

# GENESIS 12–17

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## THE COVENANT OF ABRAHAM

### Overview

No greater earthly tribute to the first patriarch of the Bible can be made than in so many of the world's diverse peoples' revering him as "*our father* Abraham." The title of Frances Worthington's thoughtful examination of Abraham's life demonstrates the size and breadth of his impact on an innumerable physical and spiritual posterity: "One God, Three Wives, Five Religions."<sup>1</sup> Through his faithfulness, Abraham merited the promise of God on our behalf that "in [him] shall all families of the earth be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). The abundant and wide-ranging results of that promise, patiently and painfully secured by Abraham, surround us today—nearly four thousand years later.

And yet, as Hugh Nibley pointed out, this superman was an everyman.<sup>2</sup> Abraham's life fascinates us precisely because the degree of unwavering focus required to bring about the near perfection of a common man is so uncommon. We admire Abraham because his supreme feats were spiritual in nature. They were neither demonstrations of Herculean physical prowess nor a triumph over worldwide political powers but rather were quiet results of inner goodness and generosity—gifts that are within our reach if we are wise and good enough to follow Abraham's example. Hugh Nibley asked:

What office did [Abraham] hold? We know of none. What miracles did he perform? What dazzling appearances? He lived in the heroic age, a time of great migrations, of epic literature, but we read of no mighty combats, blow-by-blow, or challenges boasting heroic genealogy. His ten trials were Everyman's

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<sup>1</sup> Frances Worthington, *Abraham: One God, Three Wives, Five Religions* (Wilmette, IL: Bahai Publishing, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> Hugh W. Nibley, "Abraham's Temple Drama," in *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 17 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2008), 447: "Abraham was the essential Everyman, but never was there a less-ordinary individual."

trials. He was in trouble in business. The grass, water, and grazing rights on which he depended were often withheld from him. He never drove a hard bargain . . . , not even with the king of Sodom, or the generous Ephron the Hittite, who would have given him the burial cave for nothing. He yielded to Lot's greedy cattlemen and gracefully withdrew. . . .

[His] great zeal for the common good led him to plant trees and dig wells wherever his wanderings in the drought-ridden land led him—with no expectation of personal benefit—for the enjoyment of those who would come after. At Hebron he ran a school for outcasts where he received all comers. He always played fair: “Charity was dead and Abraham revived it” was a proverb. In our obsession with crime and Western scenarios, the [central theme] is always the pleasure of revenge, watching the bad guys suffer, inflicting exquisite tortures, if possible far surpassing those administered by the villain. Such vengeance was not for Abraham; Josephus tells us that Abraham stubbornly pleaded with God to spare the wickedest people in the world because he felt sorry for them, “because they were his friends and neighbors.” That is almost inconceivable to us in our modern Sodom and Gomorrah. “It is compassion and forgiveness alone that are the unfailing traits of the true descendants of Abraham.”<sup>3</sup>

Never was a role model like Abraham more needed than now.

Abraham's most notable spiritual quality was his single-minded devotion to the one true and living God. Because of his faithfulness, his posterity has received unique promises secured by the Abrahamic covenant. But isn't that unfair? What about the rest of humanity? How do we reconcile the chosenness of the family of Abraham with the idea that “God is no respecter of persons”? (Acts 10:34).

Fortunately, there is no conflict between the chosenness of Abraham's family and the universality of the Father's love. Everyone who receives the gospel *becomes* Abraham's seed and will “rise up and bless [Abraham] as their father” (Abraham 2:10). In the beginning, God organized the human family according to a divine plan and timetable. All would have the opportunity to “come unto him and partake of his goodness” (2 Nephi 26:33), but to achieve that end, God invited each willing soul to participate with Him in the effort.

Each of us made premortal covenants that put us in a partnership with our Heavenly Father.<sup>4</sup> Individuals were to play their unique parts faithfully at the appointed time. Jesus Christ was chosen to become our Savior. Abraham and others—both men and women—also received specific assignments.<sup>5</sup> Abraham's seed

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3 Nibley, “Abraham's Temple Drama,” 447, 450.

4 John A. Widtsoe, cited in Archibald F. Bennett, *Saviors on Mount Zion: Course No. 21 for the Sunday School* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Sunday School Union Board, 1950), 11–12; Boyd K. Packer, *The Holy Temple* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1980), 216.

5 Spencer W. Kimball, “The Role of Righteous Women,” *Ensign*, November 1979, 102. See Emma Smith's blessing request when she asked that she might live to “perform all the work that [she] covenanted to perform in the spirit-world” (Gracia N.

was given the responsibility to bear a “ministry and Priesthood unto all nations” (Abraham 2:9). Through the ministry and priesthood of Abraham’s seed, “*all* mankind may be saved,” “through the Atonement of Christ [and] . . . by obedience to the laws and ordinances of the Gospel” (Articles of Faith 1:3). The disorganization and confusion of the human family will eventually come to an end; “it must be joined together, so that there [will] be a perfect chain from Father Adam to his latest posterity.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from “Abraham’s Hebron Then and Now Part 1: Introduction - Jeffrey M. Bradshaw,” video, 7:08, February 13, 2018, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=dL7BipxVcbA>.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 12–17

