

The Covenant with Abraham, Part Two

You know you are about to witness something important in Scripture when someone undergoes a change of name or, even more striking, when someone is *given* a name. This happens in numerous places in Scripture such as when Jacob has his name changed to Israel as we will see later in the Book of Genesis ([Genesis 32:23-33](#)). The Divine Name is given in Exodus ([Exodus 3:4-15](#)) and, to cite our most prominent New Testament example, when Peter is given the name Cephas, “the Rock”, by Our Lord ([Matthew 16:13-19](#), [John 1:42](#)). Names are terribly important in Scripture for if you know someone’s true name you know everything about them.

We see another change of name and the importance attached to it two times in the story we are investigating this week ([Genesis 17:4-22](#)) as once more the Lord recounts the promises that he made to Abram. In order to emphasize the importance of the event, in order to stress the *newness* of what is about to transpire, the Lord first changes Abram’s name.

“When Abram prostrated himself, God continued to speak to him: ‘My covenant with you is this: you are to become the father of a host of nations. No longer shall you be called Abram; your name shall be Abraham, for I am making you the father of a host of nations. I will render you exceedingly fertile; I will make nations of you; kings shall stem from you.’”

[Genesis 17:3-6](#)

There are numerous theories about the meaning behind the name change from Abram to Abraham. Most good bibles will have in their critical apparatus etymological discussions concerning the variations of the Hebrew names found there and their meanings. Most center around the original meaning, “the father is exalted”, or similar derivations. What is most important is the idea that with the new name we are embarking upon a new chapter of salvation history. We are seeing something that had never been seen before in human history. The Lord is entering into an everlasting pact with one man and through him all his descendants whether in blood or in faith. (Here we again see the Hebrew *berit olam*.) ([Genesis 17:7](#)). We will discuss the ramifications of Abraham’s descendants “according to the faith”, but first we have to examine *the other* terribly important name change in our story.

After the Lord institutes the sign of the circumcision with Abraham, an outward sign that signifies a member is part of the covenant with God, the Lord changes the name of Sarai as well.

“God further said to Abraham: ‘As for your wife Sarai, do not call her Sarai; her name shall be Sarah. I will bless her, and I will give you a son by her. Him also will I bless; he shall give rise to nations, and rulers of peoples shall issue from him.’” Genesis 17:15-16

It is truly a new beginning as both the Father and Mother of an entire people are given a new name by the Lord. Through their union and through their offspring (initially through Isaac then through his descendants) a great people arise, a people who will exist in a covenantal relationship with the one God.

The Catechism and Genesis

In order to gather together scattered humanity God calls Abram from his country, his kindred, and his father's house, and makes him Abraham, that is, "the father of a multitude of nations". "In you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." The people descended from Abraham would be the trustees of the promise made to the patriarchs, the chosen people, called to prepare for that day when God would gather all his children into the unity of the Church. They would be the root on to which the Gentiles would be grafted, once they came to believe. **Catechism of the Catholic Church, 59-60**

Why is the Character of Abraham so important?

At first glance Christians might wonder why they need be so concerned with the father of the Jewish nation. The story of the Patriarchs that we see in the second half of Genesis appears to be nothing more than a prelude to the far more interesting story of Exodus with all its drama, its law, and its eventual liberation of the captive Jews. Indeed, from the standpoint of ethnic history, it holds little importance for individuals who are not ethnically Jewish. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the twelve tribes appear, at least on the surface, to be someone else's story.

This idea is wrong on two counts. The character of Abraham and the history of the Jews - the story of the Patriarchs, the Exodus, the rise of the Twelve Tribes, and the rise and fall of the Kingdom of David is our story in that it is the story of Jesus. It is the prelude to the Incarnation, the back-story if you will, of the carpenter from the seemingly obscure village of Nazareth. Not to overly simplify things, but we are reading on a very real level the family history of the Lord.

In addition to giving us the family history of Jesus, the stories surrounding the character of Abraham are also important from a very practical perspective. If you wish to make heads or tails out of the writings of St. Paul in the New Testament, you have to meditate and contemplate the character of Abraham in the Book of Genesis.

Many of the examples Paul cites concerning his idea of faith in the Letter to the Galatians and the Letter to the Romans center around Abraham as a man of faith. For St. Paul, Abraham was the example of faith *par excellence* in that he had faith in God and obeyed God before receiving any law (Galatians 3:6). In addition, the promise to Abraham was seen by St. Paul as being fulfilled in Christ (Galatians 3:16). So take some time this week with Abraham our father in faith, it will hold you in good stead later.

Pope Benedict XVI and Genesis

In the First Reading we heard the words addressed to Abraham: "I will make you exceedingly fruitful"(GN 17, 6). If witnessing to one's adherence to the Gospel is never easy, the certainty that God makes our commitment fruitful when it is sincere and generous is certainly comforting. From this important viewpoint too the spiritual experience of the Servant of God John Paul II is apparent to us. In looking at his life, we see God's promise of fruitfulness to Abraham, as it were, realized and echoed in the First Reading from the Book of Genesis. One might say that especially in the years of his long Pontificate, he brought forth to faith many sons and daughters.

