

GENESIS
Week 16, chapters 15 and 16

READ GENESIS CHAPTER 15:12 to end

Let's look at verses 15 and 16 a little closer. As I have taught you on a few occasions, there was no concept of "dying and going to heaven" in Abraham's era; in fact, that concept is nowhere to be found in all the O.T. Rather, in general, life ended at the grave, the typical Hebrew word being Sheol. What existed after bodily death is very hazy in the O.T., and the number of references to death, and the varied descriptions of what death amounted to makes it clear that, at least for the Hebrews, they had NO clear doctrine of an afterlife. Particularly in the era of the Patriarchs, and therefore the era of the Torah, perhaps the most common term used is "going to your fathers in peace", or some variation of that theme. What, exactly, did that mean? It's not explained, and I can find no ancient source that gives me any confidence that the people of that day knew what it meant beyond a VERY general sense, either. It seems to me that "going to your fathers in peace" was but a gentler and less onerous way of talking about death. Today, we tend to speak of someone beloved who has died as having "passed", or "passed away". I underline BELOVED.....because when we're speaking of a wicked person, we tend not to use the words "passed or passed away". I guarantee you, when that day comes that Saddam Hussein is likely executed, it won't be reported that he "passed away". Yet, in the most literal sense of those words, passed or passing, there is not much we can take as to exactly what "passing" entails.

In general, living to a ripe old age and then going to meet your fathers in peace was the best anyone hoped for in the Bible era. It simply indicated that they had lived out a full life span, and that they died more or less naturally of old age. This, as opposed to being cut-off, meaning they died early, or were murdered, or executed for a crime, or it was determined that your death was a judgment from the Lord for a transgression

Did they actually expect to meet their ancestors in some form or another when they died? I think in a vague way, perhaps. It was a hope. It was about the best outcome one could expect from the always-unwelcome end of life. So, in our story, Abraham was essentially promised that he would live out a very full lifespan, and that his death would be of old age, and that he would die in peace with God, not from judgment or wrath or violence at the hands of another.

We're going to come back in a few minutes to some other important fundamentals concerning generations and the identity of "the Amorites", but I'd rather finish the covenant making process to maintain some continuity.

Next, the most important part of this covenant ceremony takes place: in V17, the makers of the covenant pass, as is custom, between the separated animal pieces. But, wait; what actually passes between the animal pieces is a smoking fire pot and flaming torch. Smoke and fire usually represents the presence of God in the Bible. God walked between the pieces signifying His agreement and word to keep the terms of the covenant. Notice:

Abraham did NOT walk between the pieces. Why? Because this was a unilateral covenant; this was not a two-way deal. This was entirely on God. God made promises and had obligations..... Abraham did NOT! Everything promised from this covenant was up to God to make happen.

In V18-20, as Yahweh is amidst the separated piles of animal flesh, God recites the terms of the covenant, and it includes the calling out of the boundaries of the land He is giving to Abraham and to his descendants for all time. While the exact location of these boundaries can be disputed to a small degree, the fact is that they extend well beyond what Israel, Abraham's descendants, have ever occupied to this day. Israel was at its peak territorial size during the time of Kings David and Solomon, and their territory was significantly larger than Israel is today; but still it didn't ever reach the proportions enumerated in this passage. Sometime, in the near future, Israel will be even larger than it ever has been.

Let me be very clear; for those who want to say that either the Bible doesn't SAY just what land mass constitutes "the promised land", or that this covenant has ended, just read this covenant. It is quite literal; to the south, the boundary is the "river of Egypt". This is NOT the Nile. Rather it is identified with the Wadi el-'Arish, down in the Sinai. After identifying the southern border, the northern border is said to be "the great river". The great river has long been an epithet for the Euphrates River that flows to this day from modern day Syria into Iraq. The eastern and western boundaries are a little less explicit, as it refers to the location by means of the areas certain tribes occupy. However, the western boundary is the Mediterranean Sea, because that is the end of the land mass of Canaan, and the location of these tribes is fairly well attested to as including land to the east of the Jordan River, on into the current Kingdom of Jordan, and probably a minor part of westernmost Saudi Arabia.

Now, before we move to chapter 16, we need to face the difficulties associated with the definition of the term "generation" and with the length of time Israel would be in Egypt.

