

## The Patriarchs of Israel

### Week 2

#### Abraham

##### I. His Name(s)

The shorter form *Abram* occurs only in Genesis 11:26—17:4, while the longer *Abraham* is found elsewhere in the Old Testament, except for 1 Chronicles 1:27 and Nehemiah 9:7, where both names occur together. The etymology of either name is uncertain but the shorter Abram is generally taken to mean “exalted father” and the longer Abraham to mean “father of a multitude,” as it is defined in Genesis 17:5.

##### II. His Life Story

A descendant of Shem and a son of Terah, Abraham became the ancestor of the Hebrews and other peoples (17:5). His personal history is recorded in Genesis 11:27—25:10 and is summarized in Acts 7:2-8. He is revered as the ancestor of the Jews and Arabs alike. His traditional tomb at Hebron in Palestine is a flash point of controversy between the two peoples. Christians look upon Abram as the ancestor of Jesus Christ and as the father of the faithful. So he is held in high esteem by followers of all three great monotheistic religions.

##### A. From Ur of the Chaldeans to Haran of Northern Mesopotamia

Abram was born in Ur of the Chaldeans, where he lived with his parents and brothers, and subsequently with his wife Sarai. It appears that Terah was an idolater, for Joshua says of him that he “served other gods” (Josh. 24:2). He had three sons – Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Abram was married to his half sister, Sarai. After his brother Haran died, Abram moved with his wife, father, and nephew Lot to Haran (only coincidentally having the similar name), where Terah later died (11:26-32). We are not told the reason for the migration but Stephen says that God had appeared to Abram before he dwelt in Haran and had told him to leave his country for another land (Acts 7:2-4).

Genesis 12:1-3 is the central passage of the book of Genesis. These verses are fundamentally important for the theology of the book, for they serve to bind together the primeval history (chs. 1—11) and the later patriarchal history (12:4—50:26) and look beyond it to the subsequent history of the nation (12:2a) and the world (12:3b).

What shaped this man before he responded to God's call, before he risked all to travel to an unknown country? A look at the first 75 years of his life may give us at least a partial answer. As we try to understand the remarkable period of history in which he lived, we can begin to appreciate the special way God called Abram and led him from Ur to start a new life of following God by faith. Abram embarked on a truly unusual move when he left Ur of the Chaldees for a territory known variously as Canaan, Palestine, and later on as Israel. Consider that God commanded it by personal communication to Abram in a pagan society where people worshiped many gods. Also, God didn't tell Abram where He was sending him or what he should do when he got there. Abram had no idea where God would take him when he packed up and left Ur. God had only promised him blessing and descendants.

So what is the significance of this move? Ur is of no importance today, but conditions were quite different then. When Abram lived there, Ur was at the forefront of developments. The Third Dynasty of Ur controlled a powerful empire and was perhaps the greatest city-state in the world. The only possible exception were cities of the Harappan culture of the Indus Valley, but those cities were on the wane by 2000 B.C. and seem never to have been as advanced as the Mesopotamian cities. Ur also stood in the general area where civilization is thought to have begun, defined by the developments of writing, the wheel (for pottery making and transportation), monumental architecture, decorative arts, and metallurgy, all of which first appeared in southern Mesopotamia. The people who get credit for these achievements were the Sumerians, who lived at the northern end of the Persian Gulf and who controlled Ur in Abram's day.

Some of the earliest monumental architecture consisted of the very large ziggurat, or stage-tower temples found in the area of Ur, dating from about 4000 B.C. By 3500 pottery was produced on a spinning potter's wheel and four-wheeled chariots with solid wheels. Soon after 3500, the inhabitants were writing on clay tablets in crude pictograms and by 3000 were using wedge-shaped cuneiform writing tools. Fairly sophisticated artistic production appeared in the decoration of the temples and the cylinder seals of the period. Well-developed irrigation systems consisting of canals and levees were in use for growing crops and controlling floods.

The great Ur-Nammu was governor of Ur before wrenching power from his overlord in Uruk (biblical Erech). He quickly founded the powerful and prosperous Third Dynasty of Ur sometime between 2200-2100 B.C. Its golden age lasted a little over a century. The empire Ur-Nammu carved out was probably roughly the area of modern Iraq. At its heart was the territory of Sumer (north of the Persian Gulf) and Akad (area where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers come close together). The former city-states of this area were now treated as provinces, their kings replaced by administrators appointed by the king of Ur. Then there were the conquered territories, also divided into provinces ruled by governors. At the head of the whole administrative pyramid stood the king as absolute ruler, worshiped as a god during this golden age. Previous kings had been viewed as mere representatives of the gods.

