

The Lot of Abraham and the Lot of Lot

by Aurel Ionica

Probably no reasonable person would question not only that the world is full of evil, but that the greatest perpetrators of evil are precisely the most *civilized*, and especially the Christians, whose central belief is to *save* the world from evil and dream of living in an evil-free world. The pervasiveness of evil is even more disturbing as the advances in technology not only has not diminished the suffering, but is actually the very source of the greatest human tragedies. What is even more disturbing is that the ones who cause the greatest sufferings are the very ones who claim to be the wisest and the greatest champions of fighting evil. For evil to be able to function on such a large scale, any person with a modicum of common sense would conclude that evil must be mightily organized on a universal scale by some Great Architect of Evil who is able to control the world by fooling people into believing that by their participation in such a demonic scheme they would elevate themselves above ordinary people simply by claiming to have received some light that no one else can see. Although to suppose that such a conspiracy of evil has always been able to exist in history and particularly today when the world seems to be so full of knowledge may be hard to imagine by those who like to think that human societies are just *free* and people are allowed to do what they just believe is right, the reality of the pervasiveness of evil – that no one can deny - can only be explained if evil is organized as the story about the Tower of Babel describes and was explained in the previous article. If one cannot avoid the conclusion that evil must be organized as that story describes, then the obvious question that a reader of Genesis would expect to find explained next after reading the story about the Tower of Babel is: What is God's answer to the problem? Does God have a plan about how evil can be eliminated, or is he just a helpless spectator to a world that he created and is hijacked by a Great Architect of Evil who is smarter and is able to turn God's beloved masterpiece into the most hideous monstrosity as is the world in which we live now? As one would expect, after the failure of the Tower of Babel, God takes an initiative:

Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great

nation, and I will bless you, and make your name [שְׁמֵכָא, *šmekā*] great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 12:1-3).

Although the text is not very explicit about what kind of world God intended to establish through Abram, there are some important clues. First, Abram was a city dweller and he was expected to leave that city and go to a place about which he knew nothing, and that is a key clue that he would go not on a business trip, but live as a refugee. After the story about the Tower of Babel - about which we are specifically told that it was a "city" that was abandoned because people could no longer agree with one another and therefore many scattered defeating the very purpose of building a society that kept everyone "together" under the control of a "name/Shem" - it follows that Abram must be viewed as one of those refugees who understood that the supposed project to build a stable society through a pyramid of power made life unbearable and decided to run away from it. Moreover, by leaving the city, we are told that Abram was supposed to sever all his relationships with his native area and even with his immediate family who clearly remained dedicated to city life, and that would have implied that Abram wanted to establish a new reasoned reality taking into account that the family was the basic unit by which individuals received the reasoned reality by which they lived for the whole life. Breaking any of the rules of the reasoned reality established by the larger society would place an individual at odds primarily with the immediate family who would turn against him and basically turn him into a pariah. Likewise, an individual who no longer accepted beliefs and behaviors that the family and the community had adopted would voluntarily abandon the family and the community in order to live somewhere else, basically turning himself into a pariah. That Abram was not a fugitive who ran away because he had committed some crime and that he was not what is called today an *economical refugee* because he was not able to earn his living in his own city and hoped to earn a better living somewhere else is clearly indicated by the text through the detail that Abram had wealth that he managed to take with him, something that a criminal would not have been able to do, while *economic refugees* never leave with any wealth but always go empty-handed.

Another important clue about the reason God wanted Abram to go somewhere else was to make *his* "name" great and establish a new "nation" that would not be isolated in one place but eventually would be adopted as a model by all human societies. The explanation that Abram's "name" would become great not by establishing a nation that would keep everyone in one place but rather a kind of nation that eventually would spread all over the world is a blatant suggestion that God expected Abram to establish a human society that was an alternative to the failed Tower of Babel with a *name/Shem* at the top.

Another detail that sends us back to the story about the Tower of Babel is the reference to *blessings*. We remember that after the author of Genesis explained why God would

never use natural disasters such as universal floods to purge the world of evil, he explained how evil could still take over the world even if humanity would start over with an individual like Noah who had managed not to commit any evil for six hundred years. While with Cain evil entered the world with an outrageous murder that would give pause even to the most hardened murderer and eventually led to a world full of violence, with Noah evil entered the supposedly new world purged of all evil people with something as benign as drinking some delicious grape juice that was not fresh, enjoying for a few hours the euphoria that intoxication with alcohol creates, discovering that during that euphoria you have done something that you should be ashamed of, and instead of blaming yourself and becoming responsible about what you eat and drink, you start to throw with blessings and curses to the right and to the left and others take those blessings and curses as if they had been issued by God himself and develop a pyramid of power to implement a reasoned reality based on them. Although the concept of reasoned reality cannot be found designated as such anywhere in the Bible or in ancient literature, it is precisely this concept that was referred to by words such as "blessings" and "curses." Although modern scholars find these terms just empty words since they can only understand objective reality - and blessings and curses do not designate some entities that they can photograph and place under the microscope - such words are not just elucubrations of ancient mythical minds that took as real empty words spoken by imaginary gods, but such words most appropriately describe what I called reasoned reality. While *blessings* and *curses* are just words, they are words that establish relationships within human societies, relationships that are as real as trees, rocks, or oceans, and that is precisely what reasoned reality is all about. Just as for all rules that shape human societies there are always some reasons and those reasons are not necessarily good ones, so also for blessings and curses there are always some reasons that are not necessarily good ones, and it is precisely because the reasons behind those blessings and curses cannot be justified rationally, those blessings and curses are claimed to be dictates of gods. When Americans place a bumper sticker that reads *God Bless America!* on their cars, they declare that whatever their country does is necessarily approved by God and therefore they would never call into question whatever their country does or hold their government accountable for any evil. Moreover, since God has blessed America and no other country, it follows not only that other countries are evil and Americans would not conceive of living somewhere else, but that their country has the duty to rule over other countries in order to prevent them from being evil anymore and force them to be good. Consequently, blessings and curses are the fundamental concepts for creating hierarchies in human societies and therefore they are the fundamental mechanism for propagating evil. Although in this passage God does say that he would bless and curse, the text makes clear that God himself does not issue any blessings or curses, but only makes sure that whatever humans decide, they become the beneficiaries of what they decide if it is something good, or suffer the consequences of

their own decisions if it is evil. In other words, God only claims to be the supervisor and promises that everyone gets for himself what causes to others. Whenever people *bless* something, they approve of it, support it, and adopt it, and whenever they *curse* something, they reject it and pledge to eliminate it. Since Abram had decided to turn his back on an evil society and establish a new society that promotes what is good and rejects what is evil, it follows that those who *bless* Abram and therefore approve of what Abram is doing and adopt it for themselves, then God makes sure that they end up with the same blessings that they appreciated about Abram; and if they *curse* Abram for doing what is right because they like what is evil, then their *curse* not only would not prevent Abram from enjoying the good things that he pursues, but God would make sure that they end up being themselves *cursed* with the very evil things that they declare for Abram. God not only does not issue on this occasion any blessings or curses, but he insists that blessings and curses are issued always by humans, and they are not magic words that turn God into a puppet to execute whatever humans say when issuing blessings and curses, but rather that God holds humans accountable for their decisions and makes sure that everyone experience the very things that he had decided for others and chosen for themselves. If someone *blesses* evil, then he would end up being *blessed* with that evil; and if someone *curses* what is good, then he would end up being *cursed* by not enjoying what is good because God does not push what is good down the throat of anyone. That God intended through Abram to create a reasoned reality that would become universal for the whole humanity is indicated by the fact that all nations would adopt it and that all nations would end up being *blessed*. Therefore, through Abram, God did not intend to create a world in which anyone is privileged – not even Abram – but a world in which the very idea of privilege is absent precisely because it is the very root of all evils. True, God assumes that Abram would live a different life and establish a reasoned reality of good without evil and that he would become a model not only for his descendants, but eventually for the whole world, but that does not mean that God endorses whatever Abram would do in the future so that if Abram does something wrong, God turns that evil into a blessing for Abram, and when people *bless* Abram for doing something evil, God would reward them with what is good while those who dare to condemn or *curse* Abram for doing what is wrong would end up being *cursed* or punished by God because they dared to question what God's favorite did. Indeed, that is precisely how fundamentalists and *critical* scholars read these stories about Abram and the patriarchs that whatever Abram does is what God holds as a model, but God makes no suggestion that he would unconditionally endorse whatever Abram or his descendant do; quite the opposite, he expects the reader to examine everything that Abram and his descendants do based on whether he and his descendants are consistent with whether they always pursue what is good and reject what is evil, and when they fail to do so, they not only suffer the consequences of their evil behavior, but the author is explicit that God himself approves of the price they have to pay for what they had done.

True, in the Bible we find plenty of examples of evil people who end up suffering the very consequences of the evils that they had caused, but if the stories about Abram and the other patriarchs were written in order to teach some lessons, the lessons are not that Abram and his descendants are exemptions to such rules as fundamentalist like to read these stories, but that God holds the patriarchs equally accountable when they fail to pursue what is good and God makes sure that they pay an even heavier price precisely because they cannot claim ignorance about what is good and what is evil. Therefore, in reading these stories I do not assume that the author of Genesis presents all the behaviors of the patriarchs as divinely endorsed models for the whole humanity - as both fundamentalists and *critical* scholars do - but rather in order to understand that the bad consequences of evil are as unavoidable - or even more so - when evil is perpetrated by the very people who are committed to eliminating it from the world. I want to make clear that *this is a fundamental hermeneutical principle that I will use when analyzing the biblical text from now on*. Although God is not explicit about what kind of world or reasoned reality he wanted to establish through Abram, the reader is expected to find out by observing Abram's actions taking into account that in the Bible what an individual thinks is expressed primarily not through words, but through actions. Moreover, when Abram leaves behind one kind of life and decides to live a different one and establish a different reasoned reality, we should not assume that that all the actions of Abram are consistent with the new ideal life that he has adopted. Quite de opposite, since Abram is viewed as a real individual and represent real people, radical changes in the lives of real people - unlike the lives of characters in stories - do not change overnight, but gradual so that readers are expected to see Abram behave based on patterns inherited from the life that he left behind and only gradually abandon them and adopt new ones. Indeed, one of the main points of the stories about the patriarchs is precisely to emphasize how difficult it is to live a different kind of life in a world permeated by a reasoned reality in which evil is organized on a universal scale.

After God's initiative is stated briefly, we are provided with some personal details about Abram: "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran. Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan" (Gen 12:4-5). This brief introduction of the two heroes of the stories that follow - Abram and Lot - is preceded by a genealogy list that starts right after the failure of the Tower of Babel and reads:

Then they said, "Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name [שֵׁם, *shēm*] for ourselves" ...

So the LORD scattered them abroad from there over the face of all the earth, and they left off building the city. Therefore it was called Babel, because there the LORD confused the language of all the earth; and from there the LORD

scattered them abroad over the face of all the earth. These are the descendants of Shem [שֵׁם, *shēm*] (Gen 11:4, 8-10).