## **Genesis 12:1–9. Lekh Lekha**

**12:1. “Get thee out.”** Following the lead of most Jewish commentaries, which prefer leaving the phrase untranslated to inadequately rendering it in clumsy English,<sup>7</sup> this section is titled “*lekh lekha!*” (pronounced with a firm accent on the last syllable). The basic meaning is (very roughly) “Get out and get going!” The verse as a whole conveys the daunting command for Abram to forever abandon his country, his kindred, and his father’s house and also that his final destination would remain unknown indefinitely—that is, until God chose to reveal it to him.<sup>8</sup> For now, in the words of Hugh Nibley, Abraham’s prime directive was to “keep moving!”<sup>9</sup>

**12:2. “I will bless thee.”** There are seven expressions of blessing in verses 2 and 3, as well as in the later blessings of Isaac (26:3–4) and Jacob (27:28–29). “Seven is the number of perfection, and the blessing bestowed upon Abram is perfect and complete.”<sup>10</sup>

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Jones, *Emma and Joseph: Their Divine Mission* [American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 1999], 295).

6 Elden Jay Watson, *Manuscript History of Brigham Young, 1846–1847* (Salt Lake City, UT: printed by the author, 1971), 528–531, which is an entry made on February 23, 1847, about a dream that occurred on February 17, 1847.

7 See Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2001), 48.

8 Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, vol. 2, *From Noah to Abraham*, trans. Israel Abrahams (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1997), 211–212.

9 Hugh W. Nibley, “Abraham’s Temple Drama,” in *Eloquent Witness: Nibley on Himself, Others, and the Temple*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 17 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2008), 449.

10 Cassuto, *From Noah to Abraham*, 312.

**12:2. “I will . . . make thy name great.”** While those in the story of the Tower of Babel who wanted to make a name *for themselves* failed (11:4), God declares that *He* will succeed in making a great name for Abram.<sup>11</sup>

**12:3. “in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.”** To make sure that this, the most important part of God’s message, is not forgotten, it is repeated four times later in the story: “during the appearance of the three visitors . . . (18:17–18); in the blessing following the near-sacrifice of Isaac (22:16–18); in God’s first appearance to Isaac (26:2–4); and in Jacob’s first encounter with God in the dream of the ladder at Beth-El (28:10–14).”<sup>12</sup>

**12:3. “earth.”** “The use of the word ‘earth’ at the end of Genesis 12:3 calls to mind the curses that both Adam and Cain brought upon the earth [Moses 4:23; 5:36].”<sup>13</sup> Through Abram and his family, God will succeed in reversing these curses, succeeding where the righteous Noah and the wicked builders of the tower failed.

**12:6, 8, 9. “Sichem . . . Beth-el . . . toward the south.”** “These three locations are . . . important from the perspective of the period during which the Pentateuch was written, the period just prior to Israel’s conquest of the land of Canaan. We know from the book of Joshua that Israel took the land in three campaigns: one central (at Bethel), one southern (in the Negev), and one northern (at Shechem). Thus, if we read the account from the point of view of the first readers, we see that Abraham was claiming each of these three areas by moving into the land and establishing a place of worship there. It is as if the Pentateuch was telling its readers that just as God had given the land to Abraham, so also he would give the land to the ‘seed’ of Abraham as they were about to go in to take the land under the leadership of Joshua.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from “Abraham’s Hebron Then and Now Part 1: Introduction - Jeffrey M. Bradshaw,” video, 7:08, February 13, 2018, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=dL7BipxVcbA>; and Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 88–90.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 12:1–9

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<sup>11</sup> See Joel S. Kaminsky, “The Theology of Genesis,” in *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, ed. Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr, and David L. Petersen (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2012), 644.

<sup>12</sup> Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*, 49.

<sup>13</sup> Kaminsky, “Theology of Genesis,” 644.

<sup>14</sup> John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 4.

## Genesis 12:10–20. The Abrahamic Test of Sarah

It is one thing to choose the right when the right seems reasonable and blessings for obedience seem obvious. It is another thing to bow in humble submission when “the thought makes reason stare” and the rewards of faith are not forthcoming.<sup>15</sup> In the well-known story of Abraham’s willingness to offer up Isaac in sacrifice (Genesis 22), Abraham made an unthinkable choice—a choice that opposed reason, went contrary to the commandments, seemed to nullify God’s prior promises, and must have made his whole soul recoil in moral repugnance.<sup>16</sup> Does the Lord require other disciples to make similar choices?

When scripture, Jewish tradition, and modern revelation are brought into consideration, the answer becomes a most definite yes. Not only Abraham but also Sarah, Isaac, and Hagar each experienced “Abrahamic tests”—as have many disciples in other dispensations, including ours. The connection between these tests and temple covenants is significant (as explained in more detail in the paragraph below), as is the need for the rescuing power of the Atonement of Jesus Christ. Elder Neal A. Maxwell taught, “If we are serious about our discipleship, Jesus will eventually request each of us to do those very things which are the most difficult for us to do.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, “sometimes the best people have the worst experiences because they are the most ready to learn.”<sup>18</sup>

