

Genesis 12-17; Abraham 1-2 Podcast Notes

1. Abram¹ and Sarai² – Gen. 12.1-5
 - a. Get thee out! מֵאַרְצְךָ לָךְ-לָךְ Go out from your *eretz*!³
2. Their (Abram & Sarai) blessing: bless them that bless thee, curse him that curseth thee
 - a. Additions: “I will put upon thee my name” – Abr. 1.18.
 - b. “Through thy ministry my name shall be known...” – Abr. 1.19.
 - c. “I will put upon thee my Priesthood.” – Abr. 1.18.
 - d. “My power shall be over thee.” – Abr. 1.18.
 - e. I will make thy name great! – Abr. 2.9.
 - f. Your seed will have the Priesthood and “this ministry”... - Abr. 2.9.
3. Abram and Sarai come to שִׁכֶם Sichem⁴, (Genesis 12.6) a city that would years later be inhabited by Manasseh; located in a valley between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim, 34 miles (54 km) north of Jerusalem and 7 miles (10.5 km) south- east of Samaria. This will be a ritually and historically important place in Israel’s collective memory for many years.
 - a. The terebinth at Moreh. Gen. 12.6 says “plain of Moreh,” but there is so much more to the story than this.⁵

¹ Abram אַבְרָם means “exalted father,” and is a combination of two words *rûm* רוּם – a word meaning to rise or be high or lifted up, and *’āb*, אָב the word for father or head of household, group, family, or clan.

² Sarai שָׂרַי means “princess” and comes from the root *śar*, meaning prince, ruler, chief, official, or captain. See: [H8268 - śar](#)

³ They are to depart out of Ur of the Chaldees (Gen. 11.31) and go to the land of Canaan. The Genesis 11 text informs us that on their way that they both came to Haran and dwelt there. [Eretz](#) can mean “earth,” “land,” or “country.”

⁴ Shechem means “back,” or “shoulder,” and is related to this word שִׁכֶם *śākem* with this designation.

⁵ Nahum Sarna says this regarding the terebinth at Moreh in Gen. 12.6:

Hebrew *’elon moreh*, undoubtedly some mighty tree with sacred associations. *Moreh* must mean “teacher, oracle giver.” This tree (or a cluster of such trees) was so conspicuous and so famous that it served as a landmark to identify other sites in the area. The phenomenon of a sacred tree, particularly one associated with a sacred site, is well known in a variety of cultures. A distinguished tree, especially one of great antiquity, might be looked upon as the “tree life” or as being “cosmic,” its stump symbolizing the “navel of the earth” and its top representing heaven. In this sense, it is a bridge between the human and the divine spheres, and it becomes an arena of divine-human encounter, an ideal medium of oracles and revelation. Fertility cults flourished in connection with such trees, and this form of paganism proved attractive to many Israelites. For this reason, the official religion of Israel forbade the planting of trees within the precincts of the altar, as stated in Deuteronomy 16:21

It is to be noted that Shechem seems to have been particularly rich in traditions about trees of special significance. Jacob hid idolatrous appurtenances “under the terebinth (’eluh) that was near Shechem” (Gen. 35:4); Joshua “took a great stone and set it up at the foot of the oak (’allah) in the sacred precinct of the LORD” in Shechem (Josh. 24:26); Abimelech was proclaimed king of that city “at the terebinth (’elon) of the pillar” (Judg. 9:6); and there was also “the terebinth of the soothsayers” in the Vicinity (Judg. 9:37). All these may refer to one and the same tree, although it is not certain that *’elon* is identical with the other similarly named trees (cf. Hos. 4:12)—the *’elah*, which is the *Pistacia terebinthus* and the *’allon*, which is the *quercus*. These latter two are used generically,