As even someone who cannot read Hebrew can see, scholars, with their *critical* minds, translate the word שֵׁם, (*shēm*) in verse 4 as “name,” and they render the exactly same word in verse 10 as Shem. Is that not a *shame*? Ancient readers, however, not having any *critical* minds but only common sense, would have understood that the whole idea of building the Tower of Babel or a pyramid of power consisted in implementing the *blessing* of the drunkard Noah to create a society with his *blessed* son name/Shem as boss. And while the drunkard Noah had no doubt that his God would be quick to implement the *blessings* and the *curses* he had uttered and establish the pyramid among his descendants, God failed to oblige. Is it not a *shame* that God failed to make Shem a *shēm*? Instead, we learn that God caused people to run away from the *name/Shem* rather than gather around him and fall at his feet. Therefore, the genealogy that follows is clearly intended to explain how the descendants of *name/Shem* ran away from their *blessed* ancestor and how come that Abram, as a descendant of the *name/Shem*, ended up in Haran and not in Ur where the Tower of Babel started. As I discussed earlier,¹ genealogies are not meant to belong to objective reality - that is, as lists of actual names of people with their biographical details - but rather developments of human communities that are based on a certain reasoned reality. That they should not be viewed as lists of historical individuals the author of Genesis clearly indicates by using several reality blockers. The most obvious one is the impossible long lives of the names listed. That ancient people were such idiots that they imagined that humans could live hundreds of years when lifespan in ancient times was even shorter than it is today only fundamentalists and *critical* scholars can imagine. Through such long lives, the biblical author clearly wanted to suggest life of communities that by far outlive the longest lived individuals. Another reality blocker involved is the extremely old age when a father had the first child after which he had many more children, long after real people had any children, let alone started to have a multitude. And finally, another reality blocker is the fact that some names are names that are hard to imagine that parents would give to real children, particularly in ancient times when often names were used precisely in order to describe an individual according to a belief that the name would shape the future so that the child would become what the name suggested. As it was discussed at another place, if the name Lamech means “toward downfall,” although the name makes perfect sense taking into account that the individuals who bear this name end the genealogies

¹ These articles are not meant to be individual pieces, but rather a continuous text, therefore “earlier” does not refer necessarily to the current article, but sometimes to previous ones. Since these articles are just drafts and are published as the writing progresses, until they are edited in a finished form no index is available, therefore readers have to read the articles in the order in which they are listed on the website in order to understand all the subjects and concepts referred to later because what is discussed and explained in a previous article is not repeated in later ones since readers are not expected to read articles in isolation as self-contained pieces.

that led to the flood, it is hard to imagine that real parents would give such a name to a child and hope that the child would become what the name suggested. We have a similar situation with the name of Shem. Although both fundamentalists and *critical* scholars would regard it as being the real name of the oldest son of Noah, the problem is that Shem means “name” and therefore cannot be a *name*. In order to see the absurdity, what would be the point if a parent gave a child the name *person*, or *individual*, or *somebody/nobody*, or *man/woman*? Who would consider such words as valid to be used as names of real people? What is the point of naming someone Name, or Man, or Woman. Although all kinds of words are used as names for people all over the world - some of them downright ridiculous – I do not think that anyone has ever received such words as names. As we remember when mythology was discussed, when the Greek hero Odysseus was asked by the Cyclops Polyphemus about his name, he replied “nobody.” The fact that Polyphemus took it as a real name without realizing that no one could have such a name was proof of his stupidity that eventually caused his downfall because, after Odysseus managed to blind him and other Cyclopes came to ask Polyphemus who had blinded him, when Polyphemus told them that he had been blinded by “nobody,” the other Cyclopes could not imagine that the word was the name of someone, and concluded that probably Polyphemus had blinded himself and left him alone so that Odysseus manage to get away. If the word “name” is used here to refer to a person, no doubt it is meant to indicate a position of power as when the first hierarchy of an organized society is established, and no doubt the biblical writer intended the word to be understood as it was used in the famous and widely known poem in ancient times *Enuma Elish*:

When in *the height heaven was not named,*
 And the earth beneath did not yet bear a *name,*
 And the primeval Apsu, who begat them,
 And chaos, Tiamat, the mother of them both, -
 Their waters were mingled together [*emphasis mine*].²

As it was clarified when the mythological language was discussed, “heaven,” “earth,” “underground,” and “waters” do not designate parts of nature, but rather parts of the human society, and the story is meant to explain how the hierarchy of power in the human society ended up with a *name* at the top when before did not exist any. Therefore, an ancient reader would have understood that the story about a Tower of Babel with a *name*/Shem at the top was a replica of the famous and highly revered Mesopotamian story with a completely different twist: While ancient mythologies presented how societies ended up with some names at the top such as Marduk or Zeus who managed to win decisive battles and people ended up worshipping them because they managed

² L. W. King, ed., *Enuma Elish: The seven tablets of creation: Or, The Babylonian and Assyrian ends Concerning the Creation of the World and of Mankind*, 2 vols. (New York : AMS Press, 1976), 1:3.

to established stable societies with pyramids of power that kept everyone under control and no dissent was possible, the story about the Tower of Babel presented a similar attempt, but with a radically different outcome: complete failure. And the genealogy that follows is meant precisely to describe that failure, descriptions that is suggested again through *names*. In other words, the degradation of the human societies is presented through names so that the names should not be viewed as names of real individuals, but somehow descriptions of developments within a human community over a longer period of time. The use of names, however, when describing developments in human societies is not without a reason but in order to suggest that whatever happens in human societies is not the result of chaotic forces but rather the result of human actions in which some individuals play key roles. Although using names to describe something may have been a concise and straightforward way of conveying an idea to an ancient audience for whom the meaning of such names may have been quite transparent, they pose a tremendous challenge for modern readers for several reasons. First, since modern names are not meant to have a meaning, they are never translated even when they do have a clear meaning. For instance, the French would never refer to Martin Luther King Jr. as Martin Luther *le Roi Junior*. Since some biblical names have an obvious meaning, whether they are treated as proper names or common words and therefore whether they are translated or left untranslated is decided by the scholars based on their political commitments. A blatant example is the case under discussion: Since the meaning of the word שֵׁם (*shēm*) is so obvious, in one place scholars translate it as “name,” and when it occurs again just a few verses before and after, they leave it untranslated and just transliterate it as Shem in spite of the fact that in the passage it not only clearly refers to a person all the time, but there are equally clear clues that it refers *to the same person*. How are English readers supposed to figure out that the words “name” and “Shem” are actually the exact same word in the original? Secondly, when names are used in the Bible to convey ideas, they are not good descriptive phrases because they must be quite short, usually a single word, and it is difficult to convey a clear idea through a single word. It is precisely because single words cannot convey ideas clearly that the author of Genesis resorts to genealogies, that is, to lists of names. In other words, those names need to be put together and read as a sequence just as the words in a sentence have to be read in a sequence and not in isolation in order to have a meaning. And finally, the Hebrew text only used consonants and no vowels in recording words, therefore the real words on which biblical names were based sometimes is obvious but other times can only be guessed at best. Since the text clearly states that the attempt to establish a hierarchy with a *name/Shem* at the top in a city called Ur of Chaldea failed because people got dispersed, and immediately after that we find listed the “descendants” of the *name/Shem*, it follows that through those names the author wanted to suggest how this community eventually fell apart and a descendent of *name/Shem* called Abram is found later in a city called Haran instead of Ur. The first descendant of *name/Shem* is called

Arpachshad and apparently the name means “the boundary of Cush” or Ur, the city where the whole enterprise originated, and the name may indicate that the first stage in establishing a community with a hierarchy is to establish a boundary or a territory over which the hierarchy rules. Usually boundaries were viewed as bodies of water or forests that surrounded the community, not necessarily because such borders consisted necessarily of real bodies of water or real forests up to which the ground had been cleared for agriculture, but because the neighboring communities were viewed as wild and threatening just as are bodies of water that flood or wild animals that lived in forests, therefore bodies of water and forests are viewed as surrounding communities to describe foreigners and not necessarily features of landscape. Another descendent of *name/Shem* is Shelah, a name that apparently is derived from the word “to send” and therefore could mean to “so send” or “to expand,” and that is another stage in the development of a community, when it manages to become productive, to acquire wealth and decides to use that wealth not in order to improve the life of its citizens, but rather to expand and extend its dominion over the neighboring communities in order to bring them under its control by “sending” an army to *civilize* those foreigners and make them servants of the *city*, from which the word “civilized” comes. This has been a universal rule in the development of all communities that became what scholars call *great civilizations*, including that of Ur that Genesis is talking about and in ancient times must have been the most famous in that area. Another descendent of *name/Shem* is Eber which apparently means “to cross” probably suggesting further expansions, apparently by crossing some major natural barriers such as mountains or major rivers. Just as the building of the Tower of Babel at some point got into trouble, apparently this imperialistic enterprise got into trouble because one of the next descendants is called Peleg, a name that could mean “division,” that is, exactly the opposite of what the whole project of the Tower of Babel wanted to accomplish: *unity*. It seems that at this point the whole *united states* – of Ur, of course, and not of America or of Europe - fell apart divided among different local rulers who became *liberators*, who literally spoke different languages, and obviously did not see each other eye to eye except through the barrel of a gun just as are all world leaders today. The names of the following descendants are more obscure, and if they were intended to have a confused meaning, they no doubt suggest communities in turmoil and social unrest. This state seems to be confirmed by one of the last descendants who is called Nahor, which means “to get hot” or “to burn with anger,” and I cannot imagine why parents would give a child such a name unless they wanted to suggest crushed heads and broken furniture. Any wonder that the next descendant is called Terah, a name that could mean “wind” or “expand,” and although we cannot be sure that the author intended Terah to mean “gone with the wind” or “expended by running away,” what the text makes clear is that he ended up in a faraway city called Haran: “Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram’s wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chal-

deans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there” (Gen 11:31). And what must have made these biblical names so interesting for ancient readers – and so boring for fundamentalists and *critical* scholars – is that Terah ended up in a city with the same name as his youngest son, Haran. What would have set the minds of ancient readers spinning was the detail that at this time Haran was actually dead: “Haran died before [עַל-פְּנֵי, *al-pěně*, literally “in the face/front of”] his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans” (Gen 11:28). If Haran died in *front/face* of Terah, what else could it mean than there was a *front* line there, Haran was on the *front* line, Terah was behind him, and in *front* of Haran on the other side of the *front* line was someone *hot tempered* or *burning with anger* who killed him? And the reason Haran was on the front line is clearly suggested by his name: It comes from the word “mountain,” on top of which he no doubt viewed himself worshipped just as the Greek hero Zeus who ended up worshipped on the top of the mountain Olympus after he won the battle with the *hot tempered* Titans but, unlike Zeus who won the battle, Haran lost it. If the author mentions the death of Haran before Terah decided to leave Ur, it can only mean that the author intended the detail to provide *the reason why* Terah left the native city, and if Haran’s death was the reason Terah and his family left Ur, only a violent death could have provided a valid reason. People do not leave their homes and live as refugees just because a member of the family dies young as a result of an illness. And if Terah decided to leave his home and live as a refugee in a faraway city, how come that the city happened to have exactly the same name as his deceased son? Did Terah have the ability to predict the future and was able to give his son the name of the city in which he was going to end up decades later, or rather, when he arrived in that place, noticed that the community did not have a Tower of Babel with a proper heroic *name* at the top, and after crushing a few skulls and splitting open a few bellies, decided to give the city a really good *name*, and what names are better than those of great heroes, and how does one become a great hero but by dying young on front lines, that is, in battles, as Haran did? Is it just coincidence that so many cities are called Alexandrias, Parises, Romes, Washingtons, Lincolns, Jacksons, and so on? Terah may have carefully packed all his possessions when he ran away from the Tower of Babel, but among them the most precious was the concept of the Tower of Babel itself, and as soon as he settled down and unpacked, as a heir of the blessing of the drunkard Noah, decided to *bless* the new city with a Tower of Babel and with the *name/Shem* of his heroic son Haran. That Terah did not learn anything from what happened in Ur is again suggested by names: another son besides Abram that Terah brought with him from Ur was called ... surprise, surprise ... Nahor, the only name that occurs twice in the genealogy, just as Lamech occurred in the previous genealogies. Why would Terah give his son the same name as his hot-tempered father if these names represent names of real people? At a time when grandparents and grandchildren usually lived together in extended families, what was the point in having grandparents and grandchildren with identical names,

