perhaps even stands on the ground of Solomon's Temple. The city which David originally captured through his natural but questionable love of beauty is at least in token paid for and sanctified by the holy beauty of the Temple. The charms of young David were no less real because they faded, but they had to give way to another kind of beauty.

The end of Joab's story is told in another book called the Book of Kings. This new book will bring with it new ways and Joab will die. The events surrounding his death are rather complicated, and we shall be forced to investigate each particular thread.

When the book opened David lay on his deathbed, cold and lifeless. A beautiful maiden named Abishag was chosen to be his bed companion, but the king did not revive.

In the meantime there were two contenders for the throne, Adonijah and Solomon. The split was by no means a simple geographical split as the others had been.

*And he conferred with Joab the son of Zer-u-iah, and with A-bia-thar the priest: and they following Ad-o-nijah helped him. But Zadok the priest, and Be-na-iah the son of Je-hoia-da, and Nathan the prophet, and Shime-i, and Rei, and the mighty men which belonged to David, were not with Ad-o-nijah. (I Kings 1:7,8)*

But this can only be made more intelligible by considering the men of each party.

*Adonijah*

Joab, the general

Abiathar, the priest

*Solomon*

Benaiah, the general

Zadok, the priest

Nathan, the prophet

Shimei, of the House of Saul

Rei, an obscure friend

Joab and Abiathar were two of David's oldest friends. Abiathar was the son of Ahimelech, the priest of Nob, who had been appointed keeper of the great sword of Goliath. After David's escape from King Saul he went to Ahimelech and was given the sword. When Saul discovered this plot he ravaged Nob, killed Ahimelech, and only Abiathar remained to escape. He was David's priest at Keilah and at Ziklag. But those days came to an end when David became king.

Soon thereafter Jerusalem had fallen to the forces under Joab. David wanted to establish a home for the Ark and build a temple to the Lord, but Nathan appeared for the first time and explained to David that he was still part of an old way. Too much blood was on his hands and the Temple would have to wait to be built by another king.

Shortly after that conversation several new names appear in the text. Zadok appears together with Abiathar as priest, and Benaiah was appointed general. Zadok and Abiathar served jointly as priests. They never squabble and one never appears without the other. The only difference between the two is that Abiathar remembered the old days while Zadok was a newcomer.

Two lists were given of David's staff; one immediately after he realized that he would not be the king to build the Temple, and the other followed the death of Amasa (II Sam. 8:18; 20:23). In each list Benaiah appears as the leader of the Cherethites and the Pelethites.

These troops had been part of David's army since Ziklag (I Sam. 30:14). They seem to be David's elite troops composed of Philistines. But unlike the troops of Ittai, the Gittite, their allegiance was directly to David (II Sam. 15:18). The Cherethites represent the essence of a Philistine. Although we have accepted the King James transliteration, the Hebrew simply calls them Cretans. The Philistines, who always represented the chaos of the sea, had come to the land of the Canaanites from the Island of Crete shortly before the Children of Israel arrived. Some of them seemed to have retained the full force of their ocean origins by calling themselves Cretans. They became followers of David and were placed under the rule of Benaiah, who, like David, had risen to power by killing a lion (II Sam. 23:20).

That just about completes our description of the men on the two sides, except for Shimei and Rei. Shimei was a dissident from the House of Saul who joined Solomon's camp through fear. Rei was mentioned nowhere else and appears as new blood in the new administration.

The pretender, Adonijah, had only been mentioned once before. Like his older brother Absalom he was born in Hebron, and his name appears fourth on the list of the king's sons given a few verses before David's decision to capture Jerusalem and make it his new capital.

When David took to his bed Adonijah began the revolution. The text reads as follows: *Then Adonijah the son of Haggith, exalted himself, saying, I will be king: and he prepared him chariots and horsemen and fifty men to run before him* (I Kings 1:5). Absalom's revolution began with the following words: *And it came to pass after this, that Absalom prepared him chariots and horses and fifty men to run before him* (II Sam. 15:1). Adonijah's men came together in a place called En-rogel. Aside from two verses in which the name En-rogel appears in the catalog of cities given in the latter half of the Book of Joshua, En-rogel only appears once more in the entire Bible. Absalom had also used it as a retreat during his campaigns (II Sam. 17:17).

After Adonijah capitulated he asked Bath-sheba to intercede for him with Solomon and grant him Abishag. Solomon, of course, refused, and immediately decided to have Adonijah killed. This was also part of Absalom's war. Ahithophel, David's counselor, defected during Absalom's revolt, and under his advice Absalom spread a tent out in public and slept with one of his father's concubines as a symbol of his rule.

Adonijah's revolution was an old revolution. It was an imitation of Absalom's in all its details, and the men with him had all been with David prior to the capture of Jerusalem.

Solomon was born after the establishment of Jerusalem as capital, and all of the men backing his side were introduced into the text immediately after the capture of Jerusalem. Joab, his wisdom, and his violence belonged to an old way which was to be replaced by Solomon, his wisdom, and his Temple. These two ways coexisted for a time under David as is dramatically shown by the fact that the list of David's men which includes both parties is presented twice in the text, once in the eighth chapter of II Samuel, soon after David had expressed his desire to build a temple, and again in the twentieth chapter, immediately following the death of Amasa.