- c. The narrative in the Book of Abraham has the Lord giving this instruction instead of Abraham: “The Lord said unto me: Behold, Sarai thy wife, is a very fair woman to look upon...say unto the Egyptians, she is thy sister, and thy soul shall live.” (Abr. 2.22-24)
5. “She is my sister”... Sarai is taken into the house of Pharaoh. Gen. 12.15-20. This is the **Trial of Sarai**, also known as **the Wife/Sister Motif**.
- Outside sources help modern readers to contextualize this battle between Sarai and “the serpent”... this is Sarai’s “hero’s journey” and has relevance and application to modern readers of the Bible.⁹
 - The book of Genesis contains a trilogy of incidents in which the wife/sister motif was used by either Abraham or Isaac. The first account describes Abraham’s journey into Egypt after a famine enveloped the land of Canaan (see Genesis 12:10–13:4). Similar situations arose later when both Abraham and Isaac dwelt in the city of Gerar (see Genesis 20:1–2; 26:7–8). Although in each instance the patriarch identified his wife as his sister to avert a potentially dangerous situation, these accounts have puzzled many readers and scholars because of the apparent deception involved. **Why did the patriarchs resort to such action? That is a difficult theological issue.** In attempting to justify the patriarchs’ actions, writers have proposed a number of different explanations that offer some significant insights into the three episodes... We can gain a still greater understanding, especially of the episode of Abraham’s sojourn in Egypt, if we take into account the insights provided by the book of Abraham and the [Genesis Apocryphon](#)¹⁰ (1QapGen), one of the scrolls from the Dead Sea corpus. By doing so, we see the hand of God in Abraham’s request of Sarah, for Abraham’s actions initiated a confrontation between himself and Pharaoh. Because of Abraham’s obedience, God was able to introduce Himself to the Egyptian Pharaoh in power and glory. Even though it was only

⁹ **Two midrashic traditions identify** (See Lech Lecha 41.2 and Vayera 52.13 in Midrash Rabba: Genesis, 3rd ed., trans. Rabbi Dr. H. Freedman (New York: Soncino Press, 1939), 1:334, 460.) **the plague as leprosy.** **Hugh Nibley**, in *Abraham in Egypt*, argues that Pharaoh was afflicted with impotence. That both these incidents should be associated with the creation of offspring is important, given the nature of the Abrahamic covenant that should pass through Abraham’s lineage. During these accounts Abraham and Sarah were still awaiting the time when they would be given a son to carry on the covenant. It should also be noted that although many scholars believe that the incidents with Pharaoh and Abimelech are two versions of the same story (see W. W. Sloan, *A Survey of the Old Testament* [New York: Abingdon Press, 1957], 43–44; and Robert Davidson, *Genesis 12–50, Cambridge Bible Commentary*, ed. P. R. Ackroyd, A. R. C. Leaney, and J. W. Packer [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979], 2:4), it is clear from the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible that the Prophet Joseph Smith considered them to be two separate events: “and when Abraham said again of Sarah his wife, She is my sister” (Joseph Smith Translation, Genesis 20:2; emphasis added).

¹⁰ For the text referenced in this lesson, scroll down to column 20 in the Dead Sea Genesis Apocryphon, located [here](#). This translation was prepared with the photographic images SHR 4445-4453; 7301-2A-7322 reproduced in *The Dead Sea Scrolls on Microfiche: A Comprehensive Facsimile Edition of the Texts from the Judean Desert* (ed. E. Tov and S. J. Pfann; Leiden: IDC and E. J. Brill, 1993). It also uses the transcriptions of J. A. Fitzmyer, *The Genesis Apocryphon of Qumran Cave I: A Commentary* (2d rev. ed.; Rome: Biblical Institute Press, 1971); B. Jongeling, C. J. Labuschagne, and A. S. van der Woude, *Aramaic Texts from Qumran* (Semitic Study Series 4; Leiden: Brill, 1976), 77-119; J. C. Greenfield and E. Qimron, “The Genesis Apocryphon Col. XII,” *Abr-Nahrain Supplement* 3 (1992): 70-77; M. Morgenstern, E. Qimron, and D. Sivan, “The Hitherto Unpublished Columns of the Genesis Apocryphon,” *Abr-Nahrain* 33 (1995): 30-54; *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition* (2 vols.; ed. F. García Martínez and E. J. C. Tigchelaar; Leiden: Brill, 1997-98), 1:26-48.

the first of a series of such encounters, **it is clear that the God of Abraham was announcing His jurisdiction over all the families of the earth and not just over Abraham and his descendants.** That concept is fundamental to our understanding of all of Jehovah’s subsequent dealings with humankind throughout the Old Testament.¹¹