Although Sarah’s role is backgrounded in the story of Isaac’s near-sacrifice, she is front and center in Genesis 12 and 20, where she was twice taken as a prospective wife by foreign rulers Pharaoh and Abimelech. Hugh Nibley suggested a hypothesis to explain the two close variants of Sarah’s story: that something akin to the two accounts of her trials might have been used in former times as a means to explain and illustrate ritual.<sup>19</sup> Following the logic of Nibley, one might see the themes of Sarah’s story as a natural fit for a discussion of something like the laws of obedience, sacrifice, and chastity just as the story of Enoch’s city provided a perfect context for lecture on the law of consecration. Nibley briefly summarized the story:

It was . . . a pharaoh who sought the hand of Sarah, the true princess, in order to raise up a royal progeny by her. Upon a royal bed identical in form with the altar of Abraham [Abraham 1:11–13], she too prayed for deliverance and was rescued by an angel while the king was constrained to recognize Sarah’s true marriage and heritage, bestowing upon her regal insignia and a royal escort.<sup>20</sup>

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15 Eliza R. Snow, “O My Father,” in *Hymns* (Salt Lake City, UT: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1985), no. 292.

16 No explanation was given for the divine injunction given to Abraham to sacrifice his son; the idea of child sacrifice was condemned in ancient Israel (see Leviticus 20:2–5; 1 Kings 11:4–11; 2 Kings 21:6; 2 Chronicles 28:1–4; Jeremiah 32:35–36); and the greatest promise Abraham received was posterity through Sarah and his son Isaac. Additionally, Abraham’s soul likely recoiled because human sacrifice was part of the culture Abraham had experienced personally and had despised (see Abraham 1:7–15).

17 Neal A. Maxwell, *A Time to Choose* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1972), 46.

18 Neal A. Maxwell, quoted in Bruce C. Hafen, *A Disciple’s Life: The Biography of Neal A. Maxwell* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2002), 20.

19 See Hugh W. Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, ed. Gary P. Gillum, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 14* (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2000), 343–381.

20 Hugh W. Nibley, “Patriarchy and Matriarchy,” in *Old Testament and Related Studies*, ed. John W. Welch, Gary P. Gillum,

Highlighting the independence of Sarah’s exercise of moral agency, Nibley wrote:

It is she and she alone who is being tested . . . this time. It is incorrect to say with Robert Graves that “Abraham gave Sarah to Pharaoh,” for he was in no position to do so: he was completely in Pharaoh’s power—he had already taken Sarah by force—and Pharaoh was listening only to Sarah! . . . [T]hroughout the story every crucial decision rests with Sarah and Sarah alone. . . .

There was nothing in the world to keep her from exchanging her hard life with Abraham for a life of unlimited ease and influence as Pharaoh’s favorite except her loyalty to her husband. By a special order from heaven Abraham had stepped out of the picture and Pharaoh had been placed in a legally and ethically flawless position, and Sarah knew it: “I Abraham, told Sarai, my wife, all that the Lord had said to me.”

Why is the brilliant prospect of being Queen of Egypt never mentioned as an inducement or even a lightening of Sarah’s burden? Sarah apparently never thinks of that, for she was as upset as Abraham: “Sarai wept at my words that night.” Still, the proposition was never put to her as a command, but only as a personal request from Abraham: “Please say you are my sister for the sake of my well-being, so that through your ministration I shall be saved, and owe my life to you!” (Genesis 12:13); and so with Abimelech: “This will be a special favor which I am asking of you in my behalf” (Genesis 20:13). . . .

[T]he stories of Isaac and Sarah teach us that salvation is a family affair, in which, however, each member acts as an individual and makes his own choice, for each must decide for himself when it is a matter of giving up all things, including life itself, if necessary. . . . If Abraham knew that “God would provide a sacrifice,” Isaac did not; if he was perfectly sure of his wife, she was not and prayed desperately for help—husband, wife, and son each had to undergo the terrible test alone.<sup>21</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 93–97.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 12:10–20

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and Don E. Norton, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* 1 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1986), 98–99.

<sup>21</sup> Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, 363–364, 366–367, 374.

## Genesis 13:1–13. Lot Parts with Abram

**13:5.** “*the land was not able to bear them.*” There was too little grazing land for the great number of cattle with which God had blessed Abram and Lot.

**13:7.** “*The Canaanites and the Perizzites dwelled then in the land.*” “There was an additional factor that exacerbated the situation: the area already had a settled population.”<sup>22</sup> Strife between the two groups of nomadic herders would disturb the herders’ relationship with the local farmers in nearby villages.

**13:8.** “*Let there be no strife, I pray thee.*” Nahum Sarna noted Abram’s wisdom in taking preemptive action before quarrels between the herdsmen led to sour feelings among the kinsmen.<sup>23</sup> “Abram displays great nobility of character. Although the older man, the uncle, and apparently the erstwhile guardian, he does not insist on seniority or priority of rights. Peace-loving and magnanimous, he selflessly offers his nephew first choice of grazing land and watering places.”<sup>24</sup>

**13:11.** “*Lot chose . . . the plain of Jordan.*” Not deferring to Abram, Lot chose the obviously more fertile land. The selfish choice turned out to be disastrous, both temporally and spiritually.

