



Genesis

SESSION 2—GENESIS 12:1–20; 17:1–27; 22:1–19

| *Abraham and God's Promise*

Introduction

The Abraham/Sarah story in Genesis chapters 12–24 are part of a series of accounts dealing with the predecessors of the people Israel. The Abraham/Sarah story centers on a family that migrated from Ur, probably located in what we know as Iraq about two hundred miles south-east of modern Baghdad and about one hundred miles northwest of the border of Kuwait.

Abram and his wife Sarai (whose names are later changed to Abraham and Sarah; 17:5, 15) set out from Ur with Abram's father, Terah, and the extended family, to go to Canaan, more than one thousand miles away at the other end of what is sometimes called the Fertile Crescent. The Fertile Crescent extends from the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers over to what is now Turkey and down the coast of the Mediterranean Sea through modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine to the border of Egypt. For unknown reasons, however, the clan stops at Haran, in what is now southeast Turkey.

God's Initial Promise

After an unspecified length of time in Haran, Abram and Sarai are told to leave Haran and travel toward a land that is initially unidentified (12:1). God, YHWH, promises them, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (12:2). In other words, they are to become the parents of a populous people (see 15:1–6). They would be famous and through them all the nations of the world would receive blessing. Good things would happen to those who blessed them, but a curse would fall on those who cursed them (12:3). This was a powerful promise!

In response Abram and Sarai set out with their households and flocks, heading south toward Canaan. They



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take with them one of their nephews, Lot (12:4–5). For a time they stop at Shechem (near the present city of Nablus) in the hill country of Canaan. While they are there, the Lord expands the promise, saying to Abram, "To your offspring I will give this land" (12:7). Eventually Abram and Sarai with their entourage travel several hundred miles farther south to the Negeb (12:6–9), a vast semiarid area somewhat like southern New Mexico and Arizona. Because of his response to God's promise, Abram the Urite is remembered in the Bible as "the friend of God" (Isa. 41:8; 2 Chr. 20:7; Jas. 2:23).

Testing the Promise

The theme of divine promise is found throughout the stories about Abram and Sarai. The initial promise account is followed by a story about Abram and Sarai in Egypt and their failure to trust in God. They had traveled there to escape a drought-caused famine in Canaan (12:10). Fearing that the Egyptians might kill him to take his beautiful wife Sarai, Abram instructs her to say she is his unmarried sister (12:11–13). Here the drama begins. Though God had made a commitment to Abram and Sarai, is it trustworthy? Abram is not sure, so he decides to depend on human deception to secure his safety.

The story unfolds quickly. The Egyptians do find Sarai dazzlingly beautiful and she is taken into Pharaoh's

harem. Abram is given large herds and numerous servants from Pharaoh in return for Sarai. But this is an unacceptable situation because God's promise is in danger of radical compromise (12:14–16). How can Sarai be the mother of Abram's promised offspring if she is one of Pharaoh's wives? God intervenes by sending plagues against Pharaoh and his household (12:17). Pharaoh recognizes what has happened (12:18–19). He has, because of Abram and Sarai's deception, inadvertently taken another man's wife into his harem! Pharaoh immediately releases Sarai and sends Abram on his way (12:20; see 20:17–18).

Abram's fragile trust in God's promise of offspring and land is a theme found in the main characters in this part of Genesis. Repeatedly lack of trust in God to deliver on the divine promise of a child is encountered. Both Abram and Sarai try on their own to provide the longed-for child. Abram chooses Eliezer, a slave in his household, to be his designated heir (15:1–3). Sarai gives Hagar, her maidservant, to Abram and directs him to have sexual intercourse with her so that she might provide the desired heir (16:1–4). Later in the city of Gerar ruled by Abimelech, Abraham again doesn't trust God to protect him and his wife so he tries the same basic trick he had attempted with Pharaoh, with much the same consequence (20:1–18).

These stories are entertaining and instructive. The major characters are not presented as paragons of virtue. They are not particularly brave or consistently faithful. Rather, they seem to be average people who sometimes respond as God hopes and sometimes do not. The point is that God set out directing humankind toward God's purpose through ordinary folk with whom we can all identify. Through one particular family God began a journey that yet continues, aimed at establishing a lasting relationship with all humankind.

God's Covenant

God's promise should have been enough, but to make sure, God cemented it with a covenant (in Hebrew, *berith*). There are two kinds of covenants in the Old Testament, each initiated solely by God. One is patterned after what is known as a suzerainty treaty. Such treaties were used in the ancient Middle East by a stronger king (the suzerain, called "father") with lesser kings (his vassals, called "sons"). This is an obligation covenant with stipulations to be kept by the vassal in return for protection by

WHY THE NAME CHANGE?