- c. It is noteworthy that this story or a version of this story, is told by both northern and southern perspectives, meaning that the Elohist (E) and the Yahwist (J) are both giving us versions of this story. To me, this shows the significance of her sacrifice and gives modern readers a version of the **hero’s journey** from the perspective of a woman, especially when the Dead Sea text is consulted.
 - d. Remember the pattern of the Hero’s Journey:
 - i. Leaving Safety – this is her journey in Gen. 12.
 - ii. Tasks
 - iii. Ritual Combat – this story of Sarai versus Pharaoh (the serpent) is her combat!
 - iv. Sacrifice – Sarai offers herself as a sacrifice at Yahweh’s command!¹²
 - v. Victory- See Gen. 12.17 where the Lord “plagued” Pharaoh.¹³
 - vi. Enthronement
 - vii. Temple building
 - viii. Order is established
6. The departure out of Egypt and settlement in Canaan – Genesis 13
- a. Abram is rich – Gen. 13.1-2.
 - b. They settle in a space between Bethel and Hai. (Gen. 13.3-4)
 - c. Lot and Abram’s herdmen have a strife (probably over water and grazing). (Gen. 13.5-10)
 - d. Lot chooses to settle in the cities of the plain, pitching his tent toward Sodom. (Gen. 13.11-13)
 - e. The Lord speaks to Abram, promising seed “as the dust of the earth.” (Gen. 13.14-16)¹⁴

¹¹ Strathearn, Gaye, “[The Wife/Sister Experience: Pharaoh’s Introduction to Jehovah](#)” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book 2005), 100–116.

¹² When Abraham responded to God’s commandment to call Sarah his sister, he acted with immediacy and unquestioned obedience. One of the great characteristics of such individuals as Abraham, Nephi, and Peter was their commitment to God’s current commandments, not just his previous ones. As we go through life, we also encounter times when we are given commandments that seem strange or that are difficult to understand. We may not always see their immediate purpose, but if we respond as Abraham did, then we can also experience the power of God in our lives and in the lives of those around us. Surely that is one of the great lessons to learn from our mighty ancestor, Abraham. (Strathearn, Gaye, “[The Wife/Sister Experience: Pharaoh’s Introduction to Jehovah](#)” in *Sperry Symposium Classics: The Old Testament*, ed. Paul Y. Hoskisson (Provo and Salt Lake City: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, and Deseret Book 2005), 100–116.)

¹³ Genesis 12.17 reads, “And the Lord plagued Pharaoh and his house with great plagues...”

The text: וַיִּנְגַע יְהוָה אֶת־פַּרְעֹה נְגַעִים גְּדֹלִים וְאֶת־בָּיִתוֹ – oftentimes the word for plague, *nāgā’* can be used to denote the idea of touching, or reaching. The first instance of this verb in the Bible is in Genesis 3.3 where the Lord says of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, “Ye shall not eat of it, neither shall ye touch it.” וְלֹא תִגְעוּ = “and you (2MPL) shall not touch it.” The irony of Gen. 12 is that just as Pharaoh desired to touch Sarai, the Lord touches him.

¹⁴ And I will set/place your seed as the dust of the earth וְשָׂמֵתִי אֶת־זַרְעֲךָ כַּעֲפָר הָאָרֶץ – Genesis 13.16.

- f. Abram dwells in the plain of Mamre, in Hebron, and builds another altar. (Gen. 13.14-18)
7. The Battle of the kings – Genesis 14
- a. Melchizedek, King of Salem – Gen. 14.18.
- i. מֶלְכִי־עֵדֶק Melchizedek – a priest of “El Elyon” ... who was this priest?¹⁵
 - ii. See: Gen. 14.18, Psalm 110, Hebrews 7, Psalm 2, and Alma 13.14-18.
 - iii. Melchizedek is a type of Jesus Christ. The figure of Melchizedek was invoked at the coronation of the kings of Israel and this image is tied to the Savior and the promises of the temple.
 - iv. Called a prince of peace – Alma 13.18; Heb. 7.2
 - v. Ruled under his father – Alma 13.18
 - vi. King of righteousness – Heb. 7.2
 - vii. Administered the bread & wine – Gen. 14.18-19
 - viii. Priesthood is called after him – D&C 107.2-4
 - ix. Brought a wicked society into a repentant state – Alma 13.18
 - x. Was a high priest – Alma 13.14; Heb. 7.15

¹⁵ Josephus had this to say about Melchizedek: And thus was Jerusalem taken, in the second year of the reign of Vespasian, on the eighth day of the month Gorpeius [A.D. 70]. It had been taken five times before: though this was the second time of its desolation. For Shishak, the King of Egypt; and after him Antiochus, and after him Pompey, and after them Sosius and Herod, took the city; but still preserved it. But before all these, the King of Babylon conquered it, and made it desolate: one thousand, four hundred, sixty eight years, and six months, after it was built. But he who first built it was a potent man among the Canaanites: and is **in our own tongue called [Melchisedek], The righteous King. For such he really was. On which account he was [there] the first priest of God; and first built a temple [there]; and called the city Jerusalem: which was formerly called Salem.** However, David, the King of the Jews, ejected the Canaanites, and settled his own people therein. (Josephus, War, book VI, chap. 10, Emphasis added.)