First, the Hebrew word for generation is *dor*. And, despite what some might think, that term is not all that concrete. For although it certainly CAN mean how we think of a generation....meaning the span of time between the birth of children and the birth of their parents.....it can also refer to a complete life span. It can even refer to all people living during a certain event. Later in Numbers, the word *dor* will be used to refer to all those who left Egypt on the Exodus. We also find that the traditional life span of people varies a great deal. So, the arguments as to "how long" a biblical generation is, is not likely to ever be answered, because it is a general and not a specific term. So, as to the answer of what a "generation" means in the Bible, we must say that it means different things at different times and it carries a very fluid and indeterminate meaning.

The next item I want to approach is the length of time Israel will spend in Egypt. Honest scholarship reveals that we cannot easily say 4 centuries and just leave it at that. Here, in Genesis 15, the time is referred to as 4 generations....which leads some to say that in Abraham's day, a generation was a length of time equaling about 100 years. Yet, Exodus

12:40 says the time in Egypt was 430 years. Further, we know that there was a time, before the death of Joseph, that Israel was an honored guest of Egypt, and not under subjugation. But, there is no solid information on the time that elapsed between the death of Joseph and the beginning of Israel's oppression.

Generally speaking, rabbinical tradition is that the 400-year period begins with the birth of Isaac, and that the 430-year figure begins with the day this covenant with Abraham was made official. We are told in the Bible that 190 years passed from the birth of Isaac until Jacob took his small family down to Egypt. So, if the Rabbis are right, then Israel was not in Egypt 400 years, but only 210 ($190 + 210 = 400$). To explain this problem they say that being in a foreign land INCLUDED some of the time spent in Canaan BEFORE moving to Egypt. And, if we look in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the O.T.), or the Samaritan version of the Torah, we'll find that those manuscripts specifically state that the period of 430 years included the time in Canaan.

Obviously we have a problem with ascertaining with certainty the actual amount of time Israel spent in Egypt; but remember there is NO disagreement that they indeed did go to Egypt, were there a VERY long time, and were subjugated and oppressed.

This is why I talked last week about redaction.....editing. The major time problems occur when the Torah is translated into foreign languages, which is itself a redaction. And, yet, we also know that until the invention of the printing press in the 1400's AD, all copying of books, and therefore Bibles, was done by hand. So, without doubt, some type of numerical error was introduced either through innocent mistake, or...more likely in my opinion....some misguided soul that attempted to reconcile what seemed to him to be chronological conflicts. And, once that happens, it's hard to recover the original until an earlier version is found.

I will tell you in advance that because of little other alternative, I go with the teaching that Israel was 400 years in Egypt until something can prove it incorrect.

Finally, what does that statement at the end of verse 16 mean? The one that says "and they shall return here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete". First, the Amorites became synonymous with the term Canaanites. The Amorite cultural became the dominant culture in the land of Canaan, and so the general term for those folks living in Canaan became, for a time, Amorites.

The part about the iniquity of the Amorites not being complete simply means that the timing of Israel coming back to take the land of Canaan has much to do with when the residents of Canaan have finally crossed over some line of evil that only God knows.....their wicked ways had become too much..... and Yahweh was then ready to have them driven out of their land in divine judgment for that wickedness, and displaced by Israel. This is an interesting clue about how Yahweh operates. In some intricate way that is beyond humans to fathom, God uses the acts of the wicked to achieve His purposes, even to the ultimate benefit of His people. Further, this also indicates God's absolute foreknowledge of all things. He KNOWS in advance when this wickedness of

the Amorites will reach some critical mass; and at the same time He knows in advance when His people Israel will be ready to leave Egypt; and He knows in advance when the Pharaohs of Egypt will have oppressed His people too much, so that God will be justified in smiting them. And, then, all these things will converge at some precise moment in history such that the Exodus will occur, and then a little later Joshua will lead Israel to conquer the land of Canaan and make it theirs.

READ Genesis chapter 16 all

We are now at a time that is 10 years after Abraham left his father and brother in Haran of Mesopotamia, and journeyed south to the Promised Land. A lot has happened in that 10 years; Avram and his family were forced to sojourn for a time in Egypt because the land of Canaan began experiencing a famine. While in Egypt, Avram's wife, Sarai, was taken by Pharaoh to be part of his harem, but later she was returned when Pharaoh found out that Sarai was Abraham's wife and NOT only his sister as Abraham and Sarai had implied.

Abraham and his family were kicked out of Egypt, and so they went back up to Canaan, much wealthier, and then had to part company with his nephew, Lot, and Lot's family when the herds and flocks of their animals had grown so large as to be outstripping the pasture land they shared, and it was creating trouble among the herdsmen.

