

1. Abraham

The Abraham narrative begins in Ur of the Chaldees where a Shemite named Terah became the father of three sons: Haran, Nahor, and Abram. Of the three, Abram is the man whom God chose to perpetuate the chosen line of descent from Eve through Seth, Noah, and Shem. Though Haran would play a role in future events through his son Lot (who himself was the father of Ammon and Moab), Abram is the primary character in the Old Testament salvation history, and so also the focus of the balance of Genesis (whether in his own right, or in his covenant son and grandson).

- a. Abram's own story originates with God's call and charge to him (12:1-3). Nothing is known about his personal life prior to that event because it's of no importance to the biblical storyline. What matters is Abram's divine appointment and its significance for the salvation history.

God's call to Abram formed the foundation for His covenant with him, though the covenant itself wouldn't be ratified for several years (Genesis 15:1ff). That first encounter consisted of God's charge to Abram to leave his country and family and journey to a land that He would show him. In connection with that charge the Lord declared His intention and commitment to Abram in seven particulars centered in the principle of blessing:

- 1) The first four are closely related: God would make Abram into a great nation, implying first that he would have descendants, but also that those descendants would go on to become a mighty nation. In that way, especially, God would bless Abram. But He would bless him personally as well: Abram would himself become a great man, and through his greatness he was to be a blessing to others (12:2).
- 2) The next three affirmations together help to clarify the basis and significance of Abram's greatness and how it was that he would be a blessing to others: Abram's greatness was bound up in his favor and status with God. He was to be God's chosen man; therefore, the Lord would bless those who blessed him and curse those who cursed him (12:3). Not just for his own descendants or generation, Abram was to be the conduit for divine blessing for all the earth's families in every time and place.

God's multi-faceted promise in these verses pertained first to Abram's personal descendants, but also ultimately to the whole world of men. Out of the countless nations that had arisen since Babel (ref. 10:1ff), God was now going to raise up a new nation having its origin in Abram. And somehow (though at this point the connection and mechanism aren't evident) that one chosen nation – as an extension of Abram himself – would be the source of blessing for all the families of the earth. Notably, God's promise to Abram of worldwide blessing carried forward His charge to Adam in Eden (and reiterated to Noah) to multiply and fill the earth, thereby making His presence and glory universally known.

In terms of its larger biblical significance, the Abrahamic Covenant binds together the creational charge in Eden and its ultimate fulfillment in the restoration of all things in Christ: What was introduced with Adam is being fully realized in the second Adam who is the Seed of Abraham. The command to fill and subdue is the obligation of mediated blessing that culminates in the “knowledge of God covering the earth as the waters cover the seas.” Greg Beale aptly observes:

“The mention of ‘all the nations of the earth’ being ‘blessed’ by Abraham’s ‘seed’ alludes to a renewed human community bearing God’s image and ‘filling the earth’ with regenerated progeny who also reflect God’s image and shine out its luminosity to others in the ‘city of man’ who do not rebel and also come to reflect God. Thus, these new converts are ‘blessed’ with the favour of God’s presence and become a part of God’s ever-increasing kingdom.”

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- b. God’s promise to Abram was attached to His command that Abram leave Mesopotamia and go to a land that He would show him. The biblical record indicates that Abram departed with his father and household and traveled along a caravan route that eventually took him to Haran (cf. 11:31; Acts 7:2-4). After Terah died, Abram departed Haran with his wife and his nephew Lot and headed west into Canaan (12:4-5). There Abram built his first altar to the Lord (12:6-7). Two things are important to note about this event:

- 1) First of all, this is the first mention of an altar subsequent to the altar Noah built when he came off the ark. As with Noah before him, Abram’s altar was constructed in response to divine revelation. Having brought Abram into Canaan, God revealed to him that this was the end of his journey; Canaan was to be given to him and his descendents for an inheritance. The divine promise to make Abram a great nation implied a land for that nation to dwell in, and now Abram learned that Canaan was that land.
- 2) Canaan was to be Abram’s inheritance (cf. 13:14-18), but God was the One giving it to Him as an endowment; as the Creator of all things, Canaan was the Lord’s possession. But God’s connection with Canaan was more intimate than that: The Lord had led Abram into this land, and now spoke to him as he arrived at Shechem in Canaan’s northern hill country. The reason Abram constructed an altar in that place was that he perceived God to be present with him there. The narrative reinforces this by specifically mentioning that God appeared to Abram at Shechem.