- b. After Abraham meets Melchizedek, in one source, *The Apocalypse of Abraham*¹⁶, he has a vision where he is told secret things.¹⁷
- c. There is evidence from the text of Genesis 14 that this story was penned at a later time, or at least edited later with scribal changes inserted into the text. Examples include:
 - i. "Abraham the Hebrew" – Gen. 14.13. This shows that perhaps this story comes from a non-Israelite source.
 - ii. "He pursued them unto Dan." – Gen. 14.14. The older name of this location was Laish. It was changed to Dan during the Judges period. See: Judges 18.29.

¹⁶ Hugh Nibley says this about the Apocalypse of Abraham: In hailing "the rediscovery of Apocalyptic" in the 1960s, Klaus Koch placed at the head of the list of pseudepigraphical writings (called "pseudo" only because they are not found in the biblical canon) as preeminent in both age and importance the *Apocalypse of Abraham* as preserved in the Old Slavonic texts. Since the opening sentence of the work declares that "I, Abraham ... was searching as to who the Mighty God in truth might be ..." while the opening sentence of the Book of Abraham informs us that "Abraham ... desiring ... to possess greater knowledge ..." was seeking God earnestly (Abr. 2.12), natural curiosity prompts us at once to compare the two purported autobiographies of the Patriarch, produced in times and places so remote from each other, to see what further oddities they might have in common. That is exactly what two Latter-day Saints students did back in 1898, just a year after that Apocalypse of Abraham was published to the world, they made the first English translation of the writing, which appeared in the first volume of the Improvement Era.

The *Apocalypse of Abraham* belongs to a body of Abraham literature flourishing about the time of Christ. "The Book is essentially Jewish," wrote G.H. Box, with "features which suggest Essene origin." From the Essenes it passed, he suggested, "to Ebionite circles ... and thence, in some form it found its way into Gnostic circles," though "Gnostic elements in our book are not very pronounced." Conventional Judaism and Christianity of a later day frowned upon it, as also was the case with Enoch; hence "in its Greek and Semitic forms (it) has, in fact, disappeared, only surviving in its Old Slavonic dress." And though this goes back no further than the early thirteenth century, there are ample controls to attest its remarkable faithfulness to the old vanished accounts, which "can hardly be later than the first decades of the second century", and may be older. The text, first published in Russia in 1863, was first made known to the West in an edition of Bonwetsch in 1897; he produced a German translation in 1898, and in the same year the first—and for many years the only—English version appeared in the first volume of the Improvement Era! **It is significant that it was the Latter-day Saints who first made the *Apocalypse of Abraham* available to the world in English**, as it was they who first recognized the Book of Enoch, in Parley P. Pratt's review of 1840, not as a worthless piece of apocrypha, but as a work of primary importance. (160: Dec. 1975, p. 75.) But while the Enoch suggested only the Book of Mormon to the brethren, the *Apocalypse of Abraham* from the first brought to mind their own Book of Abraham. Brothers E. H. Anderson and R. T. Haag, who made an excellent translation of Bonwetsch's German—remarkably close, in fact, to Box's "official" English version of 1919—detected in the text "many things of a character both as to incidents and doctrines that ran parallel with what is recorded in the Book of Abraham, given to the world by Joseph Smith... **They wisely contented themselves, however, with printing the text without other commentary than three or four passages in italics, trusting the Latter-day Saint reader to think for himself.** See: Hugh Nibley, *Abraham in Egypt: The Collected Works of Hugh Nibley: Volume 14*, second edition, Deseret Book, 2000, p. 11-13.

¹⁷ In the *Apocalypse of Abraham*, the figure who appeared to Abram immediately after he met Melchizedek was named Yahwehel (Jaol- "The restrainer of the Leviathan ~ The Serpent"). He told Abram he had been appointed to guard him and his heirs, and to reveal secret things.

Yahwehel was a glowing human figure dressed as a high priest with turban, purple garments and a golden staff. The radiant figure then led Abram up into heaven to receive a vision of the future. (*The Apocalypse of Abraham* 9-32. Alexander Kulik's translation can be read [here](#). Another version of the text can be read [here](#).)