**13:13.** “*very wicked sinners.*” This phrase announces the reason for the destruction of Sodom in Genesis 19. In addition, it “carries with it a judgment on Lot’s character. Dazzled by the surface appearance of prosperity, he pays no heed to the moral depravity of his future neighbors.”<sup>25</sup>

Latter-day Saint scholar Douglas Clark summarized the lesson of this passage: “If, as Nibley points out, Abraham ‘seemed to be generous to the point of lacking common sense,’ it was only because of his uncommon insight into life. By Abraham’s action, said Philo, ‘he considered that he would thereby get peace, the greatest of gains.’ It was the peace of Zion that Abraham sought, that same unity of heart and mind that once existed in Enoch’s Zion (Moses 7:18).”<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 98.

<sup>23</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 98.

<sup>24</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 98.

<sup>25</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, 99.

<sup>26</sup> E. Douglas Clark, *The Blessings of Abraham: Becoming a Zion People* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2005), 127.

## **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 97–99.

## **Related verses**

Genesis 13:1–13

## **Genesis 13:14–18. Further Promises to Abram in Hebron**

Abram was not only generous and peace loving but was also known for his hospitality. Of Abram's hospitality, Nibley wrote,

In the most inhospitable of worlds, Abraham was the most hospitable of men. It was said that charity was asleep in the world, and Abraham awakened it. Even before he went to Canaan, he held continual open house near Haran, to try to counteract the evil practices of the time. Then when he was forced to move, he dug wells and planted trees along his way, leaving blessings for those he would never see. Arriving and settling in Beersheba, he built a garden and grove and put gates on each of the four sides of it as a welcome to strangers from all directions, "so that if a traveler came to Abraham he entered any gate which was in his road, and remained there and ate and drank . . . , for the house of Abraham was always open to the sons of men that passed and repassed, who came daily to eat and drink at the house of Abraham."<sup>27</sup>

In his hospitality, Abram was always careful to direct the honor and praise of his guests toward God as the source of all blessings:

Our father Abraham would bring people into his home, give them food and drink, befriend them, and thus attract them, and then convert them and bring them under the wings of the Presence. . . .

After travelers [whom he made his guests] had eaten and drunk, they stood up to bless him. He said to them: "Was it of mine that you ate? You ate of that which belongs to the [everlasting] God of the world. Thank, praise, and bless Him who spoke and the world came into being." . . .

But if [the traveler refused to thank God], Abraham would say "Pay what you owe me." When the wayfarer asked, "How much do I owe you?" Abraham would reply, "A jug of wine—so much; a pound of meat—so much; a loaf of bread—so much. Who do you suppose is giving you wine in the wilderness? meat

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<sup>27</sup> Hugh W. Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt*, ed. Gary P. Gillum, *The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley* 14 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 2000), 198–199. See also E. Douglas Clark, *The Blessings of Abraham: Becoming a Zion People* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2005), 199–204.



in the wilderness? bread in the wilderness?” The wayfarer, now aware that he must either pay or thank God by saying grace, would say “Blessed be the everlasting God of the world, of whose bounty we have partaken.” This is the meaning of the description of Abraham as one who “bestows free bounty and justice” (see Genesis 32:18–19)—first bounty, then justice.”<sup>28</sup>

Jewish traditions recount that a visiting idol worshipper refused to honor the Lord for the bread he had received. Abram “grew enraged at the man and rose and drove him away into the desert.” Seeing this, God rebuked him, saying, “Consider, one hundred and ninety-eight years, all the time that man has lived, I have borne with him and did not destroy him from the face of the earth. Instead I gave him bread to eat and I clothed him and I did not have him lack for anything. . . . How did you come to . . . drive him out without permitting him to lodge in your tent even a single night?” At that, Abraham “swiftly brought [the man] back to his tent . . . and sent him away in peace the next morning.”<sup>29</sup>

Abram, always eager to bless others with what God had given him in a spirit of consecration, showed himself a wise steward, worthy to receive more blessings. “It is a remarkable reality that God’s greatest land grant to Abraham [Genesis 13:14–17] came as a reward for Abraham’s magnanimity with the land God had already given him.”<sup>30</sup> Abram’s response to God’s new gift was to build another altar in Mamre out of gratitude (verse 18).

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from “Abraham’s Hebron: Then and Now Part 4: Ancient Hebron - Jeffrey M. Bradshaw,” video, 23:25, February 18, 2018, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=E-8oARSCdhs>; “Abraham’s Hebron: Then and Now part 5: Mamre - Jeffrey M. Bradshaw,” video, 21:22, February 20, 2018, <https://youtube.com/watch?v=MNvHd5MzIoc&t=7s>; and Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 99–101.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 13:14–18

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<sup>28</sup> Hayim Nahman Bialik and Yehoshua Hana Ravnitzky, eds., *The Book of Legends (Sefer Ha-Aggadah): Legends from the Talmud and Midrash*, trans. William G. Braude (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1992), 33–34, chapter 3, verses 15, 17–18. See Genesis 12:5.

<sup>29</sup> Micha Joseph bin Gorion (Berdichevsky) and Emanuel bin Gorion, eds., *Mimekor Yisrael: Classical Jewish Folktales*, 3 vols., trans. I. M. Lask (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1976), 23, 1:63–64.

<sup>30</sup> Clark, *Blessings of Abraham*, 128.

## **Genesis 14:1–16. Lot Is Captured in Battle and Rescued by Abram**

Nahum Sarna gave this summary of the story of Lot being captured and its lessons:

Once again the divine promises to Abram seem to be on the verge of miscarrying, this time by the actions of the patriarch himself, who risks his life in battle. A confederacy of four eastern monarchs undertakes a punitive expedition in order to suppress a revolt of vassals in the west. In the course of the action Lot, by virtue of his association with Sodom, is taken captive and his possessions are plundered. . . .