particularly names that would make only gangsters proud of? If names or genealogies are used by Genesis as literary devices to enable the reader to understand the plot of narratives, properly reading them helps to understand what moved characters to do what they did. If Terah had to leave Ur because he discovered that life was dangerous if not unbearable along his hot-tempered father Nahor, is it not a no-brainer that Abram must have come to the conclusion that his life was equally dangerous if not unbearable next to equally hot-tempered brother Nahor? Yes, at this point we learn that Abram received the call from God to leave the new Tower of Babel and go somewhere else, but does it mean that the idea of leaving Haran was a strange idea that came out of the blue from God while Abram was living an idyllic life in his new city, or does it mean that Abram had already come to the conclusion that he had to leave but wondered whether that was a good idea and not end up in another Tower of Babel while keeping running away from them? Indeed, that is precisely how both fundamentalists and *critical* scholars read the story, that Abram was living a perfectly happy life in Haran, and in order to bring some fun into the boring life of the old man, God appeared to him, told him to pack everything without any explanation about where he was supposed to go because God would give him directions each morning only for that day, Abram responded *yes, sir!* and like a robot immediately packed everything because of his *great faith* in God, and that sets Abram as a model not only for believers, but for all the citizens of the ideal world that God dreams of which consists of blind robots. Such Abrams may be the ideal citizens that both fundamentalists and *critical* scholars hope to create because these are the kind of subjects that all tyrants, church leaders, scholars, and all kinds of pyramids of power want, but to suppose that the author of Genesis was trying to set up such a model through Abram defies everything he suggests through the collapse of the Tower of Babel. If, however, we assume that Abram was already considering leaving his current home city because he wanted to live a different life than the ones controlled by pyramids of power but was wondering whether that was a good idea or whether such life was even possible, then it would be quite understandable that he took God's call not only as an encouragement to leave, but *also as a promise* that such a life not only was possible for him, but also for all his descendants and eventually for the whole world. And the key word in the story and the call is "descendants": Abram did not have any. Of course, both fundamentalists and *critical* scholars would jump through the roof that Abram did not have any descendants because his wife, Sarai, was barren, and she was barren because God miraculously made her barren, and if later it turned out that she was not barren because she managed to give birth to a son even at a very old age, that was because God again miraculously made her fertile. An ancient reader, however, would have known that there was no need for God to miraculously make people barren and then fertile, because people can make themselves barren any time they want because, unlike animals, they know that it is the sexual intercourse that causes pregnancies and since women have discharges that enables them to know when sexual intercourse can

result in pregnancies, they can decide to be barren or fertile any time they want. It is for this reason that we are told in the Bible that only women are barren and not men, no doubt because men have no way to know whether their sexual intercourse can result in pregnancy or not, what is not true about women. That Sarai's barrenness had nothing to do with the fact that there was anything wrong with her private parts or that God had to be careful to act as a condom every time Sara and Abram had intercourse to prevent Sara from becoming pregnant is clearly explained later on in the story:

They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent." Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abram and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" (Gen 18:9-12).

Therefore, the *cause* of Sarah's barrenness was her laughter and not the fact that God messed with her private parts. Laughter is a universal behavior for rejecting something or for finding something ridiculous, and if Sarah and Abram did not have children, it was not because they did not have *pleasure* for sexual intercourse which does not necessarily disappear with old age, but because they did not have *pleasure* for children. For humans, children are expensive because they require a lot of investment in terms of care, and the only reason humans want to have children is in order to perpetuate a life that they find meaningful, but when you find life not only meaningless but downright evil, going through the trouble to raise children only resulted in perpetuating and even increasing evil. If you are living in a world where children can only be Harans or Nahors – and eventually all Nahors become Harans and the children of Harans end up as Nahors Junior - why not enjoy life without going through the pain of pregnancies, nursing children, and changing diapers in the middle of the night since you know when you are *barren* and tell your husband when he could have a go as much as his private parts are able to perform and when you are not available, he should set his mind on less enjoyable things? If Abram's childlessness had to do with his struggle whether he should go somewhere in order to live a kind of life that was worth passing down to descendants, then it is perfectly understandable why, when Abraham received a call from God encouraging him not only to leave, but also promising him a life that would be worth passing down not only to his immediate descendants, but to the whole world, he enthusiastically set out on the journey in spite of his old age. How Abram chose his itinerary we are not told but what we are told is where he arrived: "Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother's son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land" (Gen 12:5-6). An ancient reader would not have failed to notice a bitter irony: While ac-

According to the *blessings* and the *curses* of the drunkard Noah these Canaanites were supposed to be servants of Nahor in the tents of *name/Shem* in Ur, now is the hair of the *blessing* who is a fugitive from the tents of *name/Shem* and comes to live among the *cursed* one and not among the *blessed* ones. And the irony does not stop there: The *blessed* one is living in tents, while the *cursed* ones are living in cities: "Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, 'To your offspring I will give this land.' So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he moved on to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east; and there he built an altar to the LORD and invoked the name of the LORD" (Gen 12:7-8). God not only did not implement the *curses* and the *blessings* of the drunkard Noah to make the Canaanites servants of the descendants of *name/Shem* in Ur and even caused the collapse of the Tower of Babel envisioned by Noah, but now makes clear that he intentionally brought the descendant of the *blessed name/Shem* to live among the *cursed* ones. And the reason God wanted Abraham to come and live among the Canaanites is clearly indicated by the detail that the Canaanites were living in cities. But why were they living in cities? Of course, scholars would start to roll their eyes that cities proves that they were *civilized* and that is the reason scholars are so fascinated with digging those city walls and judge the level of *civilization* by the magnitude of those walls. But are cities with their walls proof of a higher society, or are they proofs of downright stupidity? If the Canaanites from the cities of Ai and Bethel built those walls to defend themselves, from whom did they try to defend themselves but from each other? And since they were all Canaanites and no doubt related through intermarriages, why were they afraid of one another? That they ran away from *name/Shem* because they did not want to be servants to a master is understandable, but why could they not live in peace with one another? Why waste materials and labor to build city walls and not use those resources to build better houses? Contrary to what scholars think, life in a city was miserable at best if not extremely dangerous, and only people completely deprived of common sense would choose to live such a life. City walls involved not only enormous expenses of valuable building materials and labor, but restricted the living space that turned life in an ancient city way below the most insalubrious prisons today. In such crowded places epidemics ran wild while fires razed to the ground cities regularly. The most deadly epidemics and the most destructive fires have taken place in the largest cities from ancient times such as Rome to the modern times such as London and Chicago. The walls, however, made life particularly cumbersome for ancient people because they lived mainly from agriculture, and all the cultivated fields were outside the city walls therefore, for laborers to get out of the city in the morning to get to the fields and then return to the city before the gates closed when gates were made as few and as narrow as possible, must have made the actual working day quite short. Traffic jams in large cities must be a piece of cake compared to what must have happened every day at city gates. And while they were working their fields, they kept an eye on their neighbors because

they never knew when they would pull their swords from under their coats, rush to crush their heads, split open their bellies, and set their city on fire. And even if they were attacked when they were in the city, a few torches impregnated with bitumen thrown over the wall would quickly set the whole city on fire and they would burn inside like rats because those mighty walls they thought would protect them, would only prevent them from running away to escape alive. The reason Abram pitched his tent between the two Canaanite cities was not doubt in order to expose the absurdity of their *civilized* mentality. To live in a tent was basically to live in the open because a tent may have provided some protection from the elements, but no protection from an attack, and if he as a foreigner could live in the open without fear, why those Canaanites could not do the same? As the Canaanites were watching each other with hostility from the city walls, they could not miss seeing Abram settling down between them and instead of starting to build some defenses, he just built an altar to his deity. And here both fundamentalists and *critical* scholars start to fantasize that Abraham built an altar in order to prove that he believed in Christ who would come and pay with his blood for all his sins because all sacrifices are just payments for sins. Just as in the case of the sacrifices brought by Cain and Abel, there is nothing to suggest that the reason Abraham brought the sacrifice was to pay for some sins, but rather, the reason he built an altar and offered a sacrifice was the same as in the case of Cain and Abel, that is, to express his gratitude to God that God had created humans with the ability to earn much more than they need even in the worst circumstances and they have no reason to be afraid that they may starve to death or have to attack others to plunder them in order to feed themselves. If the Canaanites thought that sacrifices were just bribes for deities to help conquer others and plunder all their possessions – as it was the universal mentality in ancient time and even among Christians today – clearly Abram did not bring such a sacrifice since he never plundered anyone and not only had no intention to do so, but his open presence in full view proved that he had no hostile intentions. And that this was the lesson that God expected Abram to teach his Canaanite neighbors is proved by the fact that God responded to the sacrifice by giving Abram the assurance that the land was his and therefore of descendants like him. And after this assurance, comes something really surprising: “And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb” (Gen 12:9). Since God told him that he had reached his destination and he was doing what God expected him to do, why move somewhere else? For those familiar with the geography of Palestine, Negeb is the southern part of the country which is desert and where even today Israel is trying to force nomads into permanent settlements. Why did he move into an arid area since God had indicated that he reached his destination and God expected him to teach the Canaanites peaceful living and that the concept of dominance that had been introduced by the drunkard Noah was not according to God’s plan? The only reasonable answer is that Abram became afraid that instead of becoming a buffer between hostile parties, he would be caught up in the crossfire. Evil works by fear because not only

the greatest evils are done out of fear, but fear breeds fear and as fear escalates, so does the evil that it causes because fear blocks human rationality so that they become completely unable to think, indeed, they lose any trace of common sense. The terrorist attacks were widely used by the western governments to scare the population in order to support wars that were supposed to scare the terrorists, and as those wars killed thousands of people, the scared terrorists started to organize more terrorist attacks to scare the western people, and as the western countries intensified their bombing to scare the terrorists, they started to organize themselves and to resort to more brutal killings to scare even more those who were bombing them in order to scare them. Abram may have understood that what made the world full of evil was fear that eventually turned to violence, and although he dreamt of a world in which there would be no fear and no violence, he discovered that that was not so easy. Contrary to what both fundamentalists and *critical* scholars think, although the author of Genesis does intend to present Abraham as a special character who eventually would help understand what God expects from all human beings, Genesis does not present Abram and other patriarchs as ideal individual who always do what God expects them to do and all humanity should take as models. Quite the opposite, many of the behaviors are presented precisely in order to suggest that God's standards are so high that even characters with the best intentions often fail to meet them. Once fear takes hold of Abraham, it escalates and blurs sound thinking, indeed, even common sense, because next we read:

Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account" (Gen 12:10-13).