Joab and Adonijah were both killed by Benaiah at the command of Solomon following the advice of David. But Joab died on the altar of the Lord. The author thereby raises the question of whether Joab's death was just recompense for actions committed during his life or whether the last scene of his life was the sacrifice of an old and outmoded wisdom on the altar of the Lord. Considering the last days of Solomon, his pagan wives and his pagan temples, one wonders what was achieved by the substitution of public paganism for private atheism.

But perhaps we have been misled by concentrating on the end of Solomon's life. His great prayer, delivered at the opening of the Temple, contains the new wisdom, which outlasted both his Temple and his pagan shrines. Although it was followed by a sacrifice and a feast, in his description of the purpose of that building the word sacrifice never appears.

He began by retelling the story of David's desire to build a Temple and of God's decision to wait for the son of the conqueror to come and build it. The body of the speech is a prayer to God bidding Him whom *the Heaven of Heavens cannot contain* (I Kings 8:27) to listen to the prayers of those who come into His Temple. It is at the same time an encouragement to the people to come to the Temple and Pray. Fourteen times the word *prayer* appears in the chapter, and in it prayer silently replaces animal sacrifice.

What caused this change in the Way? After the main body of the prayer is over, Solomon *stood, and blessed all the congregation of Israel with a loud voice, saying, Blessed be the Lord, that hath given rest unto His people Israel, according to all that He promised; there hath not failed one word of all His good promise, which He promised by the hand of Moses, His servant.* (I Kings 8:55,56)

The first promise had been fulfilled. The wars which occupied the people and brought them together under Moses and Joshua, under the judges and the first kings, were over, and the Lord had given rest to His people. The time of the hoopla was over; now they had only themselves to face, and that would be the hardest.

Solomon was not hopeful. In this speech Solomon looks forward to the author's day, when Babylon had come and the people were set adrift:

*If they sin against thee (for there is no man that sinneth not,) and Thou be angry with them, and deliver them to the enemy, so that they carry them away captives unto the land of the enemy, far or near; yet if they shall bethink themselves in the land whither they were carried captives, and repent, and make supplication unto Thee in the land of them that carried them captives, saying, We have sinned, and have done perversely, we have committed wickedness; and so return unto Thee with all their heart, and with all their soul, in the land of their enemies, which led them away captive, and pray unto Thee toward their land, which Thou gavest unto their fathers, the city which Thou hast chosen, and the house which I have built for Thy name: then hear Thou their prayer and their supplication in Heaven Thy dwelling place, and maintain their cause, and forgive Thy people that have sinned against Thee, and all their transgressions wherein they have transgressed against Thee, and give them compassion before them who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them: (I Kings 8:46–50)*

But where was this compassion to come from? The only words he had for us were his last. After he spoke them Solomon went his own way, but they went like this:

*And let these my words, wherewith I have made supplication before the Lord, be nigh unto the Lord our God day and night, that He maintain the cause of His servant, and the cause of His people Isra-el at all times, as the matter shall require: that all the people of the earth may know that the Lord is God, and that there is none else. Let your heart therefore be perfect with the Lord our God, to walk in His statutes, and to keep His commandments, as at this day. (I Kings 8:59–61)*

Now it should be clear why Abraham was more at home in Hebron than in Jerusalem.

2b. *And Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her.*

As distinguished from laughter, weeping will emerge as the virtuous passion, though weeping does not necessarily imply sadness. The full range of this passion can only be seen later when we try to form a picture of the character of Joseph.

3. *And Abraham stood up before his dead, and spake unto the sons of Heth, saying,*

Although the Hittites of the Bible were descendants of Canaan (Gen. 10:17) they played a special role distinguished from the other Canaanites, but it

would be more proper to speak of that distinction in the commentary to Verse Eighteen.

4. *I am a stranger and a sojourner with you: give me a possession of a buryingplace with you, that I may bury my dead out of my sight.*
5. *And the children of Heth answered Abraham, saying unto him,*
6. *Hear us, my lord: thou art a mighty prince among us: in the choice of our sepulchres bury thy dead; none of us shall withhold from thee his sepulchre, but that thou mayest bury thy dead.*

Abraham presented himself as a stranger, or more literally a *sojourner*, not one who was merely passing through and yet not one who belonged to the land. It is the word used for the Israelites during their long stay in Egypt. He wishes to *possess* a certain part of the new land, and as we shall see in Verse Sixteen this legal *possession* will be the link between Israel and the Promised Land during their four hundred years in Egypt.

In the discussion that is about to take place the word *hear* in the imperative will occur five times, and it will culminate in Verse Sixteen when the verb will finally appear in the indicative mood. The tension that is thus built up increases the feeling that more than the simple sale of a piece of land is at stake. In Verse Six the Hittites show that they recognize Abraham's special position and either through respect or through fear are willing to grant him burial privileges, though they said nothing about a *possession*.