God changed Abram's name to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah as a sign of the new relationship established by the covenant. The popular translation of Abraham's new name is "ancestor of a multitude," a name in keeping with God's promises of progeny.

the suzerain. This is the kind of covenant God made with Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai (see Exod. 20–23).

The second type of *berith* found in the Old Testament is what is called a promissory covenant. This kind of covenant is dependent completely on the trustworthiness of the one who gives it. In the ancient world a king or member of nobility occasionally gave land to a loyal servant; such a gift was sealed with a promissory covenant. As with Noah, God made such a covenant with Abraham. Abraham did not have to earn God's gift. The promissory covenant was just made (17:1–14).

The content of God's promise to Abraham (his name is changed from Abram to Abraham, 17:5) is the same as in the earlier passages noted (12:2–3, 7; 15:5–7): descendants, fame, and land (17:6–8; see 15:18–19). The matter of the land remains an issue in our time. The exact boundaries of the land are variously marked in the Bible, with no one definition that all would accept. At the height of the Davidic-Solomonic united kingdom during the tenth century BCE, the controlled land extended from the port of Elath on the Gulf of Elath/Aqaba to north of the Sea of Galilee, and from the Mediterranean Sea to parts of land east of the Jordan River. But in most places the claims made and actualized were much more modest. We must be careful as we read the Bible neither to take everything in an absolutely literal fashion nor to spiritualize concrete promises. The Bible is not a fairy tale, but neither is it a legal document that can be used in a court of law to defend land claims.

We have only scarce information about how covenants were formalized. The circumstances of covenant making are described once in terms of a sacrifice and once in terms of a rite given. In the passage concerning the sacrifice, Abraham is directed to bring several types of birds and animals, cut them in half, and arrange the halves to form a corridor (15:7–11). After the sun has set, a "smoking fire pot and a flaming torch" representing God pass



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between the offerings and God reiterates the promise made earlier to Abraham (15:17–18). The meaning of this act was that God took on the obligation and risk of keeping the covenant promises. If the covenant was not kept, then God was to be “slaughtered” just like the animals and birds. Abraham and Sarah were the beneficiaries of this extraordinary covenant, and God was the sole guarantor.

As already noted, there is also one place where a rite is prescribed to serve as the sign of the covenant, namely the rite of circumcision (17:9–14). The removal of the foreskins of all the males of the community became the sign of the acceptance of God’s promissory covenant. The covenant relationship was not earned by the act of circumcision—the promise had been made strictly on God’s initiative; circumcision was an external acknowledgment of the divine promise. This rite is still practiced among Jews as a sign of their special relationship with God.

In the ancient Middle East, circumcision was not unique to those who later called themselves Israelites. So far as we know, circumcision was practiced by all western Semites, but not by eastern Semites. When Abraham arrived in Canaan, which was populated by western Semites, he was an eastern Semite, an Urite. Thus circumcision

SEMITES

The term “Semite” is used here to indicate a group of peoples who shared a basic language known as Northwest Semitic. This language was shared in various dialects by the Canaanites, Phoenicians, Moabites, Edomites, and Hebrews, among others. It was related to the Eastern Semitic languages known as Assyrian and Babylonian, but it was distinct.

linked him more closely to his neighbors. Circumcision as a distinguishing mark was important in confronting three particular groups hostile to Israel. The first was the Philistines, a non-Semitic people who had occupied the coastal plain sometime during the eleventh century BCE. The second was the Babylonians, an eastern Semitic people who conquered Judah and Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE and took many Israelites into exile in Babylon. The third people who did not practice circumcision, who tried to impose their culture on the Jews in the third and second centuries BCE, were the Greeks. In each instance circumcision was a distinctive physical mark that set the Israelites apart from their enemies. The book of Genesis was probably brought to its present form by people who were living in Babylon as exiles. They knew firsthand how important it was to maintain the covenant rite of circumcision as a way to bind the community together and to remind all of the need to resist the ways of others and eradication by assimilation.

There is one more aspect of this account to note. After the dramatic reiteration of the promise by God (17:1–14), Abraham still questions God’s ability to carry through. After all, Sarah is now ninety years old (17:17)! How can she mother offspring for Abraham to bring the divine promise to fulfillment? Thus Abraham prays that God would bless Ishmael, born to Abraham by Sarah’s handmaiden, Hagar, as his heir (17:18). God assures Abraham that Sarah is to be the mother of his heir Isaac with whom God will continue the covenant (17:19, 21). Nonetheless God does agree to bless Ishmael and make of him a great nation (17:20). Ishmael came to be understood as the forebear of those Arabs who centuries later became Muslims.