Lot has greedily picked the best part of the country, but now his choice turns out to have been disastrous, and his very life depends on the selflessness and loyalty of the uncle he has alienated. . . .

What are the purposes of Scripture in featuring this story? Undoubtedly, its primary motive is to bring into prominence new facets of Abram's character. The one who displayed fear and evasiveness in Egypt now shows himself to be decisive and courageous in the promised land. The man of peace knows how to exhibit skill and heroism in battle. He who experienced his nephew's estrangement unhesitatingly demonstrates self-sacrificing loyalty to him in his hour of need. Abram is a military hero, but he is not glorified as such. He does not initiate the war—others do—and he is drawn into it, acquitting himself magnificently against enormous odds. Notwithstanding the wealth of detail recorded in the chapter, there is little about the war itself—nothing about the size of the opposing foreign armies, the weapons deployed, the mode of transportation, the number of casualties, or the content of the booty—none of the items that are the staple ingredients of ancient Near Eastern war chronicles. Instead, the story serves to emphasize the virtues of loyalty to family, the redeeming of captives, the disdain of material reward, and faith in the power of the few against the many.<sup>31</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 101–109.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 14:1–16

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<sup>31</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 101–103.

**Genesis 14:17–24. Melchizedek Confers Priesthood and Kingship on Abram**  
**14:17. “And the king of Sodom went out to meet him.”** As described by Douglas Clark, the king of Sodom

came forward and asked for the return of his subjects that Abraham had rescued, while recognizing Abraham’s right to the war booty. ‘Give me the people,’ said the king, ‘you take the property.’ In fact, by rights of war, Abraham now owned not only the goods but also the people, and he could have kept them as slaves, sold them, or demanded a ransom from the king of Sodom. ‘He might have done so,’ notes one writer. ‘Many would have done so.’ But Abraham had made a prior covenant with the Lord not to enrich himself in the rescue operation. ‘The king of Sodom knew nothing of Abraham’s covenant with the Lord,’ observed President Kimball. ‘Abraham could have made himself rich by receiving of the king’s [offer]. But he had made an oath which he would not violate. Oh, that all of God’s children could be so true!’<sup>32</sup>

**14:18. “Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine.”** If we can accept the account of Noah’s drinking wine in Genesis 9 in a ritual context (as is portrayed in the *Genesis Apocryphon*), we might see a parallel between what seems to be a prelude to the divine, crowning event in Noah’s life and this singular event in the life of Abram. As part of the ordinances performed by Melchizedek for Abram, Abram was made a king and a priest after Melchizedek’s holy order, having received what is called elsewhere called the “fulness of the priesthood.”<sup>33</sup> In a talk at the October 2021 general conference, President Russell M. Nelson, prior to mentioning that the “fulness of the priesthood was restored in the Nauvoo temple,” said that “in the house of the Lord, we can make the same covenants with God that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob made. And we can receive the same blessings!”<sup>34</sup>

In the Genesis 14:17–24 account, readers are no doubt meant to contrast the royal status and behavior of the king of Sodom to that of the king of Salem, as well as to take note of the differing response of Abram, who deferentially paid tithes to Melchizedek. “There may be a word play between *he-cesharti* (root *c-sh-r*), ‘made rich,’ and *macaser* (root *cs-r*), ‘tithe’ (v. 20).”<sup>35</sup>

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32 E. Douglas Clark, *The Blessings of Abraham: Becoming a Zion People* (American Fork, UT: Covenant Communications, 2005), 135.

33 Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 14:25–40; Doctrine and Covenants 124:28; Matthew J. Grow, Ronald K. Esplin, Mark Ashhurst-McGee, Gerrit Dirkmaat, and Jeffrey D. Mahas, eds., *Council of Fifty, Minutes, March 1844–January 1846*, first volume of the Administrative Records series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin, Matthew J. Grow, and Matthew C. Godfrey (Salt Lake City, UT: Church Historian’s Press, 2016), xxxvi–xxxix; Andrew H. Hedges, Alex D. Smith, and Brent M. Rogers, eds., *Journals, Volume 3: May 1843–June 1844*, vol. 3 of the Journals series of *The Joseph Smith Papers*, ed. Ronald K. Esplin and Matthew J. Grow (Salt Lake City, UT: Church Historian’s Press, 2015), xxi. Compare Genesis 14:17–24. See Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, *Temple Themes in the Oath and Covenant of the Priesthood*, rev. ed. (Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2014), 53–58.

34 Russell M. Nelson, “The Temple and Your Spiritual Foundation,” October 2021 general conference, online at churchofjesuschrist.org.

35 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah

The Joseph Smith Translation adds much to the little we know about Melchizedek from scripture and the more abundant accounts in Jewish tradition. In the translation, we read:

And Melchizedek lifted up his voice and blessed Abram.

Now Melchizedek was a man of faith, who wrought righteousness; and when a child he feared God, and stopped the mouths of lions, and quenched the violence of fire.

And thus, having been approved of God, he was ordained an high priest after the order of the covenant which God made with Enoch.