7. *And Abraham stood up, and bowed himself to the people of the land, even to the children of Heth.*
8. *And he communed with them saying, If it be your mind that I should bury my dead out of my sight; hear me, and entreat for me to Ephron the son of Zohar.*

Abraham was careful to make sure that the discussion take place in the assembly in front of the *people of the land*. Rather than going directly to Ephron, the son of Zohar, he chose to deal with the people as a whole. Presumably a private sale could have been arranged, but that would not have suited Abraham's purposes. In Verse Eight he was able to commit the Hittites to the notion that it was the general will of the people as a whole that Abraham receive the land from Ephron.

9. *That he may give me the cave of Machpelah, which he hath, which is in the end of his field; for as much money as it is worth he shall give it me for a possession of a buryingplace amongst you.*

The precise legal description of the location of the plot which Abraham intended to purchase is given in full detail. It will be repeated once more in this chapter and no less than five times in the Book of Genesis as a whole (see also

Gen. 25:9, 49:30 and 50:13). The author's insistence on the legal formality of the purchase seems to be crucial for a full understanding of the present passage.

Abraham repeated the word *possession* which the Hittites had dropped from their formulation of the arrangement in Verse Six and repeated their words *Hear me*. He also insisted that the possession be legalized through the use of *money*.

10. *And Ephron dwelt among the children of Heth: and Ephron the Hittite answered Abraham in the audience of the children of Heth, even of all that went in at the gate of his city, saying,*

(In Verse Ten Ephron was forced to speak *in the hearing of the Hittites, of all who went in at the gate of the city*. The rhetorical form of Verse Ten reminds us of Verse Seven. In each verse the assembled multitude was referred to twice in order to stress the public character of the sale.)

11. *Nay, my lord, hear me: the field give I thee, and the cave that is therein, I give it thee; in the presence of the sons of my people give I it thee: bury thy dead.*

Ephron begins with the imperative *hear me* and conjointly drops the word *possession*. His insistence upon presenting the land as a gift may be no more than a polite Middle Eastern way of beginning the process of bargaining, but given Abraham's strength as mentioned in Verse Six, it is more likely that Ephron would have preferred to give Abraham a burial place rather than sell him a legal possession which would imply the grant of certain rights, and perhaps form the basis of greater encroachment in the future.

Ephron took advantage of a certain looseness in the use of tenses which can hardly be reproduced in English. Strictly speaking Hebrew has only two tenses, a perfect and an imperfect. One is used for acts which have already been completed, the other for acts which have not yet been completed and in most cases have not yet been started. These two tenses when interpreted in terms of time as in Western grammar become the past and the future, respectively. If the present is to be stressed the participle is used. In Verse Eleven one would have expected either the imperfect *I will give* or the participle *I am giving*. Instead Ephron used the perfect *I gave*. Since the Hebrew verbs are not directly connected with time one may also use the perfect to imply actions which are, as we would say in English, as good as done. By speaking in this manner Ephron accomplished two things.

He began with the words *No, my lord, hear me*. Abraham had just used the words *hear me* in reference to the notion of possession. Ephron's word *No, hear me* are intended as a correction of the words which Abraham wanted to hear. By using the words *I have given* Ephron not only shows the magnanimity which would be demanded by Verse Six, but by making it a *fait accompli* he

also tries to prevent the transfer by legal sale and the full commitments which that sale would imply.

12. *And Abraham bowed down himself before the people of the land.*  
 13. *And he spake unto Ephron in the audience of the people of the land, saying, but if only thou wouldst hear me, I pray thee: I will give thee money for the field; take it of me, and I will bury my dead there.*

Again Abraham repeated the words *hear me*. Momentarily, at least, Abraham spoke in the language of Ephron. He provisionally dropped the word *possession* and used Ephron's word *give* instead of his own word *buy*. His compromise of speech was prefaced by a much stronger phrase than has been used in the conversation by either party thus far: *but if only thou wouldst hear me*.

14. *And Ephron answered Abraham, saying unto him,*  
 15. *My lord, hearken unto me: the land is worth four hundred shekels of silver: what is that betwixt me and thee? Bury therefore thy dead.*

Ephron saw that he could not escape the deal but was careful not to commit himself to the sale as such. He merely mentioned the price of the land, in essence agreeing to accept the exchange of gifts while not committing himself or the people to the public sale which would give Abraham rights not implied by a mere gift.

Four hundred shekels—that should ring a great bell in our minds. The number has been repeated in the same general context throughout the book. In the commentary to Gen. 7:4 it was shown that the numbers forty and four hundred always appear with reference to a time of waiting, a time in which nothing happens on the surface, and yet it is always a time of great expectation. And now a bit of land worth four hundred shekels will be the only possession of the sons of Abraham during their four hundred years of servitude in Egypt.

16. *And Abraham heard unto Ephron; and Abraham weighed to Ephron the silver, which he had named in the audience of the sons of Heth, four hundred shekels of silver, current money with the merchant.*

The word *hear* has finally appeared in the indicative mood. Abraham pays the four hundred shekels in *current money with the merchant*. The author suddenly places us within the crass world of market exchange to make it clear that a business transaction has been made.

17. *And the field of Ephron, which was in Machpelah, which was before Mamre, the field, and the cave which was therein, and all the trees that were in the fields, that were in all the borders round about, were made sure*

18. *Unto Abraham for a possession in the presence of the children of Heth, before all that went in at the gate of his city.*

The final statement of the arrangements returns to the phraseology originally used by Abraham. Abraham has procured a *possession* in the fullest sense of the word in spite of the intricacies of the discussion.