To Abram may have seemed that the famine occurred in the land when he arrived there, but those who had lived in the area before they knew that there was *always* famine in the land simply because it was desert, something that is true even today. Although the famine is blamed on the land, there are no hungry lands but only hungry people and when people are hungry, it is not the land that is at fault, but the people. Although the mentality is that deserts are places where it is not possible to obtain food, that is not really true. Actually, deserts can be some of the most fertile places because they have loose soil and plenty of wormth and sunshine, ingredients critical for abundant growth for most plants. The only other important ingredient that is missing is water, and that is what humans can provide because are endowed with the ability to develop knowledge and skills. Since the planet is two thirds water, there is no reason why every inch of dry land cannot be soaked with water. When water is provided, however, deserts can produce the most luxuriant oases. That some of the most luxuriant places

can be created in the deserts can be seen not only in the Middle East, but also in the United States of America where one of the most extravagant cities, Las Vegas, is built in the middle of the most arid part of the country. Whether a piece of land does not have enough water and humans have to provide it from somewhere else, or has too much water that makes cultivation impossible and humans have to drain the land or create dams in order to claim the land as Americans have done with the city of New Orleans and the Dutch did in order to claim a large part of their country with some of the most fertile soil, whether the land is productive or not depends ultimately on the humans and their willingness to use their knowledge to make the land provide for an abundant life for its residents. Although there was no threat to his life in the desert and people have always been able to live in that area, the reason Abram decided to move to Egypt was because Egypt was another place famous for its fertility because it was located at the mouth of one of the largest rivers in the Middle East, the Nile, just as his original city Ur was located at the confluence of two other largest rivers in that area, Tigris and Euphrates. Ancient readers, who were familiar with the geography, would have realized that Abram has come full circle: He had left a Garden of Eden in Ur and ended up in another Garden of Eden in Egypt. That he had not forgotten what life was like in such Gardens of Eden is proved by what he tells his wife:

When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account" (Gen 12:11-13).

When it comes to explaining this decision of Abraham, both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars go to a great length to show that Sarai was actually Abram's half-sister and therefore he did not lie when he told her not to claim to be his wife as if lying is what is most questionable about Abram's behavior on this occasion. Since for them Abram is God's representative and whatever Abram – and other patriarchs – are doing is what God himself holds as models because they always do only what God expects them to do, whatever these patriarchs may do, has to be justified somehow no matter how questionable it may be. After all, the Bible is *inspired*, and whatever these patriarchs say or do, must come directly from God and must be what God expects from all humans to do, right? To say that this passage was not inspired is to throw the whole Bible away as not being the *word of God*. As far as lying is concerned, even if it was true that Sarai was his half-sister, since she was his wife and Abram clearly told her to deny being his wife so that other men should feel free to have sex with her, that was one of the most outrageous lies one can imagine. What is even more irrational is that a husband and wife would decide to go in a country where both would agree that the wife could become a concubine at best or a prostitute at worst. I imagine that both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars would be quick to argue that this was a life and death situation in which peo-

ple had to do whatever was necessary to save their skins and in such situations people have to make desperate decisions that may not reflect the best judgment and therefore we should not be too quick to judge them. As the text makes clear, however, there was no threat to Abram's life in Negeb and according to his own admission, he risked to be killed precisely by moving to Egypt and that is how he justified the decision to make his wife available for anyone who wanted to have sex with her. Abram was not faced with a dangerous situation; he *placed* himself in a dangerous situation. What is equally surprising is that Sarai does not raise any objections to the plan. The fact that there was famine in Negeb does not mean that Abram was in any danger of dying of starvation particularly taking into account that he is described as being very wealthy, and even if he did not want to live the hard life that a desert offered, he could still have turned back to where he had built the altar and God had indicated that that was where God expected him to live, that is, between Bethel and Ai. Why did he move to Negeb? Although we are not presented with a reason as to why Abram moved, the common sense answer is that he did not want to live in the crossfire of the trigger-happy Canaanites and act as a buffer against their constant warfare. As the text had mentioned, Abram ended up living between two Canaanite cities, Bethel on the west, and Ai on the east. These were *cities*, implying that they were human settlements surrounded by fortified walls. Why did the Canaanites build those walls? Of course, scholars would start to roll their eyes that they built those walls because they were *civilized* and they built those walls to defend their *values* from savage people like Abram who came from nowhere and because they had no *values*, would steal the *values* of the Canaanites destroying their nice *civilization* that they had been working so hard to create. Sounds familiar? What scholars miss is that those cities were already there when Abram arrived and therefore those walls had not been built by the Canaanites in order to defend themselves against shepherds like Abram who did not pose any threat to anyone. Therefore, the only common sense answer is that the Canaanites had built those walls in order to defend themselves from each other, and that provides a clue as to what kind of relationship they had with one another. As we know from the Greek mythology, Greek cities were constantly at war with one another often for the most trivial reasons – and sometimes for no reason at all – and they built those walls to defend themselves from one another and not from foreigners. Although Sparta may have been conquered by a foreign prince like Paris when Helen was taken to Troy as a hostage, that was a rare occurrence and Paris may have been able to succeed precisely because no Greek city expected a foreign prince to contemplate such an attack so that Menelaus was taken completely by surprise and was unprepared to defend his city. Instead, all Greek cities kept an eye on the other neighboring cities for the slightest clues that they may contemplate an attack because they knew that if an attack came, it most likely was launched by a neighboring city. And this must have been true about Canaanite cities like Bethel and Ai as well. They were neighboring Canaanite cities all right, but they knew that when they

would fight next time, most likely they would fight with one another. That is the reason they constantly kept a watchful eye on each other, and that was no friendly eye. Since the cities were close to each other, so were the fields so that, when the citizens from both cities were out working their fields, they often worked next to each other, and whenever that happened, they looked all the time over their shoulder because they never knew when their neighbors would pull their swords from under their shirts and start backstabbing them. And to make sure that they would be prepared to defend themselves, whenever they left the *safety* of their city walls, besides the tools that they needed to work with in the fields, they never forget to tuck a sharp sword under their shirts as well; just in case! And while the workers were working in the fields, the most muscular young men who could have provided the greatest help in the fields when machines were not available, always remained on the city walls doing nothing but watching their neighbors to notice when they would attack their city so that they would be prepared to defend it. And the most muscular men from the neighboring city were doing the same thing: watching them to figure out when the others would attack so that they would be ready. And as they were watching each other through the barrels of their guns with their fingers on the trigger, there comes a stranger with huge flocks and pitches his tents right there in the open between the two cities with no guards and not even a fence so that anyone could go, rip open a tent with a knife, and steal what? That way of life? Who wanted it, particularly if you are *civilized* and have discovered *values* that place you way above the other mortals? Although Abram posed no threat to anyone and no Canaanite was interested in adopting anything from him since the Canaanites did not consider him and the way he lived any different from the animals he was tending, he could not miss not only their angry looks, but even their gestures from the top of the walls to pack and go away just as Americans and their European allies are so obsessed with purging their countries of all foreigners. Living among people with their closets full of guns like the Americans – particularly Christians – is not easy and it is no surprise that Abram decided to move to another place, but wherever he moved, he found himself between Canaanite cities, whether they were at west and at east, or were at north and at south, he always ended up in the crossfire, until he found himself in Negeb, where there were no more cities, no more *civilized* people armed to their teeth to defend their *values* because the only *value* that would have enabled one to survive there was hard work and no one who is *civilized* would stoop so low as to engage in such activities and still remain *civilized*. Even Abram, who did not grow up with a silver spoon in his mouth, did not find it easy, and that was because the life in a Garden of Eden like Egypt and the one that he had left behind when he left Ur seemed so attractive. If God, however, wanted Abram to teach those Canaanites a different kind of relationship that humans should have, how could Abram do it by running away from them? Contrary to how fundamentalists and *critical* scholars read the story, an ancient reader would have understood that whatever Abram does from that point, he departs from what God ex-

pected him to do and readers should understand that on this occasion Abraham displays a behavior and a way of thinking that may have been widespread both in ancient as well as in modern times that leads to broken human societies, but is a kind of behavior that God not only does not hold as an ideal, but does not even endorse. In other words, through this story the author of Genesis is trying to present not the objective actions of a historical individual called Abram married to a half-sister called Sarai who was still an irresistible beauty queen in her late 60's, but a reasoned reality on which wrong human societies are based and why humans accept to create and live in such societies. That the author does not intend to describe objective reality – that is, the actions of a real husband and wife – is indicated by a hard to miss reality blocker: the age of Sarai. Although we do not know how long it took for Abram to move from Haran to Egypt, taking into account that he was 75 years old when he left Haran and his wife was ten years younger, Abram must have been past 75 when he went to Egypt and Sarai was past 65 years old. Even if we assume that she was the undisputed beauty queen of the Middle East when she married Abram, for her to remain such a sexy woman that other men would want to kill her husband in order to have sex with a 65 years old woman particularly at a time when aesthetic surgeries were not available and she lived as a nomad and no doubt never used any skin care, defied anything that one knows not only about ancient life, but even modern life as well. Since the author is blatantly describing here reasoned reality and not some objective reality, the story is meant to point out the absurdities involved in the kind of life that one would live in places like Egypt and why people accept to live in such places. Although Abram is described as someone who was very prosperous at any time in his life and therefore in no danger of lacking anything – let alone in danger of dying of starvation – his decision to move to Egypt was justified by him “so that it may go well with me.” Since things had always gone “well” with him, what he means is that he thought that in Egypt things would go even better. Of course, he realized that in order to live in a place where life was easier there was a price to be paid by turning loose his wife to be in bed with whomever had the power over those Gardens of Eden, but he thought that the price was worth paying taking into account that his pockets would get fuller. And that begs the question: Why do people have to pay a price in order to live a better or a more abundant life? The difference between Negeb and Egypt was not only that the soil in Egypt was more fertile and therefore required less work, but in Egypt there was a pyramid of power with the Pharaoh at the top and a hierarchy that distinguished between citizens and foreigners while in Negeb there was no such pyramid of power. According to such pyramids of power, the one at the top has the right to have anything he likes while a foreigner can even be killed if anything he has is wanted by the one at the top. Since foreigners have little to offer to the locals, the sexual pleasures that foreign women can provide have always been the greatest incentives for *civilized* countries to accept foreigners, and their male relatives have been tolerated as part of the deal. Although Abram may have thought

that such an arrangement would “go well” with him, when a society is based on a reasoned reality that defies rationality, eventually things do not “go well” for anybody, because next we read: “But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife” (Gen 12:17). As we noticed so often, what happens when humans choose to do what is wrong is described as having been caused by God not in the sense that God arbitrarily brings some bad things out of the blue to punish humans when he does not like something, but in the sense that whenever humans choose to do some things, they *always* suffer similar consequences because the world that God had created is governed by such rules and when things happen according to those rules, the ultimate cause of what happens is God himself because he had established the world to function according to those rules. The word “plague” is regularly understood as referring to some pestilence or epidemic and scholars fantasize that it may have to do with some venereal disease that made it impossible for Egyptians to have sex with Sarai as if God had nothing better to do than to watch Sarai’s private parts to make sure that no one except Abram had access to them when Abram himself did not care about those private parts as long as his pockets were getting full. The word “plague” referred to major disruptions in human societies that resulted in great suffering and deaths, whether from natural causes such as diseases or manmade and therefore a modern equivalent would be *crisis*. While humans are fascinated with *civilizations*, they never notice that *crises* occur only in civilizations and never in any uncivilized society. Even today, the so called *world* crisis is affecting only the so called *civilized* societies, that is, the American and the European ones, while other countries – called derisively *third world* – not only do not experience any crisis, but know a period of greatest growth and prosperity. From the point of view of the *civilized* countries, however, the *world* is themselves while the rest of the world is just background noise therefore, when they experience a *crisis* as a result of their irrationality, the whole world is in *crisis*. And whenever *civilized* societies become dysfunctional and experience *crises*, who gets the blame? Who else but the foreigners:

But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram’s wife. So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, “What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, ‘She is my sister,’ so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her, and be gone.” And Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had (Gen 12:17 – 20).

