

Promises & Covenants

Genesis 12:1-3 (NIV): The LORD [i.e., YHWH] . . . said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and **GO TO THE LAND I WILL SHOW YOU**.

I will make you into **a great nation** / and I will **bless you**;

I will make **your name great**, / and you will be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, / and whoever curses you I will curse;
and **all peoples on earth** / **will be blessed through you**.

ACCORDING TO J (probably the earliest tradition about YHWH’s covenant with Abra[ha]m; the written version that has come down to us derives from the tenth century B.C.E.):

In **Chapter 15**, the word of YHWH comes to Abram in a vision, telling him not to fear and identifying himself as lord and shield (1). Abram questions Lord YHWH: “What can you give me since I remain childless . . . ? A servant in my household will be my heir” (2-3). YHWH tells him that a son from his own body will be his heir and **promises him a multitude of descendants**: “Look up at the heavens and count the stars . . . So shall your off-spring be” (5).

Abram believes YHWH’s **promise of descendants** and is given credit for doing so (6). But when he is then given a **promise of land** (7), he expresses some doubt: “How can I know that I will gain **possession** of [this land]?” (8) YHWH tells him to prepare a **sacrifice**--a heifer, a goat, and a ram, all cut in half, and a dove and a young pigeon (9). As the sun sets, Abram falls into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness comes over him (12). [According to a later tradition, inserted at this point, YHVH foretells four hundred years of slavery in Egypt and eventual rescue (13-16).] When darkness has fallen, “a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appear[s] and passe[s] between the pieces. On that day the LORD ma[kes] a **covenant** with Abram and sa[ys], ‘**To your descendants I give this land**, from the river [or wadi] of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates” (17-18). [The two rivers marked the actual western and eastern boundaries of the Israelite kingdom during David’s reign.]

ACCORDING TO P (a tradition that most scholars date--variously--between the eighth and fifth centuries B.C.E., at least two centuries later than J, though some of the details are ancient):

In **Chapter 17**, after the birth of Ishmael (son of Hagar, Sarai’s maid), YHVH (!) appears to Abram when he is ninety-nine years old, identifying himself as God Almighty [*El Shaddai*] and saying: walk before me and be blameless. I will make [NRSV; NIV translates *nathan* as “confirm”] my **covenant** between me and you and will **greatly increase your numbers**” (1-2).

ELoHiM renames Abram: “your name will be Abraham . . . **father of many nations**” (5) and establishes “an **everlasting covenant** between me and you and your descendants (7). ELoHiM promises Abraham “the whole land of Canaan . . . as an **everlasting possession** (8), but he also requires him to keep the covenant by **circumcising** “every male among you” (10) saying: “My **covenant** in your flesh is to be an **everlasting covenant**. Any **uncircumcised** male . . . will be cut off [!] from his people; he has broken my **covenant**” (13-14).

ELoHiM renames Sarai as Sarah, promises that she will bear Abraham a son, and responds to his incredulous laughter by insisting that Isaac (yet to be born) rather than Ishmael (who is now thirteen years old and soon to be **circumcised**) will be Abraham’s heir. [In J’s version of this annunciation scene (18:10-15), Sarah laughs, but God has the last laugh: Yitzhak--Laughter.]

ACCORDING TO E (with infusions of J at vv. 11-12, 13-18: In its written form, the *Akedah* [The *Binding of Isaac*] derives from the ninth century B.C.E.; the combined [JE] version probably dates from the eighth century. But the story itself, in its original, oral form, is very possibly the oldest of the three covenant narratives.):

In **Chapter 22**, “sometime later,” ELoHiM tests Abraham (1) by telling him to **GO TO THE LAND . . . I WILL SHOW YOU** (NRSV) and **sacrifice** his son, “your only son, Isaac, whom you love . . . as a burnt offering” (2). [What happened to Ishmael?] Without so much as a word of question or protest, Abraham sets out early the next morning, with two servants, Isaac, and a supply of wood (3). On the third day, in the Land of Moriah (Vision), telling the two servants to wait for them, Abraham, carrying the fire and the knife, and Isaac, carrying the wood, climb to a high place (4-5).

Isaac notices that something is missing: “The fire and the wood are here, . . . but where is the lamb for the **burnt offering**?” Abraham answer[s], ‘God will himself provide the lamb for the **burnt offering**, my son’” (7-8). Abraham builds an altar, binds Isaac, and lays him on top of the wood (9). “Then he reache[s] out his hand and t[akes] the knife to slay his son” (10). But an angel of YHVH calls out to him from heaven: “Do not lay a hand on the boy. . . . Now I know that you fear ELoHiM, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son” (12).

Abraham finds a ram caught in a thicket and “sacrifice[s] it as a **burnt offering** instead of his son” (13) and calls the place “YHVH Will Provide” (14). The angel of YHVH calls a second time: “I swear by myself, declares YHVH, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely **bless you** and make your **descendants** as **numerous** as the stars in the sky [cf. 15:5] and as the sand on the seashore. Your descendants will take **possession** of the cities of their enemies, and through your offspring **all nations on earth will be blessed** [cf. 12:3], because you have obeyed me” (16-18).

Then Abraham returned to his servants. What happened to Isaac?

CUTTING COVENANTS AND FORESKINS

YAHWIST COVENANT (10th century)

PROMISES

Many **Descendants**
Territorial **Possessions**
All this land

Given **UNCONDITIONALLY**

BLESSED
&**Blessing all NATIONS**

SACRIFICE

ELOHIST [COVENANT] (9th century)

PROMISES

Many **Descendants**
Territorial **Possessions**
Enemy Cities

Given **CONSEQUENTIALLY**

BLESSED
&**Blessing all NATIONS**

SACRIFICE

PRIESTLY COVENANT (8th century)

PROMISES

Many **Descendants**
Territorial **Possessions**
Canaan

Given **CONDITIONALLY**

Producing
NATIONS &Kings

CIRCUMCISION