As was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter Israel's relation to the Hittites is somewhat different from its relationship to the other Canaanite tribes. Abraham's insistence on the legality of the transaction appears as a grim joke since he already knows that the land will be taken by force (see Gen. 15:20). In later times another grave injustice would be done to the Hittites. A noble man named Uriah will be killed because of David's passion for his wife, Bath-sheba (I Sam. Chap. 11). Even God will point to that exploit as David's greatest sin (I Kings 15:5).

The absolute decency of the Hittites is not only seen in Uriah's devotion to David and his magnanimous unwillingness to rest at ease in his own bed while other men suffered the discomforts of battle, but is also seen in the one other reference to a Hittite. When David, a fugitive from Saul, was about to attack the king's army, he turned to two men, Ahimelech the Hittite, and Abishai, Joab's brother, and said *Who will go down with me into the camp to Saul* (I Sam. 26:6). Ahimelech was silent but Abishai went down with David. Apparently Ahimelech did not wish to accompany David on an expedition which, had it not been for David's piety, could have led to the death of the king (see II Sam. 26:8-17).

In former times Hittites had occupied the city of Beth-el, which they had called by the name of Luz. When Joshua's men were about to attack the city of Luz they were aided by a Hittite spy who showed them the entrance to the city. In exchange for this service the spy was allowed to go free, and the text adds *and the man went to the land of the Hittites and built a city, and called its name Luz; that is its name to this day* (Judg. 1:26).

There was no other ancient city called Luz. But apparently the author meant to equate Luz with Lud, the Hebrew name for Lyddia, which formed a significant part of the Hittite empire.

From an historical point of view it is unclear, to say the least, whether there was any connection between the Hittites of the Bible and the famous Hittite empire in Anatolia, although it is possible that some Hittites from Anatolia were living in Canaan. By reversing the historical account and making the Canaanite tribe the father of the Hittite empire, the author acknowledges the injustices which the Hittites suffer during and after the conquest. He presents the rise of their civilization in another part of the world as the full recompense of which the four hundred shekels was only a token.

The only problem which remains is whether the author was reporting what he believed to have happened or whether he was consciously rewriting history

in order to indicate what he believed should have happened. In this instance there is probably no way of answering our question, but the same problem will come up again in the commentary to Gen. 39:8, where we will be in a better position to reach some conclusion.

The relationship between Israel and the Hittites is further complicated by the fact that Esau's first wife was also a Hittite, and from that marriage came the most important of his sons. However we shall have sufficient opportunity to consider that family in our discussion of Esau.

19. *And after this, Abraham buried Sarah his wife in the cave of the field of Machpelah before Mamre: the same is the Hebron in the land of Canaan.*
20. *And the field, and the cave that is therein, were made sure unto Abraham for a possession of a Buryingplace by the sons of Heth.*

After the commercial arrangements had been transacted Abraham buried his wife Sarah as he had planted the grove at the end of Chapter Twenty-one, and thereby Abraham's acquisition of a *possession* was made complete.

#### CHAPTER XXIV

1. *And Abraham was old, and well stricken in age: and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things.*
2. *And Abraham said unto his eldest servant of his house, that ruled over all that he had, Put, I pray thee, thy hand under my thigh:*
3. *And I will make thee swear by the Lord, the God of Heaven, and the God of the earth, that thou shalt not take a wife unto my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I dwell:*
4. *But thou shalt go unto my country, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son Isaac.*

In this chapter Abraham is presented as an old man, well stricken in age. His active life is over, and he will never speak to God or to Isaac again. Nevertheless, the chapter is concerned with the pains he takes in carefully laying out the plan for Isaac's future life.

The practice of swearing by placing the hand under the thigh may have a number of significancies. First of all it implies the absolute trust that the one to whom the oath is made places in the person who is taking the oath.

In the Bible the thigh or loins is that part of the body closest to our inner feelings, even in the case of feelings of guilt which we would hide from the world as a whole (see Num. 5:27). The thigh is not only related to the personal but also to generation. A man's descendants are often spoken of as the *souls that came out of his loins* (Gen. 46:26). All these things, his own life and the lives of his descendants, Abraham is placing in the hands of his servant.

Throughout the chapter one must keep track of the various names used for God so far as the servant is concerned. In the third verse Abraham refers to God as *the God of the Heavens and the God of the earth*. Abraham begins by making no special demands beyond the assumption that God is the God of the great world who ensures the order which all men can see around them. Neither His personal name nor His special relationship to Abraham is mentioned.

Abraham asks the servant to swear that he will not take a wife for Isaac from the daughters of the Canaanites. In phrasing the oath in this manner Abraham tacitly assumes that even in the normal course of affairs a wife would have been chosen for Isaac. Isaac does not seem to share the spirit which allowed Abraham to *leave his father's house* nor the related spirit which will allow Jacob to return to Haran where he will find his own wife.