Lot moved to Sodom, down by the Dead Sea. And, some time later, several allied kings came from the north with their armies to put down a tax rebellion in the district where Lot lived. Lot and his family were kidnapped in the process, and, as captives on their way back up north to become permanent slaves to these kings from Mesopotamia, they were rescued by Abraham and 318 men from Abraham's clan.

Upon his triumphant return from freeing Lot, Avram meets the mysterious Melchizedek. Shortly thereafter, Yahweh, using the customary Middle Eastern covenant ceremony, confirms His covenant with Abraham, promising Abraham protection, wealth, land, and an heir....by definition, a son.

But to this point, Abraham's barren wife Sarai was STILL barren; she hadn't produce children. Sarai had her very own servant girl, an Egyptian named Hagar, and Sarai decided to solve the problem of being childless by using Hagar as a surrogate mother. Hebrew tradition is that Hagar was gift from Pharaoh when Abraham had his little excursion in Egypt some years earlier; in fact, she supposedly was a princess from Pharaoh's own household. In a completely usual and normal tradition for the day, Sarai offered Hagar to Abraham as a substitute; that is, Hagar would have Abraham's child, but technically as per the tradition of the era, the child would actually belong to Abraham and Sarai.

Now, notice that the scripture does NOT say that Abraham married Hagar; it says Sarai gave her to him AS, or LIKE, a wife. In other words, she was a substitute, a concubine. She was a baby-making machine. But, there is no marriage involved here, which is not only the ancient Hebrew view, it makes sense within the context of the verses, whereas some translations labeling her as Abraham's wife do not. She REMAINED a handmaiden to Sarai, as Abraham affirms in V6, and in V9 the Angel of the Lord tells her to go back and submit to her mistress, Sarai. If Hagar was a true wife, she would no longer have been under Sarai, she would have become an equal; further, she wouldn't belong to Sarai any longer, she would belong to Abraham.

While the Bible doesn't give much detail about how all this concubine/wife/substitute child bearer stuff worked, it is clear from records of other Middle Eastern cultures of Abraham's time, that what we read in this story follows those laws and traditions. The Law Codes of Ur-Nammu that date to 2100 BC deal with this issue quite specifically, as does the Law of Hammurabi from around 1800 BC. And, these laws make it clear that the barren wife who takes this serious step of making her servant a concubine for her husband, puts the wife....Sarai in this case.....in a lower social position in the eyes of the people. Legally nothing changes.....the concubine does NOT gain extra rights, nor does she legally achieve equality with, or supplant the authority of, the barren wife. And, just as we see in this story, it must have happened regularly that this tradition of using a servant as a surrogate mother created all kinds of problems. Listen to this law directly from the law code of Ur-Nammu: **“.....if the servant, comparing herself to her mistress, speaks insolently to her.....”** Doesn't that sound exactly like what is happening here with Sarai and Hagar? Let me also point out that it was also customary that the handmaiden of a wife BELONGED solely to the wife; she was the wife's property, not the husband's. The husband did not OWN the handmaiden servant, and then just allow the wife to use her. This is important to understand our story. Because when the wife, Sarai, said, “I want this servant girl oughta-here”, that was that. She didn't need her husband's approval, per se.

It was the now pregnant Hagar's attempt to behave as an equal that prompted Sarai to literally drive Hagar awaysomething perfectly within Sarai's legal and social jurisdiction to decide. So, in verse 6 when Sarai goes to Abraham, angry as a hornet, and tells him she is NOT happy with this situation, Abraham replies..... “your maid is in your hands, deal with her as you think right.” Sarai didn't go to Abraham seeking permission, nor did he at that moment did Avram give Hagar to Sarai; Sarai just wanted to gripe; she was informing Abraham what she was about to do. It was her right and personal privilege to send Hagar away.....with or without Avram's OK.

And drive Hagar away she did, until the Angel of the Lord found Hagar and told her to return UNDER SARAI's authority. Verses 11 and 12 say that Hagar was told she'd have a boy child, and that his child would produce an enormous number of descendants. And, Ishmael, meaning, “God pays attention”, or “God has given heed”, was to be the child's name.

Then, God pronounces what the child's destiny shall be. Of course, this is referring not only to the child, but also to the child's descendants. And, this destiny is that Ishmael is going to be a wild donkey of a man, going against everyone, and that he will live in the presence of his kinsmen. While Ishmael is the patriarch of several races and lines, primarily he is remembered for creating the Arabs. And, notice where the land of the Arabs, Arabia, eventually came to be: EAST of Israel.