Let us notice that it was Abram who lied about his wife being his sister and if Pharaoh eventually found out the truth, most likely it was from Sarai. But what were those “great plagues” and how did the Egyptians know that those plagues were caused by foreigners like Sarai and Abram? The reason the text is not explicit is because readers from all times would have known what kind of “plagues” all foreigners cause to all *civilized* countries particularly modern ones such as the American and the European. Alt-

though men may be fascinated to have foreign women as their concubines or use them as prostitutes, their wives who are citizens see foreign women as the ones who destroy their families and therefore a “plague” for the country. According to mythology, the women on Lemnos became so outraged that their husbands developed a taste for foreign women that they even killed their husbands. Does it mean that male foreigners are viewed more favorably by the native citizens? It seems that at least Abram somehow received some favors when the text says: “And for her sake he [Pharaoh] dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels” (Gen 12:16) and both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars understand that Pharaoh “dealt well” with Abram by raising those animals himself and giving them to Abram for letting him have sex with his sister as if he could not find cheaper sex, although the text only says that Abram “had” those animals and not that Pharaoh *gave* them to him, and therefore that Pharaoh “dealt well” with Abram can only mean that he simply tolerated him and allowed him to stay in the country and take care of his animals. That Abram had such wealth before he came to Canaan the text had mentioned earlier and whatever extra wealth Abram managed to acquire in Egypt must have been through his hard work since Genesis later states that Egyptians considered raising animals a job too dirty for their *civilized* way of life: “all shepherds are abhorrent to the Egyptians” (Gen 46:34). If Egyptians would not raise animals for themselves, why would they raise animals to give them away to pay a foreign pimp in order for Pharaoh to have sex with his sister since the pimp himself had made clear that anyone could have sex with his sister for free just by leaving him alone? Therefore, whatever animals Abram had, they were either animals that he had brought with him to Egypt plus animals that he had managed to raise himself in Egypt, and that raises the question: Whose animals were they? Since all civilizations have the concept of Gardens of Eden where there is abundance of flocks, of crops, of houses, of commodities, of money, and so on, goodies that all grow by themselves because God had *blessed* their country with such an abundance so that the citizens have nothing to do but just consume as much as they can, it follows that if foreigners end up with some flocks or some harvest or some money, is because they have stolen from the country what rightfully belonged to the residents, and when the citizens no longer have enough to eat it is not because being *civilized* they find “abhorrent” to get their hands dirty and work the land to produce what they consume – to work in factories, to raise animals, to build houses, and so on – but is the foreigners who ruin the country by stealing all that wealth to which they have no right although they do most of the hard work in the country for a miserable pay and often for no pay at all. According to all politicians and western mass media, foreigners cause all the problems in their nice societies: they steal all the jobs while never perform any useful work, they get medical care, houses, money, and all they need for free, while they bring to the country only problems such as violence, rape, burglaries, terrorism, drugs, and so on. Of course, purging their nice societies of all foreigners would cure

their country of all their problems and any politician who promises to do that and prevent any foreigner from becoming a citizen is guaranteed overwhelming victory in any election. Since at the time of this writing the presidential campaign in the United States of America is in full swing, the hugely popular candidate for the presidency is Donald Trump who promises no less than to “make America great again.” And how does he promise to do that? Surprise, surprise ... by purging the *country of immigrants* of all foreigners and by banning all Muslims from entering the country, and the reason he believes that that is going to make America the greatest country that ever existed is because he knows that “immigration is bad for the country.” And how does he know that? Well, his mother was a foreigner and became American through marriage and two of his three wives, including the last ones – and the current – were not only foreigners, but some of the worst kind of foreigners because they came from Eastern Europe where the most uncivilized and backward people live. Can anyone doubt that Trump has firsthand knowledge of how evil and bad for the country foreigners are? Moreover, his enormous wealth consists in real estate, and since building houses is a job too dirty for *civilized* American hands, it is done mainly by Mexicans so that most of Trumps wealth has been created by those Mexicans. Any wonder that he has first hand knowledge of how bad the Mexicans are for the country and why he is so determined to purge the country of them after they had built all his wealth? And Americans, being *civilized*, are not smart enough to ask him to get rid of his foreign wives before he purges the country of all foreigners if he really believes that foreigners are so evil and without them the country would be the greatest. While all politicians and mass media intoxicate the population with the idea that foreigners steal the jobs from the citizens, they would never mention that no American or European citizen would accept to do the jobs that what they call *illegal immigrants* do for the same payment just as Egyptians found “abhorrent” to care for stinky animals like the ones Abram “had.” Therefore, just like the American and the Europeans, who only elect politicians who promise to purge their nice countries of all foreigners, so also the Egyptians thought that whatever “plagues” affected their country, they would disappear by expelling all the foreigners from the country. Any wonder that one day the Egyptian officials showed up and escorted Abram out of the country? Taking into account that the biblical stories are not about objective reality, that is, about what happened to a historical individual, but about reasoned reality that referred to categories of people and happen all the time and everywhere for the same reason, the deportation of Abram must refer to a political initiative to expel all the foreigners from the country like the policies that American and Europeans are trying to implement now, of course, in order to solve all the crises with which their *civilized* societies are “plagued.” And where did Abram go? Well, he had to go back to where he came from, that hateful Negeb: “So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb” (Gen 13:1). In Negeb, however, Abram did not have to worry that some Pharaoh might want his wife and then expel him from

there, but he realized that there was nothing God wanted him to do there and therefore decided to move again. And where did he go? Surprise, surprise, ... precisely in the crossfire from where he had left and God had told him that it was there that he wanted him: "Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. He journeyed on by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first; and there Abram called on the name of the LORD" (Gen 13:2–4). How can the author of Genesis say more plainly that this story about Abram going down to Egypt is not intended to help readers learn what God-inspired people do, but rather how even people who are committed to do what God expects them to do, eventually they show poor judgment, make bad decisions, and learn the hard way by paying a price? And I want to emphasize that this is another fundamental hermeneutical principle used in analyzing these stories: Unlike the heroes of mythological stories who are at best all the time and never change or lose any of their extraordinary abilities even when they grow old, the biblical characters – including Abram and all the patriarchs – are like real people who are never at their best at any time but develop as they make decisions and learn from their experience, so that they always develop, and whether they prosper or go to ruin depends on whether they learn the right lessons or not from what they experience. Contrary to mythological stories in which the most outrageous actions of the humans are presented as having been decided and requested by deities and therefore humans bear no responsibility for what they do, in the Bible God never tells anyone what to do, although occasionally God is presented as endorsing an action, but only after it had been decided and carried out by humans. Although we are told that God encouraged Abram to leave Haran, God did not tell Abram where to go, and only when Abram arrived between Bethel and Ai God told him that that was where he wanted him to be. Although we do not know how God communicated with Abram, in spite of such a message, Abram felt free to leave the area and go down to Egypt, and although the Egyptians are presented as having been punished by God, there is no suggestion that God was angry with Abram for *disobeying* him or that God punished Abram for doing something wrong. In order to see the contrast, we need to remember that in mythological stories, heroes not only do not have the option not to kill even their parents and their children when demanded by the deity, but even showing some disrespect to a deity or failing to offer some sacrifices would incur some of the harshest punishments, from being turned into an animal to being killed in the most brutal way. For instance, the Greek character Acteon happened to see the goddess Artemisia/Diana when she was taking a bath while he was hunting deer with his hounds, and as a punishment, he was turned into a stag and was torn to pieces by his own hounds. Does it mean that the biblical deity has no expectation from humans so that they can do whatever they like and the deity does not care? Not at all! Although the biblical God has very high expectations from humans, he never expects humans to be perfect at any point or to ever do only what is

right, but what the biblical God expects all humans to do is learn from what they had done wrong and never do it again. That Abram's decision to go to Egypt was a wrong decision the text leaves no ambiguity, but that does not mean that the experience itself was *useless*. And the author includes this embarrassing experience in the story precisely because he expects the readers to see how the characters who go to such experiences learn from them and how such experiences shape their decisions and their actions in the future; for better or worse. In other words, as readers we are expected to judge and evaluate whether the characters do what God expects them to do by evaluating whether their *lot* understood as their fortune prospers or ends in failure. The pun implied in the title of the article is intended: "lot" is also a piece of land someone owns and uses and at the same time is the kind of fortune or fate that someone happens to experience, and how each character fares is ultimately the result of their decisions. People may choose a *lot* as a piece of land or a country where to live but their prosperity depends much more on their decisions and on their actions than of the qualities of that piece of land or *lot*. That we are expected to compare different ways of thinking is clearly indicated by the fact that Abram at no point is presented as moving alone, but accompanied by his younger relative Lot who so far has not done anything. Although we are not told what happened to Lot in Egypt and he is not even mentioned as going there, the author does not forget to tell us that he came out of Egypt with Abram and therefore he must have accompanied Abram even there and was expelled from Egypt at the same time. Why do we need to know about this Lot? Just to know that Abram had a duplicate who was a knee-jerk reaction to whatever he did? I need to stress again that the biblical writer is extremely economical with manuscript real estate and whatever detail is included in the story, is because it is relevant later on and readers are expected not only to retain those details, but look for the moment when each detail is helpful to understand what is going on. Biblical reading is looking all the time both forward as well as backward because whatever is left behind is necessary to understand what follows. We may not know why Lot had to go to Egypt and why Abram had to offer his wife as a prostitute to Egyptians in order to be left alive, but we can be sure that this part of the story is important to explain some things that will happen later on in the story. The reason modern readers – and particularly *critical* scholars – never explain some strange behaviors of the biblical characters is because they read with horse blinders so that they only see the words that are right under their nose and forget what they had read a few sentences before.

As Abram came in the crossfire of the Canaanites, he did come under fire, but ... surprise, surprise ... not from those Canaanites, but from his copycat nephew:

He journeyed on by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first; and there Abram called on the name of the LORD. Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, so that the land could not support both of them living together; for their possessions were

so great that they could not live together, and there was strife between the herders of Abram's livestock and the herders of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites lived in the land" (Gen 13:3–7).

Although people who were considered the most violent lived in the area, the violence came not from them, but from Abram's close relative and companion, and the violence was not caused by some famine that was in the land so that Lot had to resort to violence to get some scraps of food from his uncle in order not to starve to death, but it was caused by the fact that he accumulated too much wealth. Contrary to what is being said all the time, people do not become violent when they are poor and are hungry; they become violent when they acquire enough wealth so that the richest people are always the most violent. Of course, they would never admit that, but would say that if they have to resort to violence, it is only because they had to defend their *values* because those who are poor want to take away from them what they have and not that they want to conquer others not because they are any threat to them, but because they never have enough and want to take away even what the most poor have. Prosperity is the result of cooperation, and if Abram and Lot had managed to acquire significant wealth, it was because they managed to organize communities to coordinate their efforts to increase the flocks and their commodities and not to build walls, and if Lot's herders had decided to cooperate with Abram's herders to dig wells and sheepfolds that they could use together and coordinate the movement of their flocks on the pastures to maximize the yield of the land, their prosperity would have increased even more. Instead, the herders started to harass and quarrel with one another neglecting their flocks instead of focusing for providing for them. How did this transformation in Lot's behavior take place? An intelligent ancient reader would have said: Aha, that is the reason Abram had to go to Egypt, so that Lot had the opportunity to discover the beauty of becoming *civilized*, of acquiring wealth and then of eliminating anyone who might be around you even if he is not a foreigner because is a close relative. Lot may have been expelled from Egypt, but the Egyptians could not expel Egypt from his mind and therefore Lot took Egypt with him. He discovered the pleasure of accumulating wealth and then of using violence in order to increase it not by honest work, but by taking advantage of others. While being in Egypt, Lot and his shepherds watched from behind bushes with fascination the Egyptian warriors practicing with their swords and discovered that they could learn those moves by practicing them with their own clubs while being with their herds and when they found an area with fresh grass and Abrams shepherds were already there, they used some of those swings with their clubs, crushed several skulls, and bingo!, all that fresh grass was for their animals to enjoy. And when they had to water their herds and Abram's shepherds were already there, a few swings with their clubs got rid of those herds and now all the water was theirs to enjoy. Why wait in line when you can swing your fists and your clubs and get immediately what you want? After several of his shepherds came with their head bleeding and told Abram that they did not dare to