This passage importantly provides the first indication in the biblical text that Canaan was to become sacred space for Abram and his descendents. From this point the Scripture only continues to build upon this core theme, and will speak of Canaan in the imagery of Eden, and so also the place of Yahweh’s sanctuary (cf. Exodus 3:6-8 and Numbers 13:16-27; also Exodus 15:17 and 25:1-8).

- c. From Shechem Abram journeyed south to the area around Bethel and there he built his second altar to the God who had led him into this land. Once again the text emphasizes God's presence with Abram, this time noting that he "*called upon the name of the Lord*" (12:8; cf. 4:26). Abram called upon God because he was convinced He was present with him in that place.
- d. At that time a famine arose in Canaan and Abram headed south and west into Egypt where he hoped to find food. The ensuing episode involving Sarah and the Egyptian pharaoh testifies to God's commitment to His promise to give Abram descendents (which is crucial to the biblical storyline), but, as it regards the present study, what is important to observe is that Abram built no altar in Egypt, though God clearly made Himself known by intervening in restoring Sarah.
- e. When Abram departed Egypt for Canaan he returned to the place near Bethel where he had erected his second altar. There, at the altar in the promised land, Abram again called on Yahweh's name (13:1-4). Abram was again in the presence of the Lord in His sacred space. At this point in salvation history, sacred space assumed a localized quality associated with discrete altars. But the following context reinforces the previous observation that eventually Canaan itself was to be God's sanctuary (13:14-18). Abram had already constructed two altars in two different locations, and more would follow. Eventually Abram and his descendents would possess the whole land as the covenant kingdom.

Having settled in the land of Canaan (13:12), God told Abram that his inheritance would comprise all that his eyes could see. Moreover, He would give Abram countless descendents to inhabit and rule this land as a great nation. According to divine promise, the covenant seed would inherit and subdue Canaan, and Abram was therefore commanded to symbolically take dominion over it by walking through its expanse, setting his feet – signifying possession – on every part of it. All of Canaan was to become God's sanctuary, and thus Abram moved on to Hebron where he built his third altar to the Lord. From Shechem in the north, through Bethel and as far south as Hebron, sacred space was expanding.

- f. In the succeeding years God continued to reinforce and develop His covenant with Abram. God had promised him that he would become a great nation, but he and Sarah were well past child-bearing age and had no heir. Abram's only reasonable conclusion was that the promise was to be realized through an adopted heir (15:1-3). But God revealed that Abram would indeed have an heir from his own body (v. 4), and that son was to be the source of the nation promised to him (15:5-7). Abram's own offspring would inherit the land, and with that definition in place God formalized His covenant in a ratifying ritual (vv. 8-17). That ritual, in turn, served as the occasion for the further disclosure that fulfillment of the promise would not be immediately forthcoming. God's purpose was to produce the Abrahamic nation and its greatness from within the crucible of enslavement and oppression. In that way the whole world would know that Yahweh is God – that He sovereignly fulfills His promise against impossible odds (15:18-21).

- g. Soon Abram and Sarah tried to fulfill the promise of an heir *naturally* through Hagar, Sarah's handmaiden. But God's intention was supernatural provision, and thirteen years later He informed Abram that Sarah would bear the promised Seed. At that time God also expanded upon His promise of global blessing by declaring to Abram that his fatherhood was to extend to many peoples. Abram was thus renamed *Abraham* ("father of many peoples") (17:1-6). Connecting this with God's original promise in 12:1-3, it becomes evident that the earth's families were to be blessed through Abram by becoming part of his family. And being reckoned as his descendants, these nations were also to be heirs of the covenant land together with his natural offspring. Furthermore, in view of the evolving conception of Canaan as sacred space, *it follows that all those under Abraham's fatherhood were to be inhabitants of God's dwelling place*. This is exactly the point God was making, as shown by His oath that He would be the God of Abraham's descendants just as He had been Abraham's God (17:7-8).

God was extending Abraham's fatherhood beyond his natural line, and this required that there be some mark of Abrahamic descent other than physical lineage. That mark was *circumcision*, and Abraham accordingly circumcised all the males connected to his household (17:9-14, 24-27). And as Abram had become Abraham, so Sarai was now *Sarah* ("princess"). Beyond the physical covenant heir, Sarah was to be the mother of nations and kings (cf. 17:4-6, 15-16).