- d. Abraham is a type of Christ
 - i. He pursues the enemy and rescues his friend – Gen. 14.14-16.
 - ii. He avoids the stain of the world: “I will not take a thread or shoelatchet...” – Gen. 14.23.
- 8. Abram desires seed, and he looks for alternate ways to fulfill the promises – Genesis 15
 - a. Abram was always looking for the best possibly way to view God and his promises. He was trying to make Eliezer fit the description for God’s promises. (Gen. 15.1-5)
 - b. God was having none of this! “No, Abram, you will literally have children!”
 - c. God reveals his name to Abram, “I am Yahweh!” (Gen. 15.7)¹⁸
 - d. The sacrifice of the animals: a heifer, goat, ram, turtledove, and pigeon – Gen. 15.9-11.
 - i. The ritual of cutting animals in half and passing between them is found both in the Bible and in Mesopotamia. The parallel in Jeremiah 34.17-22 makes it likely that the essence of the ritual is a self-curse: Those walking between the pieces will be like the dead animals if they violate the covenant. In the case at hand, remarkably, it is the Lord, symbolized by the “smoking oven” and “flaming torch” (15.17) who invokes the self-curse... (*The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 33)¹⁹
 - e. The land promise is somewhat different (see attached slides) in this passage than in other Biblical passages. In Gen. 15.18, Abram is promised “this land, from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates.” This designation would extend the land from Egypt all the way to the center of modern day Iraq. The author of Numbers 34 (authored by P) will give a much more restricted land designation than the one found in Genesis 15 (mostly from J). The main thing in this passage may be that God is promising Abraham seed, so much in fact that a vast area of land will be needed to provide for their needs. From Abraham’s ancient perspective, this amount of land would have been enormous, amounting to what would probably have amounted to the entire known world in his time period.
- 9. Sarai desires seed, and sees Hagar as a way to fulfill the promises – Gen. 16²⁰

¹⁸ This will run counter to the narrative found in Exodus 6.3 Where God says, “I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty (El Shaddai), but by my name Jehovah was I not known unto them.” This verse will lead many early Biblical scholars on the road to thinking that perhaps the author of Genesis 15 was not the same person as the author of Exodus 6, since if the same person was writing both stories, the apparent contradiction would not be in the text.

¹⁹ A curse like this is attested in eighth-century treaties (700s BC – *ANESTP*, 532). In Genesis, of course, it is God himself who walks between the pieces, and it is suggested that here God is invoking the curse on himself, if he fails to fulfill the promise. (Gordon J. Wenham, *World Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*, Volume 1, p. 332. *ANESTP* = *Ancient Near Eastern Supplementary Texts and Pictures*, by J. B. Pritchard)

²⁰ I realize that this is complicated, as D&C 132 has the Lord telling Joseph Smith: This promise is yours also, because ye are of ^aAbraham, and the promise was made unto Abraham; and by this law is the continuation of the works of my Father, wherein he glorifieth himself. Go ye, therefore, and do the ^aworks of Abraham; enter ye into my law and ye shall be saved. But if ye enter not into my law ye cannot receive the promise of my Father, which he made unto Abraham. God ^acommanded Abraham, and Sarah gave ^bHagar to Abraham to wife. And why did she do it? Because this was the law; and from Hagar sprang many people. This, therefore, was fulfilling, among other things, the promises. Was Abraham, therefore, under condemnation? Verily I say unto you, Nay; for I, the Lord, ^acommanded it. (See: [D&C 132.31-35](#))