What was the religious worship and practice of Ur, and where was Abraham spiritually when God spoke to him? Joshua gives us a clue when he addressed the Israelites at the end of his life, observing that their ancestors had served "other gods" on the other side of the Euphrates River (Josh. 24:2, 14). What that means may be illustrated by the sacred enclosure of the moon god Nanna in Ur. Within the enclosure rose the great brick ziggurat or stage-tower of Nanna, about 200 by 150 feet at the base, rising at least 70 feet high to the temple of the moon god at the top. Each of the three stages of the tower was smaller than the one below, with gardens to beautify the terraces between. This ziggurat at Ur was one of several that Ur-Nammu built in the cities of Sumer.

Nanna's special functions were to light up the night, to measure time (Sumer observed a lunar calendar), and to provide fertility. Nanna was expected to give general prosperity: fish in rivers, plants on land, long life in the palace, abundance of cattle and dairy products to cow herders, as well as human fertility. In line with the phases of the moon, festivals were celebrated on the first, seventh and fifteenth days of the month during the Third Dynasty of Ur. On the day the moon was invisible and thought to be dead, special offerings were made. The people believed that on that day Nanna went to the underworld to judge and make administrative decisions. That done, the god reappeared in the night skies as the new moon. In addition to the state cult or the city cult, the populace worshiped personal gods. In some of the houses rooms were set aside as shrines; often reception rooms doubled as shrines. These shrines commonly had an altar in the corner, standing about waist high. Here one might worship a family or personal god. That was the religious environment in which Abram grew up and did his business. With his father, Abram too may have worshiped idols for many years before God's special call was given to him.

### *B. From Haran to Canaan and Egypt ...*

After staying some time in Haran, Abram, now 75 years old, moved with Sarai and Lot from Haran to Shechem in Canaan, where God assured him in a vision that this was the land his descendants would inherit. He then moved on to Bethel before going down to Egypt to escape from a famine in Canaan (12:4-10). While there, the pharaoh wanted to incorporate Sarai into his harem, being under the impression that she was Abram's sister (12:13). Abram's statement to this effect was technically correct (cf. 20:12), but it did not represent the whole truth.

Was it fear or faith that motivated Abram's decisions in this episode? It seems that Abram rushed ahead of God by going to Egypt without divine revelation that he should do so. God blessed Abram in Egypt, in spite of his lack of faith, then returned him to the Promised Land. Regarding the identity of his wife in Egypt, Abram tried to pass Sarai off as his sister because he feared for his life (12:12). By doing so, he jeopardized his blessing since he temporarily lost his wife to Pharaoh. Only God's intervention delivered them both from Egypt (vv. 17-20).

Abram's fears were understandable; Pharaoh did take Sarai into his harem. Fear for his physical safety in a strange land led him to do something that seems not to have been God's will. Should he have told the whole truth and kept trusting God? We too may fear for our own welfare, especially in a foreign environment, and want to do something to save ourselves instead of trusting God. Is it ever right to tell a half-truth to escape a perceived danger?

### C. ... *And Back to Canaan and Political Intrigue*

Leaving Egypt, Abram returned to Bethel and subsequently Lot and he parted company, Lot choosing to pasture his flocks in the fertile Jordan Valley (13:1-13). After Abram received God's promise that he would possess all the land he could see, he moved on to Mamre (later Hebron, vv. 14-18).

Abram suggested that he and Lot separate from one another because their mutual flocks had become too large to pasture together. He graciously offered Lot the choice of moving to the left (north) or to the right (south), thus partitioning the Promised Land of Canaan between them. Lot chose neither when he chose to move eastward, to the cities of the Jordan Valley. It was already known that these were populated by very wicked sinners.

Since Sarai was barren, Lot had been the most likely candidate to be Abram's heir, as part of his household and a blood relative. Abram probably regarded Lot as the one through whom God would fulfill His promises. But when they parted company, Abram was without an obvious heir. However, at this point, God reconfirmed His promise of the land He would give to Abram's descendants. It was more specific than His previous promises. (1) Abram's heir would be *his own seed*. (2) God would give the land to Abram and his descendants *forever*. (3) Abram's descendants would be *innumerable* (13:14-17).

Commentators see two types of believers in Abram and Lot (for Lot's faith, see 2 Peter 2:7-8). Abram commits himself completely to trusting and obeying God, though with occasional failures in his faith. Lot wants what both God and the world can give him. These correspond to spiritual and carnal, single-minded and double-minded believers. When Abram gave Lot the choice of where he wanted to live, Abram was giving up any claim to temporal advantages and was trusting God to bless him as God had promised He would. This step of faith led to greater blessing by God.