go out and feed the flocks, Abram realized that he had to take action and decided to settle the matter with his nephew. And what was the solution? Of course, Abram should have built some walls, train his herders to crush skulls and rip open bellies instead of milking sheep and taking care of them, at least this is what all *civilized* people have done. But this is not what we learn that Abram did: “Then Abram said to Lot, ‘Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herders and my herders; for we are kindred. Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left’” (Gen 13:8–9). What Abram tells Lot is that he is a coward: If Lot decides to go to the right because that is where the better grass is, then he would run to the left to stay out of his way, and if he decides to go to the left, he would make sure to run in the opposite direction so that all Abram wanted from Lot was to let him know what he wanted and Abram would be careful to stay out of his way so that Lot and his herders did not need to use their newly acquired fighting skills to keep Abram away because he himself would do it for them. What can be expected from a barbarian like Abram who had no *values* and did not understand that he needed to build his muscles to defend *values*? The chicken patriarch was no match for the British Irion Lady who fought a war on the opposite side of the Earth in which thousands of people died in order to defend a barren island called Falkland off the coast of Argentina because the British, being some of the most *civilized*, are so obsessed with defending their *values* that they cannot conceive of giving up some piece of land across an ocean no matter how worthless it is and is not theirs to begin with. Who says that patriarchs are brutes and women are just powerless toys in their hands! Realizing that he was dealing with a coward, one can imagine what a big smile Lot had on his face, and as he was looking around to decide which part of the country to choose, what standard did he use in order to pick where he wanted to live? Surprise, surprise ... that trip to Egypt proved to have been an eye-opener:

Lot looked about him, and saw that the plain of the Jordan was well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, *like the land of Egypt*, in the direction of Zoar; this was before the LORD had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward; thus they separated from each other. Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the Plain and moved his tent as far as Sodom. Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD [*emphasis mine*] (Gen 13:10–13).

The “land of Egypt” may not have liked Lot, but Lot did like that land very much so that, when he had to pick another land, he chose what in Palestine was the closest to the land of Egypt and started to treat Abram exactly as he had been treated by the Egyptians. Let us notice that God is not involved in any way in what is happening and is not interfering in any way with what people decide. The text, however, does provide some clues to guide the reader about what should expect to be explained as reading progress-

es. For instance, although Lot's decision to pick the best part of the country seems a no-brainer, the author does mention that the people where Lot decided to stay lived in cities that were "wicked" and "sinners," and although we do not know what was their wickedness and their sins, we should expect not only that to be explained in what follows, but how come that those cities no longer existed when the story was read. On the other hand, although Abram looks like a coward and no *civilized* American or European would imagine to follow his example, the deity approves of his decisions and promises that his choice would end in great prosperity:

The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you" (Gen 13:14–17).

Can there be anything wrong with living in "gardens of the LORD" and in "lands of Egypt," no doubt clear references to the Garden of Eden? As one would expect, that is exactly what the author explains next:

In the days of King Amraphel of Shinar, King Arioch of Ellasar, King Chedorlaomer of Elam, and King Tidal of Goiim, these kings made war with King Bera of Sodom, King Birsha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Admah, King Shemeber of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). All these joined forces in the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Dead Sea). Twelve years they had served Chedorlaomer, but in the thirteenth year they rebelled. In the fourteenth year Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him came and subdued the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim, the Zuzim in Ham, the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, and the Horites in the hill country of Seir as far as El-paran on the edge of the wilderness; then they turned back and came to En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh), and subdued all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites who lived in Hazazon-tamar. Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admah, the king of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar) went out, and they joined battle in the Valley of Siddim with King Chedorlaomer of Elam, King Tidal of Goiim, King Amraphel of Shinar, and King Arioch of Ellasar, four kings against five. Now the Valley of Siddim was full of bitumen pits; and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them, and the rest fled to the hill country. So the enemy took all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah, and all their provisions, and went their way; they also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, who lived in Sodom, and his goods, and departed (Gen 14:1–12).

Lot may have thought that by choosing to live in Sodom he would live on top of the world, but later discovered that those cities were at constant war with one another, and when they were not at war with one another, they would join forces to become allies only to fight other coalitions of cities so that regardless whether you ended up defeated or victorious, they were always at war or paying tribute. At this time, four kings in the area had made an alliance to conquer the cities of Sodom and four others around Sod-

om, and since in wars arithmetic does not always work, the alliance of the four kings defeated the alliance of the five kings, so that Sodom and its residents – including Lot – were actually paying tribute to the alliance of the four kings, alliance that was probably an ancient version of NATO, let us call it CATO – Canaanite Alliance Treaty Organization. Consequently, the alliance led by Sodom – let us call it the Sodom Pact – had been paying tribute to CATO for twelve years. In the thirteenth year, however, the Sodom Pact decided to stop paying tribute to CATO and that triggered a cold war when all residents of all cities, whenever they ventured outside of their cities to go on a trip or to work their fields, were armed to their teeth. Hoes, sickles, and axes were quickly turned into swords as both CATO and the Sodom Pact kept track of how many *weapons of mass destruction* each side had. In the fourteenth year, however, CATO came to the conclusion that they were the most *civilized* because they had the best weapons and therefore had the mission to *civilize* all the other cities who posed a threat to their *values* that consisted in the flow of tribute, and the proof that the conquered cities became *civilized* was that they kept sending tribute accompanied by *Thank you!* notes for *liberating* us and allowing us to serve such special masters. Having reached a very high level of *civilization*, CATO swiftly conquered all the cities in the area and as arithmetic does not always work, the Sodom Pact was no match for CATO, so that the whole population and everything they had – including Lot himself – ended up slaves in exile. Quite a *blessing* to live in “gardens of the LORD”! We learn however that one of Lot’s servants did manage to escape the onslaught, and to whom did he go to tell about the tragedy? Surprise, surprise ... he went to the coward Abram: “Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, who was living by the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and of Aner; these were allies of Abram” (14:13). While Abram did not manage to persuade his nephew Lot to become his ally and live together, he did manage to persuade an Amorite Mamre and apparently his two brothers not only that he was no threat to them, but that it was to their benefit to become allies and live together. What Abram could not do with a descendant of Shem and Haran, he was able to do with some descendants of Canaan! The detail that they were living “by the oaks” would be seen just a trivial detail by modern readers and *critical* scholars, but in ancient writings where manuscript real estate is at a premium, there are no trivial details and this detail is clearly meant to indicate that Abram and his Amorite allies were not living in a city where no trees could grow but were living in an open country. Although all the cities had been conquered, no one bothered to conquer Abram and his neighbors, and apparently they did not even know that a hot war had been raging in the country so that Abram had to learn about what happened to the Sodom Pact and to Lot from an escapee. When learning about what happened to his nephew, one would have expected Abram to throw a party and thank you offerings to God for handing out to Lot what he deserved, Abram decided to take on CATO on his own:

When Abram heard that his nephew had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, born in his house, three hundred eighteen of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. He divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and routed them and pursued them to Hobah, north of Damascus. Then he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his nephew Lot with his goods, and the women and the people (Gen 14:14–16).

So, the coward patriarch and his bunch of chicken herders who did not dare to challenge Lot's thugs for the right to graze and to water their animals, suddenly they all turned into super-Achilleses and defeated what at that time seemed the undisputed world superpower! At least that is the way fundamentalists and *critical* scholars read the story. Is that believable? What is even more remarkable is that Abram managed to defeat the mighty army not by assembling his few warriors in order to fight together, but by dispersing them so that they would fight not together, but on their own. While both fundamentalists and *critical* scholars imagine that in this passage an actual battle is described, ancient readers would have understood that what is describe is rather the defeat of conquerors that always takes place by what is called resistance, that is, the subjugated population refuses to cooperate with the conquerors and eventually no conquerors are able to keep a population under control. What has deluded all conquerors is the belief that a conquest is over when an army is defeated and the battle is over, and the reason conquerors are deluded is because they confuse the army with the population. Although the army may be defeated, it does not mean that the population necessarily accepts to submit and to cooperate with the conquerors. In order to keep a whole population under control a much larger army is necessary than the army that won the battle because people are very resourceful and find ways to sabotage the masters without open hostile actions. Moreover, when the local population does resort to hostile actions, they take the form of guerilla war in which individuals act on their own without a chain of command, and launch opportunistic attacks that decimate the conquering army, make those who keep a population under control live in terror all the time, ruins the morale, make the cost of extracting tribute extremely high, and eventually the conquerors have to withdraw. Has any empire, no matter how mighty, been able to keep even the poorest population under control forever? That both the Soviets with their Warsaw Pact and NATO have been able to quickly conqueror Afghanistan is no surprise, but has any of those mighty armies been able to keep that poor population under control without being forced to withdraw sooner or later? People like Abram may not have big swords, but they have brains, and if they do not want to submit to anyone because they only want to do what they think is right, they in the end will always succeed. While both fundamentalists and *critical* scholars imagine that Abram conducted a battle, the text is quite explicit that no battle took place, and the people who eventually defeated the conquerors were people who were "born in his house," implying that they were people who shared Abram's way of thinking. That these people were not motivated by any gain is plainly spelled out in the text:

After his return from the defeat of Chedorlaomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). And King Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High. He blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abram gave him one tenth of everything. Then the king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself." But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to the LORD, God Most High, maker of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal-thong or anything that is yours, so that you might not say, 'I have made Abram rich.' I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me—Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre. Let them take their share." After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great" (Gen 14:17–15:1).

Although the text had not made explicit why Abram decided to abandon his family to live a different kind of life and what kind of world he dreamt of that God himself endorsed and promised that the whole world would eventually be blessed with, some key ideas are becoming apparent from Abram's actions. We know that he came from a family obsessed with using violence to dominate and take advantage of others – mentality that Lot blatantly displayed – and Abram not only rejected violence in dealing with his relative, but rejected violence when it was used against others so that Lot and the residents of Sodom were freed by him. Abram not only did not choose the best part of the country for himself when dealing with Lot, but even when liberating Lot and his city not only did not keep any part of the booty as just payment for himself, but even paid tithe to Melchizedek who apparently was both king and priest in the area. Abram's actions are so unusual that some justification is necessary and Melchizedek shows up to explain that Abram did what he did because he worshiped a God who cannot tolerate violence in human interactions because being the highest God who is actually the creator of everything - including of all humans - he only endorses justice as the basis of all human interactions. While all *lower* gods not only endorse violence but regularly wars are waged at their behest, the supreme deity whom Abram worshiped rejected all forms of violence including the war that had ravaged the city of Sodom and its neighbors. How did Melchizedek know all these? Well, because he not only was a priest, but was a priest of the same highest God and at the same time the king of the city called Salem which means "peace," because it is only when people worship such a deity and reject all forms of violence there is peace among humans. And when Melchizedek presented this explanation about what Abram believed and why he did what he did, then Abram paid him tithe by which he not only endorsed Melchizedek's explanation about his faith on which his actions were based, but claimed Melchizedek as his own priest although they apparently had not met before. By paying tithe, Abram indicated that the belief that Melchizedek professed on this occasion accurately described his own belief, his own deity, and the kind of world he believed in and wanted to establish.