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The Conversation

One of the most beautiful aspects of the Book of Genesis is that every once in a while, you catch the Lord having an introspective moment, i.e., you get a view into the mind of the Almighty as perceived by the sacred authors of this book. We see an example of this in the prelude to the famous story of Sodom and Gomorrah. In this account God seems to express some misgivings about keeping the information concerning the impending doom of these two cities to Himself and not sharing it with Abraham, the man whom He has chosen to be the forefather of a great race of people who will be devoted to the Lord. As we have discussed previously, it is quite clear that the Lord gains nothing from having a conversation with Abraham about his plans for Sodom and Gomorrah. The purpose of the conversation, the real meaning behind bringing this up in the first place, must be for Abraham's benefit. God wants Abraham to know the rationale behind the upcoming divine actions and wants Abraham (the one chosen to "*direct his sons and his posterity*" Genesis 18:19) to learn from what is about to transpire.

At this point in the narrative we could have been confronted with a very straightforward pronouncement from the Almighty along the lines of "This is what I am about to do, remember this day." We could have been given pronouncements similar to the ones we have seen after the casting out from the Garden, after the flood, or after the banishment of Cain. However, we are given no such thing. In the place of what we expect we are given a conversation between Abraham and God in which Abraham appears to be interacting on a personal level with the Almighty. Talking to the Lord, as the messengers that were sent to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah went on ahead, Abraham raises the following question:

“Then Abraham drew nearer to him and said, ‘Will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty? Suppose there were fifty innocent people in the city; would you wipe out the place, rather than spare it for the sake of the fifty innocent people within it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to make the innocent die with the guilty, so that the innocent and the guilty would be treated alike! Should not the judge of all the world act with justice?’”

Genesis 18:23-25

From this initial interchange we see the give and take between Abraham and the Lord. Abraham seems to bargain with the Lord to spare the city even if there are only ten innocent members there. What is incredible about this interchange is not only that Abraham can bargain with the Lord, but that Abraham has framed the discussion from the perspective of justice - a divine justice that holds for both man and God. We are given many, many laws in the Book of Genesis and many, many more in the books that follow such as Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers. But the law that emerges from this conversation over Sodom and Gomorrah is, in my opinion, one of the most important in the entirety of Sacred Scripture - namely the innocent are to be protected. Note that Abraham and the Lord are not discussing the future of the cities from the standpoint of how many guilty people live there, but from the standpoint of how many innocents are there. Abraham’s God, our God, is the God who is concerned intimately with the protection of the innocent.

The Catechism and Genesis

*Because Abraham believed in God and walked in his presence and in covenant with him, the patriarch is ready to welcome a mysterious Guest into his tent. Abraham's remarkable hospitality at Mamre foreshadows the annunciation of the true Son of the promise. After that, once God had confided his plan, Abraham's heart is attuned to his Lord's compassion for men and he dares to intercede for them with bold confidence. **Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 2571***

Sodom and Gomorrah: What was the Sin?

There is clearly plenty of sin to go around when one reads the story of Sodom and Gomorrah. There have been, however, various interpretations in the Roman Catholic tradition as to exactly what sin merited such punishment. In the text we read that the townsmen of Sodom wished to have “intimacies” with the Messengers of the Lord, which seems to imply that they intended to rape the men who were sent by the Lord and who were spending time in the house of Lot. Later Jewish interpreters, most notably in the Book of Isaiah, see their sin as a lack of social justice (Isaiah 3:9) or as ill treatment of the poor (Ezekiel 16:46-51) when discussing the example of Sodom and Gomorrah. The prophet Jeremiah looked upon the sin of these two cities as somehow linked to a general lack of morality (Jeremiah 23:14).

A Brief Word on Angels

We will encounter numerous heavenly beings in the Old Testament, many of them in the Book of Genesis. Depending on your translation they are either called messengers or angels. Whatever your translation, the concept of the Heavenly Messenger from the Greek verb *aggelleo* (meaning to tell or proclaim) is a complicated one in scripture. In the earlier sections of the Bible, most notable in Genesis, these heavenly beings seem to be the Lord's mouthpieces and at times it is hard to tell when the voice of the Lord ends and the voice of the messengers begin (Genesis 16:7-13).

What is also notable about them in their earliest manifestations in the Bible story is that they are not given names or personalities. We will have to wait a bit before we meet Michael or Gabriel. What is clear however is that when Messengers of the Lord (angels) speak their words come directly from God. It is also clear that these spiritual beings exist, and their existence is looked upon as a truth of faith in the Roman Catholic Tradition (Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 328).

The Catechism on Angels

St. Augustine says: "Angel' is the name of their office, not of their nature. If you seek the name of their nature, it is 'spirit'; if you seek the name of their office, it is 'angel': from what they are, 'spirit,' from what they do, 'angel.'" With their whole beings the angels are servants and messengers of God.

Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 329