It being after the order of the son of God; which order came, not by man, nor the will of man; neither by father nor mother; neither by beginning of days nor end of years; but of God;

And it was delivered unto men by the calling of his own voice, according to his own will, unto as many as believed on his name.

For God having sworn unto Enoch and unto his seed with an oath by himself; that every one being ordained after this order and calling should have power, by faith, to break mountains, to divide the seas, to dry up waters, to turn them out of their course;

To put at defiance the armies of nations, to divide the earth, to break every band, to stand in the presence of God; to do all things according to his will, according to his command, subdue principalities and powers; and this by the will of the Son of God which was from before the foundation of the world.

And men having this faith, coming up unto this order of God, were translated and taken up into heaven.

And now, Melchizedek was a priest of this order; therefore he obtained peace in Salem, and was called the Prince of peace.

And his people wrought righteousness, and obtained heaven, and sought for the city of Enoch which God had before taken, separating it from the earth, having reserved it unto the latter days, or the end of the world;

And hath said, and sworn with an oath, that the heavens and the earth should come together; and the sons of God should be tried so as by fire.

And this Melchizedek, having thus established righteousness, was called the king of heaven by his people, or, in other words, the King of peace.

And he lifted up his voice, and he blessed Abram, being the high priest, and the keeper of the storehouse of God;

Him whom God had appointed to receive tithes for the poor.

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Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 111.

Wherefore, Abram paid unto him tithes of all that he had, of all the riches which he possessed, which God had given him more than that which he had need.

And it came to pass, that God blessed Abram, and gave unto him riches, and honor, and lands for an everlasting possession; according to the covenant which he had made, and according to the blessing wherewith Melchizedek had blessed him. (Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 14:25–40)

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 109–111.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 14:17–24

## **Genesis 15:1–21. “The Covenant Between the Pieces”**

**15:1. “the word of the Lord came unto Abram in a vision.”** According to Jewish midrash, “the highest of [the ten forms of] prophetic experiences is vision, and then speech. Great then, is the power of Abraham that his experience included both of these high levels of prophecy.”<sup>36</sup>

**15:1. “Fear not, Abram. I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward.”** The outcome of the battle against long odds in chapter 14 provided evidence of God’s power as a shield and protection to Abram against his enemies. As to a reward, Abram, having refused the riches of the king of Sodom, had a much greater and eternal reward given to him through Melchizedek. But after so many years had passed, what about God’s promised reward of posterity? The question drew out a fervent prayer from Abram.

**15:2. “O Lord God.”** Nahum Sarna noted that the rare divine title “O Lord God” is repeated twice in this chapter (verses 2, 8), “in a context of complaint, prayer, and request.”<sup>37</sup> Remember that Abram had just received the highest ordinances of the priesthood from Melchizedek and, like modern temple goers, would have been instructed about the form of sacred prayers offered in the most sacred of settings.

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<sup>36</sup> Meir Zlotowitz, *Bereishis/Genesis: A New Translation with a Commentary Anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic Sources*, 2nd ed., 2 vols (New York, NY: Mesorah Publications, 1986), 1:504.

<sup>37</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 113.

Traditions about the prayer of Abram align well with those about the prayer of Adam.<sup>38</sup> Just as the opening words of Abram’s prayer represent “the first time [he] speaks to God,”<sup>39</sup> so also the “first word Adam spoke” was “a word of supplication.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, it is reported elsewhere in Jewish tradition that Abram, having “rebuilt the altar of Adam” at the command of an angel,<sup>41</sup> repeatedly raised his voice to God, saying: “El, El, El, El, Iaoel . . . Accept my prayer.”<sup>42</sup> After “many days” (Moses 5:6), Adam’s urgent and persistent request for additional knowledge from the Lord was finally answered with instruction by an angel. This angel is said to have borne a book that “teaches [those who are wise and God-fearing] how to call upon the angels and make them appear before men, and answer all their questions.”<sup>43</sup> Likewise, the Prophet Joseph Smith was anxious to teach the Saints the manner by which they could “pray and have [their] prayers answered.”<sup>44</sup>

**15:5. “And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness.”** In verses 4–5 and 7, Abram’s prayers were answered with the promise of an innumerable posterity who would eventually possess the land forever. However, modern revelation makes it clear that Abram saw much more than that, including the vision of the Son of Man referred to by the Savior in John 8:56: “Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.” In the Joseph Smith Translation, we read this addition:

For the day cometh, that the Son of Man shall live; but how can he live if he be not dead? He must first be quickened.

And it came to pass, that Abram looked forth and saw the days of the Son of Man, and was glad, and his soul found rest, and he believed in the Lord; and the Lord counted it unto him for righteousness. (Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 15:11–12)

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38 “May the words of my mouth be acceptable” (Louis Ginzberg, ed., *The Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols., trans. Henrietta Szold and Paul Radin [Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998], 1:91); compare Psalm 54:2: “Hear my prayer, O God; give ear to the words of my mouth.”

39 Sarna, *Genesis*, 112.

40 William Clayton, *Intimate Chronicle: The Journals of William Clayton* (Salt Lake City, UT: Signature Books, 1995), 134, June 15, 1844.

41 Hugh W. Nibley, “The Early Christian Prayer Circle,” in *Mormonism and Early Christianity*, ed. Todd M. Compton and Stephen D. Ricks, The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley 4 (Salt Lake City, UT: Deseret Book, 1987), 57.