- a. This story can be read as Sarai taking things into her own hands to fulfill the word of the Lord. One commentator wrote: “God’s uncompromising reiterations of the promise of offspring in the previous chapter (15.4-5, 13-16, 18) render Sarai’s infertility all the more problematic: ten years in Canaan but still no child! Nothing in the promises given to Abram to date. Having specified the matriarch of the great nation to come, Sarai takes matters into her own hands and, in accordance with documented ancient Near Eastern practice, offers her slave woman as a surrogate mother. Abram (who might have solved his problem by divorcing Sarai but stayed with her nonetheless) accepts.”²¹
- b. **The building of a house.** Genesis 16.1-2 uses the language of building when it comes to bearing children: Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children (had not borne to him). And she had an Egyptian maidservant whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, “See now, the Lord has restrained me from bearing children. Please, go in to my maid; perhaps I shall obtain children (I will build -בנה) from her.”²²
- c. Abram and Hagar conceive – Gen. 16.3-4.
- d. Hagar becomes “despised in her eyes,” hinting at enmity between these two women – Gen. 16.5.
 - a. Hagar flees from Sarai – Gen. 16.6, and sees an angel of the Lord – Gen. 16.7-16, bearing an important message to Hagar. Berlin and Brettler write: “The flight of the oppressed slave into the wilderness, only to meet a divine being there, foreshadows again the experience of the Exodus, prophesied in chapter 15. But this time the oppressor is Israelite, the slave is an Egyptian, and the angel of the Lord commands the escapee to return to her cruel mistress and submit to her harsh treatment. God’s sympathy with the oppressed is potent in the Tanakh, but so is his election of Israel, and it is the latter that trumps in this instance.”²³
 - b. Beer-lahai-roi – Gen. 16.14, the name of the well where Hagar sees the angel, is an interesting place name. בְּאֵר לַחַי רֹאִי can be read as a combination of three words in the text: *b’ēr*, meaning a well or spring, and *hay*, meaning “life” or a “living thing,” and *rō’ê*, the active participle of *rā’â* רָאָה, verb “to see.” So this word can mean “Well of the living One seeing me.” This is connected to the name of God in the next chapter of Genesis, chapter 17, where we read that God reveals the divine name as אֱלֹהֵי שַׁדַּי El Shaddai. See Genesis 17.1.

10. The Covenant of Circumcision – **El Shaddai and Abraham** in the Priestly version of the Abrahamic Covenant – Genesis 17

²¹ Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler, [The Jewish Study Bible](#), Oxford University Press, 2014, p. 36.

²² We see similar language in Genesis 30.1-3 where we read: Now when Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children (she had not borne to Jacob), Rachel envied her sister, and said to Jacob, “Give me בְּנִים children (literally sons), or else I die!” And Jacob’s anger was aroused against Rachel, and he said, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” So she said, “Here is my maid Bilhah; go in to her, and she will bear a child on my knees, that I also may have children by her אֶבְנָה (I will build), also I, from her”.

²³ [The Jewish Study Bible](#), p. 37.

- a. This is the Priestly version (P) of the Abrahamic Covenant. The Jwrist version (J) is Genesis 15, and the Elohist version (E) is Genesis 22.²⁴
- b. **The Nature of God in the Tanakh**
 - i. It is important to note a trend in the text of the Old Testament when it comes to understanding the God of the Israelites. There is a general agreement among Biblical scholars that the ways that the Israelites viewed God changed over time. I contend that the pattern went as follows: from a polytheistic view (1900-1500 BCE)²⁵ towards henotheism or monolatry (1500-700)²⁶, finally to monotheism in the 7th century BCE with the Deuteronomistic Reform. After centuries and with the rise of Christianity, a new theological perspective arises. The Christians

²⁴ Source critics identify ch 17 as the P(riestly) version of the covenant with Abraham (of which the J version appears in ch 15). Nothing in ch 17 indicates any awareness that the covenant mandated therein has, in fact, already been established two chapters earlier. In our chapter, the two chief innovations are that the covenant acquires a sign (circumcision, v. 10) and that it is Sarah who, despite her advanced age, shall bear the promised son (vv. 15-16, 19). The closest parallel to ch 17 in style and diction is 9.1-17, the account of the covenant with Noah. See: *The Jewish Study Bible*, p. 37.

²⁵ These are loose dates. Mark Smith offers this understanding of the polytheism that is in the early writings of the Old Testament: Various passages in the Bible suggest a more complicated picture lying behind the more dominant narrative of Israelite monotheism. Signs of polytheism are apparent. For example, Moses and the people ask: “Who is like You among the gods, O Yahweh?” (Exodus 15:11); the question rather neutrally implies the existence of other deities. Other biblical passages contain vestiges of Israelite polytheism. The complex relations between Israelite monotheism and polytheism were not always an issue of conflict, as the bulk of biblical narratives have strongly led readers to believe. Instead, it has become clear that Israel knew some sort of polytheism; how to reconcile signs of such a religious situation within the larger framework of monotheism in the Bible has been a major topic of scholarly discussion for some time. Extra-biblical sources have also affected the discussion of biblical monotheism. Discovery of ancient inscriptions has added greatly to the scholarly knowledge of deities mentioned in the Bible. Moreover, archaeological research has accumulated a massive amount of information pertinent to the understanding of ancient religion. In recent years pictorial art has come to the fore as a major source for studying ancient deities. In short, only in the twentieth century did the scholarly community come to know these deities on their own terms, namely from the vantage point of their own adherents, rather than from biblical polemics directed against them. These discoveries have inspired a renewed investigation into biblical religion, in particular biblical monotheism and its relations to polytheism in ancient Israel and neighboring cultures. See: Mark Smith, [The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts](#), Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 4-5.