5. *And the servant said unto him, Peradventure the woman will not follow me unto this land: must I needs bring thy son again unto the land from whence thou camest?*
6. *And Abraham said unto him, Beware thou that thou bring not my son thither again.*
7. *The Lord God of Heaven, which took me from my father's house, and from the land of my kindred, and which spake unto me, and that sware unto me, saying, unto thy seed will I give this land; He shall send his angel before thee, and thou shalt take a wife unto my son from thence.*
8. *And if the woman will not be willing to follow thee, then thou shalt be clear from this my oath: only bring not my son thither again.*
9. *And the servant put his hand under the thigh of Abraham, his master, and sware to him concerning that matter.*

When speaking with the servant in Verse Seven Abraham is more explicit about his relationship to God. He is a God who has chosen a particular man for a particular purpose and will aid that man in carrying out that purpose. In the sixth verse his opposition to Isaac's return to Haran is even stronger than his opposition to a Canaanite wife. Apparently even if Isaac were to take a Canaanite wife, there would have been some possibility that the promise might still be fulfilled, though we are to assume that if Isaac were to return the promise would come to naught. Even at this early stage in its development, Abraham saw that the distractions that lure his children from the New Way would not come from a foreigner. Canaanite ways might hold a fascination for them, but it would not last. They would soon be dropped or so transformed as to become part of the New Way. But something near to home—that was the problem. The Way could be lost and no one would notice.

While a more systematic account of the role of angels will be given in the commentary to Gen. 28:12, even in terms of the present passage it appears as though the angel will ensure the fruition of this journey, even though this crucial link is left in the hands of a servant.

10. *And the servant took ten camels of the camels of his master, and departed; for all the goods of his master were in his hand: and he arose, and went to Mesopotamia, unto the city of Nahor.*

The servant is in complete possession of Abraham's goods, which he is holding in trust for Abraham's son, Isaac. Many of the following passages will be unclear if we do not bear in mind that Abraham has become very old in the service of the New Way and that he has already turned it over to younger hands.

11. *And he made his camels to kneel down without the city by a well of water at the time of the evening, even the time that women go out to draw water,*  
 12. *And he said, O Lord God of my master Abraham, I pray thee, send me good speed this day, and shew kindness unto my master Abraham.*  
 13. *Behold, I stand here by the well of water: and the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water:*

The well outside a city gate seems to be a fine place for the beginnings of a marriage. This will not only be true in the case of Jacob (Gen. 29:10) but in the case of Moses as well (Ex. 2:15). The servant prays to Abraham's God to ensure the success of his journey. While it is true that the servant will act with great wisdom, much of what happens in the present chapter will depend upon divine providence in a sense radically different from anything we have seen thus far in the book. Up to now little has happened which to a Greek eye could be called *chance*. This is not to deny that God called Abraham, but to note that Abraham's reaction to that call was carried out with forethought and that his actions were those of a man who, given his divine calling, arranged his travels with great awareness. The present chapter will rely to a large extent on the good offices of the angel whom Abraham said would accompany his servant.

14. *And let it come to pass, that the damsel to whom I shall say, let down thy pitcher, I pray thee, that I may drink; and she shall say, drink, and I will give thy camels drink also: let the same be she that thou hast appointed for thy servant Isaac; and thereby shall I know that thou hast shewed kindness unto my master.*

The servant's plan for determining the virtue of the young lady is not altogether foolish. It is intended to reveal the virtues and kindness of the young lady involved. The main virtue which the servant is looking for in a wife for his young master is her willingness to care for her husband. If the woman shows kindness for himself as well as to the dumb beasts with him she will prove herself to be the best wife for Isaac.

15. *And it came to pass, before he had done speaking, that, behold, Rebekah came out, who was born to Bethuel, son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor, Abraham's brother, with her pitcher upon her shoulder.*
16. *And the damsel was good looking, a virgin, neither had any man known her: and she went down to the well, and filled her pitcher, and came up.*
17. *And the servant ran to meet her, and said, Let me, I pray thee, drink a little water of thy pitcher.*
18. *And she said, Drink, my lord: and she hastened, and let down her pitcher upon her hand, and gave him drink.*
19. *And when she had done giving him drink, she said, I will draw water for thy camels also, until they have done drinking.*
20. *And she hastened, and emptied her pitcher into the trough, and ran again unto the well to draw water, and drew for all his camels.*

The angel had done his work well. This is that same young lady that we heard about before Sarah died. The servant of course knows nothing of all this. He was only told to go to Haran, but nothing was said about Rebekah. And what a fine girl she is, too, full of that same spirit Abraham showed the day three visitors stood by his tent. She is a good-looking girl too, not beautiful like Sarah, but good-looking.

She runs, too, just like Abraham ran. First to the man and then to the camels; all are cared for and none shall want. Isaac has a real prize, but will he know that? Maybe not. Does that matter? Maybe not.