Passing the Quality Test

Chapter 22 begins with a startling statement: “After these things God tested Abraham” (22:1). The King James Version uses the word “tempt” for the Hebrew term that the NRSV rightly translates “test.” In either case, modern English usage prompts the average reader to think of something like a quiz or a trick. The Hebrew term *nissah*, as used here, means neither. Rather, the idea is of testing one’s mettle, of examining the strength of a piece of metal, of examining a person’s readiness for a task. The psalmist uses the term in this way:

Prove me, O LORD, and try me;
test [*nissah*] my heart and mind. (Ps. 26:2)

In other words, “See if I am ready.” Thus from the outset of the story we know that God is up to something good, not something bad. God will check to see if Abraham is up to what God intends for him.

Chapter 22 is known in Christian tradition as “the sacrifice of Isaac” and has been a theme in art for centuries. Jewish tradition labels this “the binding of Isaac” because this is what happened. Abraham bound Isaac to prepare him for sacrifice (22:9–10) but—and this is one of the main points of the story—Abraham did not sacrifice him (22:12).

To skip too quickly to the end of the story, though, is to miss the drama. This is the climactic episode in a story in which Abraham has repeatedly failed in his trust of God. Once again God “tested” him by instructing him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering (22:2). Isaac was Abraham’s “only son,” a son whom Abraham loved deeply (22:2). When I read the opening lines, I can’t help but wonder, what was going in Abraham’s mind? In Isaac’s? In Sarah’s? In God’s?

Of course, we know the outcome, but that does not negate the dramatic manner in which the story unfolds with the gathering of wood, the travel to a place named Moriah, later identified with Jerusalem (22:2–4; 2 Chr. 3:1). When they arrive after three days, Abraham and Isaac leave two others who had traveled with them and go on, with Isaac carrying the wood and Abraham bringing the knife and the fire (22:6). Isaac begins to deduce what is about to happen and asks about the absence of any appropriate sacrificial animal (22:7). Abraham answers him, “God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (22:8).

When they arrive at the “place God had shown him,” Abraham builds an altar, lays wood on it, binds Isaac, and places him on the wood (22:9). While Abraham is remembered for his great trust, one should not miss the trust displayed by Isaac. Isaac was not a toddler who didn’t understand anything. Isaac was old enough and strong enough to carry a bundle of wood some distance and he could certainly have fought off his father if he had wanted to. But he didn’t! Why? We are not told. At the last moment as his father has the knife in hand, a divine messenger sent by God tells Abraham to stop. God recognized that Abraham was ready, that the metal had been tested and was found strong enough. Abra-

ham is shown a ram caught in a nearby thicket and uses this animal for the burnt offering (22:10–13).

There were two outcomes of this story for ancient Israel. First, it was made clear that child sacrifice, though practiced among some of Israel’s neighbors, was not to be condoned in Israel. The appropriate way for the people to “fear God” was to show reverence and stand in “awe” of God (22:12). Second, at the conclusion of this narrative Abraham and Sarah received a reaffirmation of the divine promise. Because of this demonstration of trust in God, the promised offspring would be “as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore” (22:17). Indeed because of Abraham’s obedience, his offspring were to be a source of blessing for all the nations of the earth (22:18).

The Abraham/Sarah cycle of stories ends with the report of Sarah’s death and her burial in a cave purchased by Abraham from some residents of Hebron (23:2, 19–20). This was an important note because it recorded the fact that the divine promise of land was at least partially fulfilled. Abraham, too, at his death was buried in Hebron (25:7–10). The traditional site of their burial is still venerated by Jews and Muslims in the modern city of Hebron.

Conclusion

The narrative about Abram/Abraham and Sarai/Sarah starts and finishes with a divine promise. The story unfolds with threats to the realization of the promise and with the concrete, though partial, keeping of the promise. The faithlessness and the faithfulness of the major human characters are noted. These are three-dimensional people with all the faults and virtues we know humans to possess.

The other major character, God, is repeatedly portrayed as totally trustworthy, the only kind of promise-giver worthy of our allegiance. The story begins with a charge and a promise by God to Abraham and Sarah and ends with the reaffirmation of the promise sealed with a covenant. God will bring the divine purpose to its completion.

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