²⁶ Peter Enns explains: **What made the Israelites different from their neighbors, religiously speaking, was their belief that only Yahweh, and not any of the other gods (heavenly bodies included), was worthy of their worship. To use the technical language, the Israelites were not monotheists in the strict sense of the word, but monolatrists: they worshiped one God, but believed in the existence of many gods.** All of which is to say, when it came to worshipping something, the ancient Israelites had options. I don’t mean in some poetic way, as when preachers today speak about the “false god” of money or politics. **The Israelites of long ago believed that other gods really, actually existed and that these real, actual gods could do real, actual things to them—like withhold rain, give victory to the enemy, or send a plague of locusts...** The Israelites certainly believed other gods existed, but Yahweh alone was to be worshiped because he was the best god. How they thought and wrote about their God was absolutely shaped by the world in which they lived—which is a very different world from ours. Peter Enns, [How the Bible Actually Works: In Which I Explain How An Ancient, Ambiguous, and Diverse Book Leads Us to Wisdom Rather Than Answers—and Why That’s Great News](#), HarperOne, 2020, p. 89/281 electronic version.

begin to understand God in a different way from the Deuteronomists. These early Christians move towards a view of understanding God as having a Son and the existence of a Divine Mother²⁷, as well as the Holy Ghost, and then by the 4th century CE a new view of God arises. This view of the Trinity worked to encapsulate monotheistic ideas while maintaining the essence of the New Testament texts that were being canonized which emphasized a Most High God, the Savior Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost. Many Christians by the time of Joseph Smith were in the space of reading the anthropomorphic descriptions of God in their Bibles as figurative expressions of God.

1. Polytheism: “let us go down...” (Genesis 11.7)
 2. Henotheism/Monolatry: “Thou shalt have no other gods *before* me...” (Exodus 20.3)
 3. Monotheism: “I am the first and the last, beside me there is no god...” (Isaiah 44.6)
- c. The Divine Name: El Shaddai. We read, “the Lord appeared to Abram, and said unto him, I am the **אֱלֹהִים** Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect.” Gen. 17.1.
- d. It can be argued that El Shaddai is one of the names of the Divine Mother, or the Divine Feminine in scripture.²⁸ All of the passages using El Shaddai in Genesis, with one exception, are fertility blessings. See: Genesis 17.1, 28.3, 35.11, 43.14, 48.3, 49.25.²⁹
- e. Why circumcision?
- i. We don’t know. Anthropologists do not agree on the origins of circumcision. The English Egyptologist, Sir Grafton Elliot Smith, suggested that it is one of the features of ‘heliolithic’ culture, which, some 15,000 years ago, spread over much of the world.³⁰
 - ii. It seems that Abraham did not start the practice of circumcision; rabbinic legend suggests that it was known before.³¹ However, circumcision became firmly established among the Hebrews. When Jacob’s daughter Dinah was seduced by the Hivite prince Shechem and the question of marriage arose, the sons of Jacob

²⁷ See: Margaret Barker, [Mother of the Lord: Volume 1: The Lady in the Temple](#), T&T Clark, 2012.

²⁸ The argument is complicated. El Shaddai is usually rendered as “God Almighty,” assuming that the root “shad” must refer to the Hebrew word **שָׁדַד** *šādād* meaning “to violently destroy” or to a word in the Akkadian language, *shaddu*, meaning “mountain.” There are a few verses in the post-patriarchal period for which the judging, destroying meaning of Shaddai seem to fit appropriately (Isaiah 13.6, Joel 1.15). David Biale makes the argument that El Shaddai is a feminine deity in these priestly texts of Genesis. See: David Biale, [The God with the Breasts: El Shaddai in the Bible](#), *History of Religions*, Feb., 1982, Vol. 21, No. 3, p. 240-256.

