

I will build an altar

*[The story is set in the city of Haran a little while before
Abram sets out for God's Promised Land]*

'Have you been sitting there all night?' Ishtar's voice stirred Abram from his dreams.

'Perhaps I have,' Abram yawned. 'I have so much to plan. Anyway, it's too hot to sleep.'

Ishtar joined his friend on the stone bench between the central columns of the portico. He was on his way to supervise the harvest in the date palm groves, but it was early and he wanted to talk. The two men, friends for many years, sat silent for a while, listening to the stirring of the city all around them, its wakening sounds muffled by the morning mists. It was before sunrise, but the foreglow was already lifting the mist above the distant barley fields bordering the river. A blood red glow covered the great square tower of the Temple of Nanna, god of the moon.

'So you're still set on going.' Ishtar broke the silence.

'Yes. God has called me. I have to go.'

'Your God! I never have been able to understand your God.'

Ishtar and Abram had been over this ground many times during the years of their friendship. 'Our gods don't speak to us or make such demands on us,' he continued. 'They're content so long as we make our offerings and sacrifices. We do our bit and they give us rain at planting and fruit at harvest.'

'That's just the difference between your gods and my God,' Abram was alert now. He always felt this great surge of warmth inside him when he spoke of his God. 'Are not your sacrifices demanding?,' he asked. 'My God is real. He speaks to me - in my heart. He is almighty and eternal. He is greater than all gods. He is the Lord of heaven and earth. He is the judge of all the nations.' His voice rose with passion. Then in a quieter mood he added, 'My God is just and wise. He is good and merciful. I have known him and believed in him since my father first taught me of him.'

'Your father, Terah,' interrupted Ishtar. 'He was a good man. It's many years since he brought you to Haran and we first became friends. I've been wondering what your father would have thought of your plans to leave Haran after all this time.'

Abram turned to look at Ishtar for the first time since he had sat down. 'Father would have understood, Ishtar. Remember, he believed and obeyed the living God too.'

'But, you're leaving your father and all his memories. Think of all he built up here, your business; the fields and flocks. All this is your inheritance. This is your land of promise. You're leaving all this to go out to a strange and hostile country. You'll have to begin all over again as your father did here.'

'No Ishtar. We shall take our inheritance with us. And we shall leave some of it too. My brother Nahor will stay. I am leaving my land with him. And then God has promised we shall go to a fertile place where he will provide us with all we need. He is going to make us wealthier than you could ever imagine.' Abram warmed to his vision again.

Plainly, Ishtar was not convinced. 'I'd have to be pretty sure of my gods before I would leave my beautiful house and take up the nomad's life in tents. But I suppose it's in your blood. And what about your family?' he continued. 'You're uprooting them. I hear your nephew, Lot is going with you. He's a bright fellow. There's a great future for him in business here in the city.'

'Lot has made his own choice,' replied Abram. 'As for the family, that's the whole purpose. God has promised to make us a great family; a special family for him and his purposes. One day we will be so great we will populate the whole world.'

'How?' Ishtar paused. This was a sensitive matter. He had started though and he had to continue his comment. 'How? You haven't a son of your own. Sarai is still a beautiful woman but she has given you no children. How can you become a great family?'

Abram was silent. As Ishtar had realised, he had touched on a sore, some would say shameful subject. Abram turned his face to Ishtar. There was a strange, distant look in his eyes. Was there a flicker of doubt? 'God has promised, Ishtar,' he said slowly. 'God has promised.'

There was another long silence to let the matter pass. Then Ishtar rose. 'Well, I must be going,' he said. 'When do you expect to leave?'

'Before the next full moon.'

Ishtar turned on the steps to face his friend again. 'I shall miss you, Abram. You know, I do respect your decision. I do admire your faith.'

'Thank you Ishtar.' Abram rose to stand with him. 'My faith is not so admirable, really. When you have a God like ours and really know him, it's difficult not to believe. I only wish you believed too, Ishtar, but then, I've not been able to persuade you in all these years.'

Ishtar did not respond to the challenge. He had a day's work to do and already the city was busily alive all about them. 'May your God go with you.'

'He will,' Abram called after him. 'He will. He has promised.'

Ishtar looked back. 'How will you know that?'

'I will stay close to him and listen to him,' replied Abram. 'In the new land we will worship him, and he will keep his promise. Everywhere I go, I will build an altar to my God and he will never let me down.'