A powerful coalition of kings from Mesopotamia invaded Canaan and, in the process, took Lot captive. Abram retaliated with a surprise attack at night and recovered Lot and the possessions those kings had taken (14:1-16). Upon his return to his home, Abram received a blessing from Melchizedek, priest and king of Salem, and received an offer of reward by Bera, the king of Sodom. Abram would not accept the reward because he did not want to tarnish God's promised blessing of him (vv. 17-24). Abram's realization that victory and possessions come from God alone enabled him to avoid the danger of accepting gifts from the wicked and to wait for God to provide what He had promised. In this chapter, we see a much different Abram from the coward who endangered his wife in Egypt (ch. 12).

A major significance of this passage is that it describes two more challenges to God's faithfulness and Abram's faith. So far Abram had to contend with several barriers to God's fulfilling His promises to him. His wife was barren, he had to leave the land, his life was in danger, and his anticipated heir showed no interest in the Promised Land. Now he became involved in a war and potentially a target of retaliation by four powerful kings.

Why was Abram willing to take such risks? His love for Lot may have been the primary factor. Undoubtedly he also had confidence in God's promises to him. The situation that Abram faced taking his 318 men and going into battle against an alliance of five armies was similar to the one Gideon faced in leading 300 men against 135,000 Midianites. The lesson of both passages is similar: *God is able to give a trusting and obedient minority victory over ungodly forces that are overwhelmingly superior in numbers.*

Both Melchizedek and Abram regarded Abram's victory in the battle as due to the blessing of El Elyon. His willingness to take no spoil from the battle for himself demonstrates Abram's desire that God would receive all the glory for his prosperity. This event demonstrates Abram's trust in God to provide what He had promised, which God soon rewarded with another revelation and promise (15:1).

#### *D. The Promised Descendants*

Still childless, Abram had adopted his home-born slave Eliezer as his heir, but he was assured by God through a vision that he would have natural offspring. Abram asked God to strengthen his faith. In response God promised to give him innumerable descendants. This led Abram to request some further assurance that God would indeed do what He promised. God graciously obliged him by formalizing the promises and making a covenant. In giving the covenant, God let Abram know symbolically that his descendants would suffer enslavement before the fulfillment of the promise (ch. 15).

Genesis 15:6 is perhaps the most important verse in the entire Bible. In it, the doctrine of justification by faith is set forth for the first time. This is the first verse in the Bible explicitly to speak of (1) faith, (2) righteousness, and (3) justification. To justify someone means to *declare* that person righteous, not to *make* him or her righteous. Justification expresses a legal verdict. Abraham's faith recorded here was foundational for making the Abrahamic Covenant (vv. 18-21). God made this covenant with a man who *believed* in Him. It is trust in God's promise that results in justification in any age. The promises of God (content of faith) vary, but the object of faith does not. It is always God. Abram trusted in a Person and hoped in a promise.

But when no son came, Sarai, despairing of having children of her own, suggested that Abram take her maid Hagar as his concubine, in conformity with the local custom. Having conceived, Hagar despised her mistress and tensions within the household led to Hagar fleeing to the wilderness, only to return by divine instruction. In Abram's 86<sup>th</sup> year, Hagar bore him Ishmael (ch. 16).

Sarai and Abram tried to obtain the heir God promised them by resorting to a culturally acceptable custom of their day, though it involved failure to trust God. This fleshly act created serious complications for Abram and his household. Resorting to fleshly means, rather than waiting for God to provide what He has promised, always creates problems. But human failure does not frustrate God's plans ultimately.

The Abrahamic Covenant has not yet been fulfilled as God promised it will be. Since God is faithful, we believe He will fulfill these promises in the future. Therefore there must be a future for Israel as a nation (cf. Rom. 11). If God fulfilled the seed and blessings promises literally, should we not expect that He will also fulfill the land promises literally?

The Palestinian, Davidic, and New Covenants are outgrowths of the Abrahamic Covenant. Each of them expands one major promise of the Abrahamic Covenant: the land (Deut. 28:1—29:1; 30:1-10), seed (2 Sam. 7:9b-16), and blessing (Jer. 31:31-40) promises, respectively.

Now that God had given Abram the covenant, Moses proceeded to show how He would fulfill the promises. This is the reason for the selective material that follows. So far in the story of Abram, Moses has stressed the plans and purposes of God, culminating in the cutting of the covenant. Now we will learn how Abram and his seed would experience these plans and purposes. This involves the revelation of God's ways and man's responsibilities. God's people can rely on His promises, even if they experience suffering

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