After this extraordinary liberation, Lot and Sodom lived happily thereafter, right? Well, not quite, because next we read that some divine messengers come to Abram and disclosed to him that God was not quite happy with Sodom: “Then the LORD said, ‘How great is the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and how very grave their sin! I must go down and see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; and if not, I will know.’ So the men turned from there, and went toward Sodom, while Abraham remained standing before the LORD” (Gen 18:20-22). As someone who had been *civilized* himself, Abram must have known that the majority of the inhabitants of a city like Sodom must have been evil. After all, he had lived in two great cities and had left them deciding to live a life away from cities precisely because he found life in such places unbearable precisely because the evilness of the citizens and he must have had enough common sense to assume that life was no different in any city. Somehow, however, he questioned that Sodom was so evil as the rumor went, and decided to plead for the city raising the issue of killing the innocent people when punishing the evil ones, innocent people who in Sodom could have been at least fifty if not more according to Abraham’s estimation: “Then Abraham came near and said, ‘Will you indeed sweep away the righteous [צַדִּיקִים, *ṣadīq*] with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous [צַדִּיקִים, *ṣadīqim*] within the city; will you then sweep away the place and not forgive it for the fifty righteous [הַצַּדִּיקִים, *haṣadīqim*] who are in it?’” (Gen 18:23-24). That raises the question of what did Abram count on when he assumed that there must have been at least fifty righteous people in the city? Did he count on the fact that his nephew Lot must have made at least fifty converts to what he believed in? After all, Lot himself was far from righteous taking into account that he was using violence against his own uncle without any regard for his seniority. If Abraham imagined that there were at least fifty righteous people in the city, would he even have included Lot among them? Abraham could not have had such a short memory! An ancient reader, however, who was familiar with the language, would have realized that it was this question that the appearance in the story of the strange character Melchizedek was supposed to answer. What is strange about this character is not that he provided an accurate explanation about what Abraham believed and why he did what he did, but particularly his name מַלְכֵי-צֶדֶק מֶלֶךְ שָׁלֵם, *malkī-ṣedeq melek šālēm*, which literally says “my king is justice, king of peace.” And that raises several questions: Did he have a king called “צֶדֶק, *ṣedeq*, justice,” was he king himself of a city called “Peace,” or was he a priest in a city called “Peace” ruled by a king whose name was “צֶדֶק, *ṣedeq*, justice”? And if he was a king and a priest in the city called “Peace” - if such a place ever existed - why was he the official from Sodom who received the captives and the spoils from Abram if he was not the highest authority in Sodom? Kings and priests established the reasoned reality by which the community lived, with the priests sanctioning all the rules and the laws as having been issued by the deity that no one could challenge or question, and with the king who had the power to supervise and enforce compliance with all those rules and

regulations. It was precisely because the monarchs and the priests were the pillars of the reasoned reality that they always worked together and supported each other. Although occasionally a ruler could be both king and priest, usually the two offices were separated and held by different persons. Through this strange description “my king is justice, king of peace,” the writer obviously does not present the real name of an individual who was both king and priest at the same time, but rather the officials who ruled Sodom representing both the king and the priest(s) as professing to establish a reasoned reality by which Sodom lived based on justice and peace by adopting Abram’s religion and ideals, profession that Abram endorsed by deciding to pay tithe as he himself belonged to that kind of community, although physically he did not live inside the community. Abram pleads for the Sodom not as a resident of the city, but as a member of its faith community. Abram may have failed to convert his nephew Lot to what he believed, but he must have felt that with that rescue, he must have converted to what he believed the highest officials of the city in which Lot chose to live, and the reason the divine messengers decided to reveal to Abram their ominous mission and Abram decided to plead for the city must have been precisely because of this special relationship that had been established between Abram and Sodom. That Sodom may have been a totally evil city and its king and priests the main advocates and perpetrators of evil no doubt was true before the city had been rescued by Abram, but was it conceivably that the city officials who had converted to Abram’s beliefs had not managed to make at least fifty converts after that marvelous liberation? When the king and the priest of the city decide that violence is completely unjustified among humans and only justice and peace is the basis of human interactions, although there may be people who may still practice evil privately, in a city must be at least fifty individuals who would comply with what the highest authorities had decided. Abraham raised the issue of punishing the righteous with the wicked having in mind precisely Melchizedek and his likely followers otherwise he would have raised the issue of punishing evil people who had never had any idea of what righteousness is and his line of defense would have been completely different arguing that it is not right to punish people for being evil when they never had any opportunity to know better. The fact that Abram does not raise the issue of killing people who never had the opportunity to know what is right, is clear proof that the Sodomites could not claim ignorance, and the presence of Melchizedek in the story is precisely in order to rule out that excuse as far as the Sodomites was concerned. When the priest and the king profess to adopt righteousness and peace as their ideals, can any citizen claim ignorance about what righteousness and peace is? After Melchizedek made that profession, if there still were evil people in the city, none of them could claim ignorance and Abraham admitted that they could be rightfully punished, and therefore he raised the issue of killing those who were righteous about whom he assume that they must be at least fifty, but then he realizes that his expectations may be too high and starts to argue for lower expectations:

Suppose five of the fifty righteous are lacking? Will you destroy the whole city for lack of five? And he said, "I will not destroy it if I find forty-five there." Again he spoke to him, "Suppose forty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of forty I will not do it." Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak. Suppose thirty are found there." He answered, "I will not do it, if I find thirty there." He said, "Let me take it upon myself to speak to the Lord. Suppose twenty are found there." He answered, "For the sake of twenty I will not destroy it." Then he said, "Oh do not let the Lord be angry if I speak just once more. Suppose ten are found there." He answered, "For the sake of ten I will not destroy it" (Gen 18:28-32).

Although the divine messengers are not specific as to what exactly that "sin" consisted of, as the story progresses we learn that the whole city is outraged when those foreigners arrived in the city intending to overnight in the city square. Not only no citizen offers to provide accommodation for the travelers, but when Lot offers to accommodate them overnight, the whole city gathers determined to lynch the foreigners using sexual language that has been the language of violence in all cultures. Therefore, the "sin" that Sodom was guilty was xenophobia - treating foreigners as criminals simply for daring to come in your area even if they had not caused any harm to anyone. Xenophobia is always the most important gage of *civilization* so that the level of *civilization* can always be accurately measured by the level of xenophobia. When learning that some foreigners have come to their city and have been sheltered by Lot, all the citizen of Sodom came and demanded that the foreigners be handed over to them, no doubt to be killed:

And they called to Lot, "Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, so that we may know them." Lot went out of the door to the men, shut the door after him, and said, "I beg you, my brothers, do not act so wickedly. Look, I have two daughters who have not known a man; let me bring them out to you, and do to them as you please; only do nothing to these men, for they have come under the shelter of my roof." But they replied, "Stand back!" And they said, "This fellow came here as an alien, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them." Then they pressed hard against the man Lot, and came near the door to break it down. But the men inside reached out their hands and brought Lot into the house with them, and shut the door. And they struck with blindness the men who were at the door of the house, both small and great, so that they were unable to find the door. (Gen 19:5-11).

When Lot argued with them and they noticed that he was speaking with an accent, they remembered that he was a foreigner himself and decided to treat him worse, no doubt to kill him first. What they found extremely offensive was that a foreigner dared to call them "wicked," when they were citizens and not only had the right to be there, but had the duty to keep their nice city free from all those "wicked" foreigners like Lot, and now one of those wicked foreigners who had been tolerated in the city dares to call them "wicked" simply because they are vigilant citizens and do their duty to get rid of foreigners. Realizing that the situation was desperate, Lot decides to entice the Sodomites and win their favor by offering his two virgin daughters to be raped by the mob. As a

foreigner, Lot knew that *civilized* people never like anything more than to rape foreign women, and the younger the better, and since he had two underage daughters, he reasoned that this was the greatest treat that a foreigner could offer to *civilized* citizens. How did he know that? Well, he had accompanied his uncle Abram on his trip to Egypt and learned that when the *civilized* people want to kill you because you dare to come among them, the best way to save your skin and win their tolerance is to offer females - including your wife - to be used by those *civilized* people for sex. Lot did not offer his wife, however, probably because his wife was not such a beauty queen like Sarai, but reasoned that his underage girls would be as enticing for those *civilized* Sodomites. No matter how enticing Lot's offer may have been, it did not work apparently because those Sodomites were determined to purge their nice city of all foreigners for good, and if Lot was not killed, was because the assailants were struck with blindness by those guests and both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars imagined that those divine messengers miraculously deprived those assailants of their ability to see so that they not only were unable to see Lot and his guests, but not even find their way back home. If those divine messengers had the power to miraculously disable those assailants, why did they choose to strike those assailants with blindness and not with paralysis, since blind people can still be violent and able to kill? As we have seen too often so far, when people choose a course of action for which they become victims, those consequences are presented in the Bible as having been caused by God because they are the natural consequences of how the world created by God functions. Therefore, the blindness of the Sodomites was not caused by some miracle worked out by those divine messengers, but it was caused by their xenophobia, because that is what xenophobia is: blindness, that is, inability to see what people are. What all *civilized* people cannot see is that they themselves are foreigners since none of them knows where they come from. Probably there are no more xenophobic people than the Americans, and their xenophobia is the more inexcusable as the greatest majority of them are all foreigners just a few generations away, and even the so called *native Americans*, are related to and amalgamated with those foreigners so that foreigners are part of their family. The blindness that xenophobia creates is this inability to see that everyone is a foreigner or related to a foreigner and therefore to turn against foreigners causes people to become a blind violent mob not knowing what is doing like the one described in our story. At the time of this writing, the presidential campaign in the United States of America is under way and the Republican candidate has managed to win the popular vote and become the nominee by simply promising to expel from the country all foreigners whom he *sees* as evil and the source of all evils in the society. What Donald Trump – and those who vote for him – cannot see is that his own mother was a foreigner and his last two wives have been foreigners. Quite a blindness!

What is most outrageous about the *civilized* Sodomite mob is not that they hated foreigners, but that on this occasion they assailed Lot and threatened to kill him. During the argument with the mob, Lot must have explained that those guests were not just some strange foreigners, but were visitors who came from Abraham - his uncle and the savior of their city - and most likely were friends if not relatives of Abraham. The text is specific that on this occasion all residents of Sodom were present: "But before they lay down, the men of the city, the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house" (Gen 19:4). If no resident of Sodom was absent, is it conceivable that the official who identified himself as "My king is justice Prince of Peace" - or whatever his real name was - who greeted Abraham when he brought back the captives and the booty was absent from this event that raised the whole city up in arms? When arguing with the mob, should not a reader assume that Lot was dealing with the same city official to whom Abraham handed over the captives and the booty and to whom he paid tithe and to whom now Lot offered his two girls to be raped for the favor to allow those foreigners to spend the night in his house? For Melchizedek to reciprocate for what Abraham did by killing his friends and by raping Lot's daughters for whom Abraham initiated the whole liberation enterprise is something that even the most callous murderers would not do. Can anyone think of a "sin" that is more outrageous? Is there any wonder about what followed: "Then the men said to Lot, 'Have you anyone else here? Sons-in-law, sons, daughters, or anyone you have in the city - bring them out of the place. For we are about to destroy this place, because the outcry against its people has become great before the LORD, and the LORD has sent us to destroy it'" (Gen 19:12-13). Although Lot may not have believed that three men can destroy a city, one would have expected him to find the advice to leave the city just plain common sense and for Lot to immediately start to pack his belongings and leave that very night. Apparently, Lot initially seemed to follow the advice because he tried to persuade his would-be sons-in-law to leave: "So Lot went out and said to his sons-in-law, who were to marry his daughters, 'Up, get out of this place; for the LORD is about to destroy the city.' But he seemed to his sons-in-law to be jesting" (Gen 19:14). Although we are not provided with any information about these would-be sons-in-law, they must have been Sodomite citizens since Lot did not try to find spouses for his children by going back to Haran where his relatives were. If that is the case, then that explains why the would-be sons-in-law found the idea of leaving Sodom simply laughable: it is as if someone would suggest to an American citizen, or English, or French, or Danish, or Swiss, and so on, to leave their country and give up their citizenship in order to live as a refugee somewhere else because their nicest countries on earth would go to ruins? Can anyone think of a proposal more ridiculous? Taking into account that in ancient times marriages were arranged when children were quite young and the actual marriage took place when children became of age, since Lot's daughters were still virgin, they were underage and therefore the marriage had not taken place, he was not bound by those mar-

riage arrangements to remain in the city particularly when he was considered *persona non grata* by the city. Instead, we learn that Lot was not excited at all about the idea of leaving the city:

When morning dawned, the angels urged Lot, saying, 'Get up, take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or else you will be consumed in the punishment of the city.' But he lingered; so the men seized him and his wife and his two daughters by the hand, the LORD being merciful to him, and they brought him out and left him outside the city (Gen 19:15-16).