- h. To this point Abraham had symbolically extended sacred space within Canaan from Shechem to Hebron, where he resided for many years. But after the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah he journeyed farther south and west to Gerar (a town and district within future Philistia). There he and Sarah experienced a virtual repetition of the previous incident in Egypt (20:1-18). Once again God intervened and delivered Sarah from her husband's unbelief that jeopardized the seed promise, but this encounter with Abimelech, the king of Gerar, also served another important purpose in the outworking of the covenant. It established for Abimelech Abraham's greatness as God's chosen instrument and mediator of divine blessing (ref. esp. vv. 1-7, 14-18). Though Abimelech was blameless in his dealings with Sarah, his favor before God – associated in context with God's restoring *life* to him and his household – depended upon Abraham's mediation.

This event provides the context for Abraham's next altar building episode. After Isaac's birth, Abraham continued to dwell in the region around Gerar and this troubled Abimelech. Having experienced first-hand Abraham's greatness and the greatness of his God (and perhaps learning of the birth of Isaac and God's promise in connection with him), Abimelech feared for his country and rule. And so this mighty king, along with the commander of his army, came out personally to Abraham to implore him to act favorably toward his kingdom (21:22-23). Abraham was not a king and he commanded no army, yet this powerful Canaanite ruler came humbly before him seeking his favor. Abimelech recognized what the Genesis narrative previously emphasized in Abraham's battle with the four kings: Abraham was great because God was with him (14:1-24).

Abraham agreed to deal favorably with the king and his kingdom, but he also complained that Abimelech's servants had seized his well, thereby attempting to drive him from Gerar, and he demanded that it be restored to him (vv. 24-26). In order to formalize their mutual agreement, Abraham and Abimelech made a covenant and Abraham took seven ewe lambs from his flock and gave them to Abimelech as a testimony to him and all his servants and subjects that the well belonged to him (vv. 27-30). In commemoration, Abraham named the place of his well *Beersheba* ("well of seven" or "well of oath") and planted a tamarisk tree there. Several observations show the importance of this event:

- 1) First of all, Abraham's well at Beersheba constituted his first real foothold in Canaan. Settled life in an arid land requires a continual source of water, and so communities in the ancient Near East formed around rivers and wells. Where a person had permanent rights to a well, he was able to sustain an ongoing presence in that area. Thus Abimelech's grant to Abraham (together with Abraham's oath to the Philistine king) points back to *God's* covenant grant and highlights the principle of Abraham's permanent presence in the land (ref. again Genesis 12:7, 13:14-17).
- 2) The tamarisk tree serves to reinforce this truth. The fact that Abraham called on the name of the Lord after planting it indicates that this tree represented a kind of altar – a symbolic representation of sacred space. But if this was the case, why a tree, and why a tamarisk tree in particular? The answer is found in the qualities of this species of tree. The tamarisk is known for its hardiness and ability to survive even in hostile, salty soil, and so speaks of perpetual, flourishing life in the face of adverse and even impossible circumstance. Recognizing the significance of this encounter and his covenant with Abimelech, Abraham planted a tamarisk by the well at Beersheba as perpetual testimony that God Himself is a covenant-keeping God. *Beersheba epitomizes God's faithfulness to give His covenant people the land of promise, and Abraham accordingly rendered it a shrine dedicated to Yahweh, the Everlasting God* (cf. 22:19, 26:23-25, 46:1-4). Though his descendents would spend centuries outside the land awaiting the appointed day of their inheritance, the tamarisk promised that Canaan was theirs; it spoke of perpetuity in God's sanctuary land.
- 3) It is also important that Beersheba was located on the border of the future Philistine kingdom. The Philistines would prove to be enemies of Abraham's descendents throughout their generations, but God's promise was sure; Abraham's foothold in Canaan was the earnest of Israel's future full possession and dominion. One day, according to God's oath, the Abrahamic nation would reach the height of its greatness and then David – the regal son of Abraham – would arise to fully vanquish the Philistine enemy. The tamarisk tree at Beersheba spoke of the day when Goliath's head would fall to the ground and Abraham's seed would rule over all the region from the Euphrates to the Nile (Genesis 15:18ff; 1 Kings 4:21-25).