21. *And the man wondering at her held his peace, to wit whether the Lord had made his journey prosperous or not.*
22. *And it came to pass, as the camels had done drinking, that the man took a golden earring of half a shekel weight, and two bracelets for her hands of ten shekels weight of gold;*
23. *And said, Whose daughter art thou? Tell me, I pray thee: is there room in thy father's house for us to lodge in?*
24. *And she said unto him, I am the daughter of Bethuel the Son of Milcah, which she bare unto Nahor.*
25. *She said moreover unto him, We have both straw and provender enough, and room to lodge in.*

Throughout this passage we are constantly reminded of Rebekah's generosity and care for the servant. Her thoughts for his comfort seem to be more important to her than the golden rings and bracelets, and the complete description she gives of her parentage seems to show that she is somehow aware of its importance for her destiny.

26. *And the man bowed down his head, and worshipped the Lord.*  
 27. *And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of my master Abraham, who hath not left destitute my master of his kindness and his truth: I being in the way, the Lord led me to the house of my master's brethren.*

So the *kindness* of the Lord brought him to *the house of his master's brethren*. The servant was *in the way*, going to Haran, but the rest was up to God. We shall see providence expressing itself more strongly now that Isaac is about to inherit the New Way. Abraham was a careful man. He may have made a few mistakes at times, but he was always planning, always acting. Things will be different for a while. The servant was led to Laban, and Isaac will be led by Rebekah, by the world around him, and by the plans which his father had made.

28. *And the damsel ran, and told them of her mother's house these things.*  
 29. *And Rebekah had a brother, and his name was Laban: and Laban ran out unto the man, unto the well.*  
 30. *And it came to pass, when he saw the earring and bracelets upon his sister's hands, and when he heard the words of Rebekah his sister, saying, Thus spake the man unto me; that he came unto the man; and, behold, he stood by the camels at the well.*  
 31. *And he said, Come in, thou blessed of the Lord; wherefore standest thou without? For I have prepared the house, and room for the camels.*

Laban is certainly much more aware of the gifts than his sister, Rebekah. Apparently he does not share her natural gifts and goodness.

32. *And the man came into the house: and he ungirded his camels, and gave straw and provender for the camels, and water to wash his feet, and the men's feet that were with him.*

In spite of Laban's great welcome the words *the man* refer to the servant, who was left to look after his own camels. Laban's greetings seem to have been superficial though the grammatical structure is unclear and it would be difficult to decide anything about Laban's character on the basis of it.

33. *And there was set meat before him to eat: but he said, I will not eat, until I have told mine errand. And he said, Speak on.*  
 34. *And he said, I am Abraham's servant.*  
 35. *And the Lord hath blessed my master greatly; and he hath given him flocks, and herds, and silver, and gold, and manservants, and maid-servants, and camels, and asses.*  
 36. *And Sarah my master's wife bare a son to my master when she was old: and unto him hath he given all that he hath.*

The servant delivers his message clearly and in simple words. He had taken the time to refresh himself, give straw to the camels, and make himself presentable. But food was another matter. Their common meal would have to wait until his errand was completed and community existed between them.

Although he calls Abraham *my master* because he knows the name will mean something to Laban, he and all that is with him now belong to Isaac. Abraham was old and tired and had already passed the New Way on to younger hands.

In the next chapter we shall see the old man come back to the prime of his life, but it will be another life only vaguely connected with the New Way. We shall discuss that life in the next chapter, but now that we have seen something of the author it is time to stop for a moment and begin to reflect on his work and our own relation to it.

Other men in modern times have also noticed that Abraham was old and that in Verse Sixty-six the servant will call Isaac *my master*. From this they assume that there had once been another account in which the death of Abraham was retold sometime soon after Verse Nine. While there may have been such a text, there is no need to suppose one. Abraham has already given the servant to his son, and it is only proper that the servant call Isaac *my master* even during Abraham's lifetime.

Even though the modern interpretation cannot bring out the full impact of the next chapter, how important can that be? Any commentary including the present one is certainly bound to miss more of the author's intention than it is able to capture. Trying to understand and express the words and intentions of another author is at best a hazardous task. It is always full of hunches and guesses which can at most become more reasonable as they become more unified. If a book tends to fall into a whole picture the completeness of that understanding is a minor guarantee that some contact has been made between the author and his reader. Clearly anyone who makes the effort to reach out for the intentions of an author will land sometimes close to the mark and sometimes further away.

In making such remarks, I certainly do not mean to imply that there were no such earlier texts nor even that it can be known that there was no text in which Abraham's death did occur at an earlier date. This commentary clearly presupposes that the author of Genesis had more ancient texts from which he learned many particular details of past ages, but to give up the task of trying to understand what the author intended in his final redaction is a fatal blow to our own attempts to understand the real problems. All of us who have the good or bad fortune to have been born into the Western world find ourselves somewhere in the middle of life full of thoughts. If it were not so we would have little to think about, and yet since it is so, our heads are full of the partially digested thoughts of those who came before us. They are largely, though not completely, misunderstood, and they have all been twisted together, but not in

such a way that we cannot begin the task of unravelling them. In order to get some clarity about our own prejudices it is imperative that we make the sober attempt to understand those thoughts as they were when they were fresh, that is to say, as they were in the minds of the men who first thought them.

*A priori* it could not have been known whether the Book of Genesis as it exists in its present form merits such close reading. It could have been the case that a thoughtless redactor compiled a work leaving many contradictions which he either did not notice or did not care about. One can only judge the virtue of the redactor by examining the text carefully to see whether it makes sense or not.