The only reason Lot found it difficult to leave was because he discovered that he himself could not give up his *citizenship* in that city he was so fond of so that the divine messengers had to somehow bring him and his family out of the city by force. Lot and his family physically may have been outside the city, but mentally they were still inside unable to move away from the city walls so that the messengers had to urge them to flee and stay as far from the city as possible: "When they had brought them outside, they said, 'Flee for your life; do not look back or stop anywhere in the Plain; flee to the hills, or else you will be consumed (Gen 19:17).'" What Lot discovered was that he had become so *civilized* that he found life outside a city simply unthinkable so that, if he had to leave Sodom, he pleaded to be allowed to go to another city, no matter how small as long as it was a city:

And Lot said to them, 'Oh, no, my lords; your servant has found favor with you, and you have shown me great kindness in saving my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, for fear the disaster will overtake me and I die. Look, that city is near enough to flee to, and it is a little one. Let me escape there - is it not a little one? - and my life will be saved! (Gen 19:18-20).'

After the divine messengers granted Lot's request and Lot started to move towards that city, Lot's wife discovered that she simply could not take her mind out of Sodom and probably moved walking backwards still looking at that fascinating city, and when she was some distance from the city suddenly she could not move anymore and remained stuck there like a statue: "But Lot's wife, behind him, looked back, and she became a pillar of salt" (Gen 19:25). We have here a powerful contrast between Adam and Eve when the wife took the initiative to eat from the tree of knowledge and leave the garden of God called Eden, and Lot whose wife could not contemplate living outside Sodom which was just like that original garden of God and eventually Lot had to leave without his wife. Although we do not know whether the Garden of Eden ended up in smoke after Adam and Eve left it, that is precisely what happened to the "garden of the Lord" called Sodom: "Then the LORD rained on Sodom and Gomorrah sulfur and fire from the LORD out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the Plain, and all the inhabitants of the cities, and what grew on the ground (Gen 19:24-25)." Of course, both fundamentalist and *critical* scholars imagine that what the author of Genesis describes is a miracle by which God made fire come out of the blue and set those cities on fire burn-

ing all the population alive without feeling any mercy even for the youngest children. Ancient readers, however, familiar with ancient cities, would have understood that what is described is not a miracle, but rather the way all ancient cities were burned to the ground when they were conquered. Before siege machines were invented – and this is the time when the supposed destruction of Sodom took place - the regular tactic to destroy a besieged city was to throw torches impregnated with bitumen over the city wall and set the city on fire. Since in ancient times wood was the only building material used for rafters and the roofs were thatched with reeds, buildings were extremely flammable, and taking into account that in a city houses were tightly crammed together, a fire once started quickly spread through the whole city. Those fires were so devastating that the city had to be rebuilt above a thick layer of ashes, and archaeologists calculate when ancient cities were conquered by dating the layers of ashes that they discover as they dig, sometimes dozens of them. When torches impregnated with bitumen were thrown over the city wall, from the point of view of those inside the city the fire literally looked like coming down from the sky. Of course, everyone knew what was happening and that the fire was caused by an attacking army, but wars have always been justified as decided by gods and therefore the destruction as having been caused by gods, and the explanation was used not only by the attackers, but often by those attacked but were dissatisfied with the abuses of the rulers. As we know from prophetic discourse, often conquests and disasters were *predicted* and explained as *just* punishments caused by the deity for the evils that the residents have to endure. This pattern is used by the biblical writers not only about Canaanite cities like Sodom, but the biblical prophets used it even to predict similar disasters that were going to happen to Israel itself. With the biblical God, however, who created the world and the rules by which it functions, whatever happens in the world naturally is ultimately decided by God. Although the text is explicit that the destruction of the city was decided by the deity, how exactly the destruction was carried out is only hinted at. As it was mentioned, the detail that the fire fell from the sky and was fueled by bitumen were unmistakable clues that the reference was to torches impregnated with bitumen thrown over the city walls by an attacking army. If fire is caused miraculously out of the blue, why does it need fuel such as bitumen in order to burn? But the most important clue that the destruction of the city was caused not miraculously by some deity but by a besieging army is the insistence in the story that Lot should get out of the city before the conflagration begins. This was true only when cities were besieged, and not when fire started to fall down from the sky out of the blue or when a fire was started accidentally in the city. When a city was besieged, the city gates were not only blocked, but heavily reinforced so that no one could possibly leave the city after the siege had started. If the fire had been miraculously caused by a deity, as soon as the first flames started to come down from the sky, nothing would have prevented people to head for the gates and run away. If a fire started in a city, why would the city gates be closed and prevent anyone from leaving the city and escape

alive? True, there would have been some jams at the gates and some on whom the flames would have fallen directly may have suffered severe burns and no doubt there would have been some casualties, but the great majority of the population would have managed to escape the city. Since Lot would not have been able to leave the city once the fire in the city started, this would have been an unmistakable clue to an ancient reader that the burning of the city took place while being under siege, the only scenario in which the city gates would be closed so that no one can get in or out.

If, however, the city was burned not by a miracle caused by God but by an enemy, who could have been that enemy? This is why xenophobia is so irrational and such a great *sin*: When you hate foreigners because you are *civilized*, those foreigners hate you just as much precisely because they themselves are *civilized* and you are just as a foreigner and uncivilized to them as they are to you. The problem with Sodom was not that they were the only *civilized* people; *civilized* people were everywhere and kept looking from their city walls to all the others outside – including Sodom – as barbarians who are a threat to their *values* and they cannot feel safe until all foreigners are eliminated, not just from their city, but from everywhere. Would the Americans and their European allies feel safe if all Muslims are eliminated from their countries if there are still some Muslims left somewhere in the world? Just as Sodom saw those visitors as a threat to their city because they would come only to steal, to kill, and to rape women, so also the neighboring cities saw all visitors coming to their city – including those coming from Sodom – as the threat to their city. And before they come to your city, why not go to their city and burn it down to the ground so that you finally feel safe? Does it sound familiar? Any wonder that there is no ancient city that has not been burned down many times? Xenophobia is so irrational because anyone is a foreigner to others and others are foreigners to everyone else therefore you hate everyone and everyone hates you no matter who you are and who they are. If you do not know who they are, then that is the perfect reason to hate them because they are a threat to you, and if you do know who they are, that is an even better reason to hate them. If there are foreigners about whom you know nothing, then that is an excellent reason to hate him, and if you know that they are Muslim, that is an even better reason to hate him. Few people hate foreigners as much as Americans and few people are hated by foreigners as much as Americans are hated. The reason the author of Genesis does not tell us who set Sodom on fire is because they were just like the Sodomites and therefore there were too many candidates because the world has always been full of such people.

Fortunately, thanks to his relationship with Abraham, Lot did not end up being burned up like a rat in Sodom and lived happily with his daughters thereafter, right? Well, not quite, because next we read:

Now Lot went up out of Zoar and settled in the hills with his two daughters, for he was afraid to stay in Zoar; so he lived in a cave with his two daughters. And the firstborn said to the younger, "Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to come in to us after the manner of all the world. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and we will lie with him, so that we may preserve offspring through our father." So they made their father drink wine that night; and the firstborn went in, and lay with her father; he did not know when she lay down or when she rose. On the next day, the firstborn said to the younger, "Look, I lay last night with my father; let us make him drink wine tonight also; then you go in and lie with him, so that we may preserve offspring through our father." So they made their father drink wine that night also; and the younger rose, and lay with him; and he did not know when she lay down or when she rose. Thus both the daughters of Lot became pregnant by their father. The firstborn bore a son, and named him Moab; he is the ancestor of the Moabites to this day. The younger also bore a son and named him Ben-ammi; he is the ancestor of the Ammonites to this day (Gen 19:30-38).

Finally, Lot got the message and realized that it was dangerous to live in a city, even a small one like Zoar where everyone knew everyone and where a foreigner like him would have stood out like sore thumb, and decided to live in a cave by himself. But even when people manage to learn something, in the Bible alcohol is the means by which people can unlearn what they know. Unlike Noah who got drunk himself, Lot is made drunk by his daughters and while Noah just laid naked while he was drunk, Lot managed to have sex with his daughters even when he was so drunk that he did not know what he was doing. The reason his daughters got him drunk was because they wanted to have children and supposedly there was no other men on earth with whom they could have sex and get pregnant. Is that believable? Abraham was moving in the country and everywhere he went he ran into populated areas therefore, if Lot's daughters did not find anyone to marry, it was not because there were not men around, but because they themselves had become *civilized*. Another important idea of all *civilized* people is not only xenophobia, but also the idea that they are *superior* so that they can only marry people like themselves and not foreigners. What Lot's daughters are saying when they declare that there are no other people on earth, was that, since the Sodomites were destroyed including their would-be husbands, all the others who existed were *barbarians* and they could not have such husbands and children from them. This is the fundamental ideal of racism, that is, only those like you are human and in order to preserve your superiority you need to marry and have offspring only with people like you. This is reflected in – how else? – the *names* that the daughters gave to their sons: Moab, which apparently means "the seed of the father," and Ben-ammi which means "the son of my people." To be truly human – and to have all the *rights* in the world – one needs to come from the common father and to be a son of their own people, otherwise is a dangerous barbarian and needs to be eliminated. Does it mean that the Moabites and the Ammonites considered the descendants of Abraham as seed of a common father and therefore sons of a common people? Not necessarily! True, if one went far enough,

one could find that Abraham and Lot had a common ancestor, but if one went only as far back as Abraham and Lot, they one could find completely different ancestors who fought with one another, who decided to separate because Abraham was a coward and semi-animal who could only tend sheep and live in a tent while Lot was a citizen of the famous city Sodom. As ancient readers knew, the Moabites and the Ammonites were neighbors of the Israelites, and as neighbors, they were the most bitter enemies never missing an opportunity to attack and destroy each other just as it is today.

Since the only *civilized* man Lot's daughters could find was their father, they could only conceive of having children from their father. Probably thinking that their father may have had scruples about raping his own daughters, they resorted to alcohol that deprive people of their rationality. Although Lot was drunk, apparently he was able to perform. The sarcasm of the story is that those daughters whom the evil Sodomites refused to rape, they ended up being raped by their own father. While Lot was so smart to choose the best part of the country, he ended up living in a cave like animals. And Lot was able to choose for himself such a *lot* because he was *civilized*, unlike Abraham who was a coward and lived in tents in the open.