42 Ryszard Rubinkiewicz, “Apocalypse of Abraham,” in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, ed. James H. Charlesworth, 2 vols. (New York, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 697, Apocalypse of Abraham 17:13. Note that Yahweh-El = Jehovah (Nibley, “Early Christian Prayer Circle,” 57).

43 Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 1:92; compare Steve Savedow, ed., *Sepher Rezial Hemelach: The Book of the Angel Rezial* (Boston, MA: WeiserBooks, 2000), 6.

44 “Recollections of the Prophet Joseph Smith,” *Juvenile Instructor* 27, no. 11 (June 1, 1892): 345, cited in Truman G. Madsen, *Joseph Smith the Prophet* (Salt Lake City, UT: Bookcraft, 1989), 99.

The idea that Abram saw much more in this vision than what is reported in Genesis is not only part of Christian belief but was also embraced by later Jewish readers who “came to view this incident as a fully prophetic apocalypse in which Abraham was afforded a view of all of human history, of heaven and hell, and other things normally hidden from the sight of mere mortals,”<sup>45</sup> including the judgments of God’s “chosen one”<sup>46</sup> in the last days.

Perhaps the most impressive of Jewish works purporting to describe what Abram saw in his heavenly vision within Genesis 15 is the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the Hebrew original probably dating to the first century.<sup>47</sup> Although much chaff is mixed with the wheat (as in many similar works), the *Apocalypse of Abraham* has a distinct advantage when it comes to being able to test its authenticity—namely, an impressive series of thematic resemblances between itself, the book of Abraham, and the book of Moses.<sup>48</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 101–118.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 15:1–21

## **Genesis 16:1–16. The Abrahamic Test of Hagar**

In papers by Latter-day Saint scholars Andrew C. Smith and Jonathon M. Riley,<sup>49</sup> we learn much about the neglected character and role of Hagar in biblical, Islamic, and Latter-day Saint tradition. Smith noted that unfortunately, Hagar often has been portrayed in a secondary role “as one of the characters defined

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45 James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 299. Compare Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, 2 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 1:767–768; Francis J. Moloney, *The Gospel of John* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 284.

46 Rubinkiewicz, “Apocalypse of Abraham,” 704–705, *Apocalypse of Abraham* 31:1–3.

47 For a discussion of how the work interacts with Genesis 15 and 22 and other books of the Bible, see Ryszard Rubinkiewicz, *L’Apocalypse d’Abraham en vieux slave: Introduction, texte critique, traduction et commentaire* (Lublin, Poland: Société des Lettres et des Sciences de l’Université Catholique de Lublin, 1987), 84–93.

48 Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David J. Larsen, and Stephen T. Whitlock, “Moses 1 and the Apocalypse of Abraham: Twin Sons of Different Mothers?,” in *Tracing Ancient Threads in the Book of Moses: Inspired Origins, Temple Contexts, and Literary Qualities*, ed. Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, David R. Seely, John W. Welch, and Scott Gordon (Orem, UT: Interpreter Foundation; Springville, UT: Book of Mormon Central; Redding, CA: FAIR; Salt Lake City, UT: Eborn Books, 2021), 789–922.

49 Andrew C. Smith, “Hagar in LDS Scripture and Thought,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 8 (2014): 87–137; Jonathon M. Riley, “Two Views of the Foreign Woman: Reading the Hagar Narratives and 1 Kings 19” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, San Diego, CA, November 24, 2019).

largely by their positions vis-à-vis the ‘main characters’ of the narrative.”<sup>50</sup> However, in scholarly circles, “she is steadily being granted a role more equal to that of Sarah as a covenant wife of Abraham, albeit with a different ‘calling’ or role.”<sup>51</sup>

Indeed, Smith noted that “in some later Jewish traditions, Hagar is said to have . . . fully converted to the covenant religion of Abraham, and taken a new name, Keturah (which most consider to be Abraham’s third wife), and is reunited with Abraham after Sarah’s death.”<sup>52</sup>

With respect to the theme of Abrahamic tests in the lives of Abram’s immediate family, there is good reason to believe that Hagar’s experience is no less a trial than the others. Bible scholar Nahum Sarna observed that the story of Isaac’s near sacrifice in Genesis 22 “is organically connected with the preceding chapter [about Hagar and Ishmael]. Abraham has lost [the company of] one son [Ishmael] and now seems about to lose the other [Isaac]. In both narratives, the child is saved by divine intervention at the critical moment, the only two biblical instances of an angel calling from heaven to human beings. In both cases there is a fortuitous discovery: a well of water in the earlier story, a ram in the thicket here.”<sup>53</sup>

Going further, Riley showed how Hagar’s narrative also deeply resonates with parallel stories of other prophets. He found significant patterns of allusions to Hagar’s story in the Exodus narrative as well as in the story of Elijah.<sup>54</sup> These all go to show that Paul’s allegory in Galatians 4:22–31 (which contrasts Hagar, the “bondmaid,” and Sarah, the “freewoman,” to describe the difference between Judaism and Christianity) should be taken as useful rhetorical fodder, not as a literal characterization of Hagar herself.<sup>55</sup> Rather, Hagar, in company with the prophets Abraham, Moses, and Elijah, can be seen as an exemplar sharing a common model of faithfulness and eventual reward after trial.