It may be that the way we have chosen is filled with giants and will often lead into unconquerable lands, but once an author, such as the author of Genesis, has shown himself to be as reliable as he has, it is wiser to play the part of Caleb than to reduce the Promised Land to a printer's oversight.

37. *And my master made me swear, saying, Thou shalt not take a wife to my son of the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I dwell:*  
 38. *But thou shalt go unto my father's house, and to my kindred, and take a wife unto my son.*  
 39. *And I said unto my master, Peradventure the woman will not follow me.*  
 40. *And he said unto me, The Lord, before whom I walk, will send his angel with thee, and prosper thy way; and thou shalt take a wife for my son of my kindred, and of my father's house:*  
 41. *Then shalt thou be clear from this my oath, when thou comest to my kindred; and if they give not thee one, thou shalt be clear from my oath.*

In Verse Thirty-eight the servant adds the words *to my father's house and to my kindred* which did not actually appear in the oath. It is almost as if he were unaware of, or taking for granted, the great role which providence plays in this chapter. On the other hand he seems to be concerned that the goal of obtaining a wife for Isaac be achieved not through providence but through the conscious consent and desire of Rebekah.

Verse Forty is evidently a reference back to Gen. 17:1, in which Abraham is commanded to *walk before me and be perfect*. The angel who will *prosper the servant's way* seems in this case to be related to the heavy emphasis upon what later theology will call *divine providence*. The servant is saying that the task of the angel with regard to Isaac has as its origin the God who had witnessed Abraham's personal virtues.

As we shall see through the next few chapters the story of Isaac largely concerns itself with the relation of the virtue of the father to providence as it affects the son.

42. *And I came this day unto the well, and said, O Lord God of my master Abraham, if now thou do prosper my way which I go;*
43. *Behold, I stand by the well of water; and it shall come to pass, that when the virgin cometh forth to draw water, and I say to her, Give me, I pray thee, a little water of thy pitcher to drink;*
44. *And she say to me, Both drink thou, and I will also draw for thy camels: let the same be the woman whom the Lord had appointed out for my master's son.*
45. *And before I had done speaking in mine heart, behold, Rebekah came forth with her pitcher on her shoulder; and drew water: and I said unto her, Let me drink, I pray thee.*
46. *And she made haste, and let down her pitcher from her shoulder, and said, Drink, and I will give thy camels drink also: so I drank, and she made the camels drink also.*
47. *And I asked her, and said, Whose daughter art thou? and she said, The daughter of Bethuel, Nahor's son, whom Milcah bare unto him: and I put the earring upon her face, and the bracelets upon her hands.*
48. *And I bowed down my head, and worshipped the Lord, and blessed the Lord God of my master Abraham, which had led me in the right way to take my master's brother's daughter unto his son.*

The account which the servant gave of his meeting with Rebekah was essentially a repetition of the facts as they occurred with one minor exception. According to his account he presented Rebekah with the gifts after their conversation though, in fact, that happened prior to the events related in the beginning of Verse Forty-seven. His motivations for changing the story are somewhat unclear. The overall effect is to decrease the importance of what we would call providence in the eyes of the servant by making it seem as if he had waited until he was sure that Rebekah was a descendant of Terah before giving her the gifts, but whether the servant made this change consciously or not is unclear.

49. *And now if ye will deal kindly and truly with my master, tell me: and if not, tell me; that I may turn to the right hand, or to the left.*
50. *Then Laban and Bethuel answered and said, The thing proceedeth from the Lord; we cannot speak unto thee bad or good.*

In Gen. 31:24,29 it will become clear that to Laban the words *to speak to you good or bad* mean *to do harm to*. In the early books of the Bible they generally imply the knowledge appropriate to a king—political wisdom (see commentaries to Gen. 3:6 and Gen. 20:7). Laban's understanding of the political seems to confirm the indications concerning his character which were given in Verses Thirty and Thirty-two, but men are complicated and we must wait to see more of him before making any judgments concerning his character.

51. *Behold, Rebekah is before thee; take her, and go, and let her be thy master's son's wife, as the Lord hath spoken.*
52. *And it came to pass, that, when Abraham's servant heard their words, he worshipped the Lord, bowing himself to the earth.*

As was mentioned in an earlier note, Abraham began the discussion with the servant by referring to *the God of the Heaven and the God of the earth* (Gen. 24:3). Only when the servant raised the objection that the woman might not wish to accompany him did Abraham refer to God as *the Lord God of Heaven which took me from my father's house* (Gen. 24:7), thereby assuring the servant of God's special care for Abraham. Throughout the chapter (verses 12, 27, 42 and 48), the servant has continually referred to God as *the God of my master*, but after having heard Laban's reaction he speaks of Him as *the Lord*.

Laban's speech in Verse Fifty is tantamount to a confession that whatever decency there is in his actions is caused by his fear of the Lord rather than by his native character. Being impressed by the effect God has on Laban, the servant no longer merely considers Him the *God of my master* but *the Lord*.