It's important to remember today, in our time, that Abraham **is** the **true** father of both the Arabs and the Israelites; or, as I have begun to enjoy calling them, the Ishmaelites and the Israelites. And, that both the Arab peoples AND the Israelites are from the line of Shem, meaning they are Semites. But, even so, another of God's divisions is going to take place, and we are going to see that occur in the next Chapter. Let us also remember, that in our time, what the Evening TV News Anchors call Arabs rarely actually are. Most of these supposed Arabs are actually Persians, Egyptians, and others from the line of Ham..... totally different from TRUE Arabs who are from the line of Shem. What the news tends to do is identify every Muslim (which is a religion) as an Arab (which is a family line), which is completely incorrect.

Now, before we move forward, let's take a moment with this term, "The Angel of the Lord" that we saw in verse 11. I'd almost rather not do this, but I know that many of you are probably eager and loaded for Bear about this topic. The thing is, Angels, let alone "The Angel of the Lord", is a difficult concept and theological issue, for there are many reasonable people who disagree on what this means. But, studying the original Hebrew helps to cut through all the fantasy.

First, the Hebrew word that many will say is the word for Angel is "Mal'ach". But, actually, angel is a mistranslation; the term mal'ach simply means messenger, and standing by itself could be any kind of messenger or agent, and in the bible it is often used that way. It's when the term Adonai, or Yahweh, gets added to the wordsuch as "Mal'ach Adonai" or "Mal'ach Yahweh", that the Hebrews consider the word Mal'ach no longer meaning messenger in the human sense, but rather meaning Angel in the spiritual sense. In other words, by associating the name of God (Adonai) with the word messenger (Mal'ach), we get an angel..... a spirit-messenger from God.

Now, in Greek, the word for Angel is Angelos, which, like Hebrew, technically means messenger. And, just like in Hebrew, angeloi can mean simply any kind of messenger, not necessarily a heavenly messenger. But, as happens with words over the centuries, their meaning and usage can change. With the advent of gentile Christianity, angeloi, when used in scripture, came to mean, in every case, a "messenger from God"..... an angel. The problem here is that there is several places where our English bibles say angel, and it probably, within the cultural context, meant not angel at all, but was simply referring to a human messenger or agent, even if that messenger was mysterious.

So, from the Hebrew point of view, if the word Mal'ach, messenger, is used all by itself, it's something other than a heavenly messenger.....it's usually just a man. Add the word Adonai or Yahweh to it, and this messenger becomes what we call an angel. The problem

is, the usual English translation approach is that the translators take the word Mal'ach when used all by itself and make it Angel; and then when Adonai gets added it becomes an Angel of the Lord, which has been taken to mean some kind of very high or special angel.

What I'm telling you is that as a result of allegory, hyperbole, fantasy and just plain error, Christian writers have taken every instance of the word Mal'ach in Scripture and turned it into a heavenly messenger, an angel; which in many cases it was not. Even more, as a result of that misguided approach, when they saw the words "Mal'ach Yahweh".....they translated it to Angel of the Lord, and assumed it was some SPECIAL type of angel, or even perhaps another kind of manifestation of God Himself. Actually, in general, the ONLY time the word "angel" (meaning a spirit being sent from God) should appear in our Bibles is WHEN the words "angel of the Lord" are written. In reality, angels are barely even mentioned in Scripture; it's our traditions that have multiplied their presence, amplified their purpose, and humanized their form. So, the search for the elusive Angel of the Lord is a snipe-hunt....it's a red herring.

I tell you this not so much to provide a good explanation of what this Angel of the Lord is, but rather to point out why it has proven to be such a source of disagreement and scholarly argument. And, this is not a new argument. Going back to before the time of Christ, the Pharisees had worked out an elaborate hierarchy of angels, little of which comes from Scripture, and therefore is mostly Tradition. The Sadducees, contemporaries of the Pharisees, didn't even believe Angels existed. The Essenes had their own understanding of Angels, quite different from the Pharisees, and the Essene theology became the basis for the Christian Angeology system we have today.

In any case, what exactly the Angel of the Lord is we don't know. Was it a special kind of Angel? Was it another manifestation of God, like the Logos, or like the Holy Spirit? Was it a specific Angel that God set aside for certain tasks? Was it God taking on the form of an Angel? Probably most times a Mal'ach is not even an angel, except when the word Adonai is attached to it, meaning that ALL true angels should be called Angels of the Lord.

One thing, however, does seem certain: the being that spoke to Hagar, whether this is a regular Angel, or whether this is a more special Angel, or God Himself, WAS a spirit being and NOT a human messenger. Other than that slim fact, the rest I'll leave for you to wrestle with.