This is not all, however. Smith argued that in the casting out and redemption of Hagar, “the author of the Hagar passages wanted to draw attention back to the earlier story of Adam and Eve in the Garden. . . . It is plain that the author of the story wanted Hagar to be seen as a parallel to the great mother figure” Eve—thus becoming a model for following the road of return to the presence of God for each of Eve’s daughters and sons.<sup>56</sup>

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50 Smith, “Hagar in LDS Scripture and Thought,” 90.

51 Smith, “Hagar in LDS Scripture and Thought,” 136.

52 Smith, “Hagar in LDS Scripture and Thought,” 88.

53 Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 150. See also the list of parallels in Riley, “Two Views of the Foreign Woman,” 1.

54 Riley, “Two Views of the Foreign Woman,” 1–3, 8, 12–17.

55 See the analysis in Smith, “Hagar in LDS Scripture and Thought,” 100–103.

56 Smith, “Hagar in LDS Scripture and Thought,” 130.



## **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 118–122.

## **Related verses**

Genesis 16:1–16

## **Genesis 17:1–27. The Covenant of Circumcision and New Names**

The Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible connects the death of the righteous Abel to an anomalous ordinance of sprinkling blood coupled with “washing” or “baptism” for little children that is denounced by the Lord in the Joseph Smith Translation of Genesis 17:3–7:

And it came to pass, that Abram fell on his face, and called upon the name of the Lord.

And God talked to him, saying, My people have gone astray from my precepts, and have not kept mine ordinances, which I gave unto their fathers;

And they have not observed mine anointing, and the burial, or baptism wherewith I commanded them;

But have turned from the commandment, and taken unto themselves the washing or baptism of children, and the blood of sprinkling;

And have said that the blood of the righteous Abel was shed for sins; and have not known wherein they are accountable before me.<sup>57</sup>

To counteract this practice, the Lord established the covenant of circumcision for eight-day-old boys (Genesis 17:12), “that thou mayest know for ever that children are not accountable before me till [they are] eight years old” (Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 17:11). Doctrine and Covenants 68:25–28, received later in the same year that Genesis 17 was translated by Joseph Smith, also emphasizes that children are not accountable until eight years old.

While these verses may seem like a strange addition to the story of Abram, the theme is actually very old. For example, in remarkable resonance with Joseph Smith’s translation, Abel is associated with the

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<sup>57</sup> Scott H. Faulring, Kent P. Jackson, and Robert J. Matthews, eds., *Joseph Smith’s New Translation of the Bible: Original Manuscripts* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2004), 131–132. God’s anointing would presumably have to do with the reception of the Holy Ghost. Besides references to “oil of anointing,” the noun *anointing* specifically describes a ritual in Exodus 29:29 and 40:15. Then, the crossing out of the words “or baptism” is perhaps intended to disqualify the practice as being baptism in the legitimate sense. The words may also foreclose the possibility that a practice incorporating full immersion (“burial”) was being described. Compare Exodus 29:16–21; Leviticus 1:5–11; 3:2, 8, 13; 4:6, 17; 5:9; 7:2; 14:7, 51; 16:14, 15, 19; 17:6; Numbers 18:17; 19:4; 2 Kings 16:15; Isaiah 52:15; Ezekiel 43:18; Hebrews 9:13; 11:28; 12:24; 1 Peter 1:2; 3 Nephi 20:45.

washing rituals of immersion among the Mandaeans, a religious group with roots that may go back two thousand years.<sup>58</sup> In Mandaean scripture, Abel (often called *Hibil Ziwa*, or Abel Splendor), who is often identified with the roles of redeemer and savior, was said to have performed the baptism of Adam, who prefigures every later candidate for these repeated rituals.<sup>59</sup>

Also of relevance is Hebrews 12:24, in which the author, who “may have been familiar with some extra-biblical Enochic and Noachic traditions,”<sup>60</sup> speaks of the saints’ coming “to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.” With reference to this scripture, Craig Koester cited the possibility that the author of Hebrews may be suggesting that, consistent with the idea in *4 Maccabees* that martyrs’ blood atoned for sins,<sup>61</sup> “Abel’s blood brought a limited atonement, while Jesus’ blood brought complete Atonement.”<sup>62</sup>

### **Source**

Book of Genesis Minute by Jeffrey M. Bradshaw, adapted from Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation Commentary*, The JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 123–128.

### **Related verses**

Genesis 17:1–27

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58 E. S. Drower, *The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2002), 100–123.

59 E. S. Drower, ed., *The Canonical Prayerbook of the Mandaeans* (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 1959), 30.

60 Andrei A. Orlov, “The Heir of Righteousness and the King of Righteousness: The Priestly Noachic Polemics in 2 Enoch and the Epistle to the Hebrews,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 58, no. 1 (2007): 58.

61 “Fourth Book of Maccabees,” in *The Lost Books of the Bible and the Forgotten Books of Eden*, ed. Rutherford H. Platt, vol. 2 (Berkeley, CA: Apocryphile Press, 2005), 192, 195, 4 Maccabees 6:28–29, 7:20–21.

62 Craig R. Koester, *Hebrews: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, *The Anchor Bible* 36 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 546n12:24a.