53. *And the servant brought forth jewels of silver, and jewels of gold, and raiment, and gave them to Rebekah: he gave also to her brother and to her mother precious things.*
54. *And they did eat and drink, he and the men that were with him, and tarried all night: and they rose up in the morning, and he said, send me away unto my master.*
55. *And her brother and her mother said, let the damsel abide with us a few days, at the least ten; after that she shall go.*
56. *And he said unto them, Hinder me not, seeing the Lord hath prospered my way; send me away that I may go to my master.*
57. *And they said, We will call the damsel, and enquire at her mouth.*
58. *And they called Rebekah their sister, and said unto her, Wilt thou go with this man? And she said, I will go.*

Once the arrangements have been made the servant is willing to eat the meal which he had refused in Verse Thirty-three. This gesture of friendship and agreement becomes a substitute for the ten days which he was unwilling to spend at the home of Laban. It appears in rather sharp contrast to the twenty years which Jacob will spend with Laban and is part of the curious combination of divine providence and careful planning which forms the subject matter of the present chapter.

Rebekah's answer, consisting of one short word in the Hebrew, is clear and definite and comes from the same spunk with which she ran down to fetch the water.

59. *And they sent away Rebekah their sister, and her nurse, and Abraham's servant, and his men.*

60. *And they blessed Rebekah, and said unto her, Thou art our sister, be thou the mother of thousands of millions, and let thy seed possess the gate of those which hate them.*

The blessing which Rebekah receives at the home of Laban is almost identical to the final blessing which Abraham received from God:

*That in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the Heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies: and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed: because thou hast obeyed My voice.* (Gen. 22:17,18)

The obvious changes are that the cosmological simile is dropped and that there is no counterpart to Verse Eighteen in Laban's blessing. Laban does not consider the growth of the state in terms of the natural limits formed by the waters, nor does he understand the political as a means towards justice. His blessing is much more of a parody than a repetition.

61. *And Rebekah arose, and her damsels, and they rode upon the camels, and followed the man: and the servant took Rebekah, and went his way.*  
62. *And Isaac came from the way of the well Lahai-roi; for he dwelt in the south country.*

Evidently Isaac had left Abraham before he was married to Rebekah. For the time being he had no one to care for him and went to Lahai-roi, the well Hagar fled to when she escaped from Sarah for the first time (Gen. 16:14) and had nowhere to go. Perhaps the author wishes to indicate that if left to himself without the care of Rebekah and the servant, Isaac would have stayed in the place of those who have nowhere to go. Such a supposition would not only account for the present verse but would also account for Abraham's great care in planning the young man's future. However we shall see more of Rebekah's role in the next chapter.

63. *And Isaac went out to languish in the field at the eventide: and he lifted up his eyes, and saw, and, behold, the camels were coming.*

The word which we have translated *languish* is sometimes translated *to walk about* and sometimes *to meditate*. All of these translations require some change in the text. The Hebrew alphabet, as it has been known for the last two thousand years, contains two letters, one of which is equivalent to our *s*, the other to our *sh*. They are identical in form and differ only by virtue of a small dot, placed over the left-hand corner in the case of the *s* sound and over the right-hand corner in the case of the *sh* sound. The Hebrew text as it presently appears reads *lasuah*, a word which is found nowhere else in the Bible. The translation we are suggesting assumes that the dot over the letter has been misplaced and that hence the word is really *lashuah*, which originally meant *to sink* or *to melt and vanish* and ultimately comes to mean *to be saddened* or *to*

*languish* (see Ps. 42:6,12; 43:5; 44:26). Often the word is taken to be *lashūt* meaning *to rove* or *to walk about*, which would require not only the change in pointing suggested but also a change in one of the root letters. Others have assumed that the word is related to the word *lasiah* meaning *to be troubled, anxious, or plaintive*, and which may also mean to *muse* or *study*. This latter assumption is much more reasonable than the former suggestion. However, in the light of Verse Sixty-seven, in which Rebekah comforts Isaac, it would seem more reasonable either to accept the word as *lashuah* or to take the word *lashiah* in the sense of being *plaintive*, which would come to very much the same thing.

64. *And Rebekah lifted up her eyes, and when she saw Isaac, she lighted off the camel.*

65. *For she had said unto the servant, What man is this that walketh in the field to meet us? And the servant had said, It is my master: therefore she took a veil, and covered herself.*

66. *And the servant told Isaac all things that he had done.*

As has been suggested by many other commentators, there may have been a custom that the intended bride should veil her face upon meeting her future husband. However in the Biblical tradition it may have a greater significance since the notion of *covering* has played a significant role in several points during the story. The most important occasions on which we have seen the word are in Gen. 9:23 when Shem and Japheth covered their father's nakedness, and again in Gen. 20:16 when the money which Abimelech paid to Abraham is spoken of as *a covering of the eyes unto all that are with thee*. In each case *covering* implies a forgetting of the past as was discussed in the commentary to Gen. 9:23.

The term is also used with reference to Moses after he returned from Mount Sinai. Rays of light beamed from his face, and he was forced to veil it in front of the people. As we shall see in the following chapter, Rebekah's relationship to her husband has much the same character. She will love him deeply and will protect him in many unseen ways.

67. *And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.*

As compared with Gen. 25:9, Isaac seems to be much more disturbed by the death of his mother than by the death of his father, which may be part of his character as we shall see it develop.