²⁹ Biale points out the word play in the Testament of Jacob where Joseph receives his blessing regarding fertility and strength, particularly in Gen. 49.25. The Almighty **אֱלֹהִים** blesses Joseph, with the **בְּרֵכַת** blessings of the breasts, and **מִבְּטֵן** of the womb. The word for breasts in this text is *shadiym*, the plural of *šād*. This word appears 24 times in the Hebrew Bible, predominantly in the Song of Songs.

³⁰ W.D. Dunsmuir and E.M. Gordon, [The History of Circumcision](#), *BJUI International*, 1999, 83, Suppl. 1, p. 1.

³¹ Gen. R. 42:8; and cf. “*Huppot Eliyahu Rabbah*,” in J.D. Eisenstein’s *Ozar Midrashim*, 1 (1915), 165. See also: [The Jewish Virtual Library, circumcision](#). Accessed 1.1.2022.

insisted that the Hivites undergo the rite (Gen. 34:14); when Moses failed to circumcise his own son, the fault was repaired by Zipporah, his wife who declared (Ex. 4:25): "Surely a bridegroom of blood (*hatan damim*) art thou to me." The Hebrew term translated as "bridegroom" is connected with the Arabic for "to circumcise."³² Circumcision was not merely a religious practice; it also took on a national character. Only circumcised males could partake of the paschal sacrifice (Ex. 12:44, 48). Before the Israelites entered Canaan, they were circumcised by Joshua, the rite having been omitted in the wilderness owing to the hazards of the journey (Josh. 5:2).

- iii. Elon Gilad offers the following possible explanation: "The answer may be from their farming habits. Archaeological evidence shows that the farming of grapevines and olive trees was spreading through the region during this period. These plants require regular pruning to increase yields. Maybe some ancient Semitic sage came up with the idea that if pruning vines increases yields, why not prune (men) too? In fact, there is evidence in the Bible that the ancient Hebrews tied circumcision to pruning "And when ye shall come into the land, and shall have planted all manner of trees for food, then ye shall count the fruit thereof as uncircumcised [literally: ye shall foreskin their foreskins]: three years shall it be as uncircumcised [literally: foreskins] unto you: it shall not be eaten of" (Leviticus 19:23)."³³
- iv. With the fulfillment of the Mosaic law under Jesus, the token of circumcision was no longer required of God's covenant people (see Acts 15:22–29; Galatians 5:1–6; 6:12–15).

11. Abraham and the Covenant

- a. Though we know from modern scripture that the covenant-making process began with Adam and the other patriarchs (see Moses 6:65–68; 7:51; 8:2), it is from the Abrahamic covenant that we get a fuller idea of what is involved in covenant making. Since righteous members of the Church become the seed of Abraham and thus part of the covenant people (see D&C 84:34), we should understand what is involved in the covenant made with Abraham. Abraham's part of the covenant, which is the same as for us, is that he "walk uprightly before me, and be perfect" (JST, Genesis 17:1). If he would do so, then the Lord's part of the covenant, or His promises to Abraham, constitute what is known as the Abrahamic covenant.
- b. "Abraham first received the gospel by baptism (which is the covenant of salvation); then he had conferred upon him the higher priesthood, and he entered into celestial marriage (which is the covenant of exaltation), gaining assurance thereby that he would have eternal increase; finally he received a promise that all of these blessings would be offered to all of his mortal posterity. (Abra. 2:6–11; D. & C. 132:29–50.) Included in the

³² The Jewish Virtual Library, circumcision. See also: EM, 3 (1965), 357, S.V. *Hatan Damim*.

³³ Elon Gilad, [Haaretz Magazine, March 2016](#), accessed 2017. The author continues: "If this is all true, Jews circumcise their sons because an ancient tribe converted an agricultural innovation into a questionable method to increase male fertility, and later a small group of their descendants bestowed this practice with a national meaning, which endures to this day."

divine promises to Abraham was the assurance that Christ would come through his lineage, and the assurance that Abraham's posterity would receive certain choice, promised lands as an eternal inheritance. (Abra. 2; Gen. 17; 22:15–18; Gal. 3.)

- c. "All of these promises lumped together are called the Abrahamic covenant. This covenant was renewed with Isaac (Gen. 24:60; 26:1–4, 24) and again with Jacob. (Gen. 28; 35:9–13; 48:3–4.) Those portions of it which pertain to personal exaltation and eternal increase are renewed with each member of the House of Israel who enters the order of celestial marriage; through that order the participating parties become inheritors of all the blessings of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (D. & C. 132; Rom. 9:4; Gal. 3; 4.)" (*Mormon Doctrine*, p. 13.)