

Abraham – A Paradigm of Faith in God

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THE STRUCTURE OF GENESIS

- I. THE CREATION OF THE UNIVERSE AND HUMAN BEINGS 1.1 – 2.3**
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ABRAHAM AND HIS SONS 10.1 – 25.11

- 1. Nimrod and the foundation of cities: Babel, Erech, Accad, Calneh, Nineveh, Rehoboth-Ir, Calah, Resen (10.9-12). The city, tower and ideology of Babel; the judgement of God on Babel and the scattering of the nations linguistically and geographically (11.1-9).
- 2. The call of Abram. God's promise to him of nationhood carrying universal blessing: *in you all the families of the earth will be blessed* (12.1-3; 1.:18; 22.18).
- 3. The 'promised seed' (12.7; 15.1-6; 18.10-18): the birth (21.1-7), sacrifice (22.1-19) and marriage (ch. 24) of Isaac.
The covenant made with Abram and his seed regarding inheritance (15.7-21), the covenant of circumcision (17.1-27).

THE STAGES IN THE LIFE OF A MAN OF FAITH

SECTION 1	12-15	God's call and promise: justification by faith
SECTION 2.	16-19	Faith in God's promise or personal effort?
SECTION 3.	20-24	The search for security: a bride for the son

Genesis gives not only an account of the temporal beginnings of the universe, the earth and life on it but also a biblical anthropology in the original sense of that word – a logos (account) of anthropos (man). Leon Kass suggests that the stories are powerful precisely because they present human life in all its moral ambiguity – they present to us not simply what once happened in a particular time and place with particular people but in a very real sense they throw light on what always happens and hence act as a mirror in which the complexity of our own lives is reflected.

That is, Genesis shows us not only what is first in time but also what is first in importance when it comes to understanding fundamental things – God, the universe, life, language, morality, relationships sin, death, ...

The first half of the book reveals to us first of all what the world once was in all its glory with human beings made in the image of God as the pinnacle of God's creation with all their wonderful capacities. It then traces the devastation wrought by the misuse of those capacities – the banishing from Eden, the trials of life and the increasing violence of human behaviour that leads to capital judgement that is survived by Noah and his family alone.

In the second half of the book God makes a new beginning – this time by calling out a particular person, Abram, from a particular tribe to form a new nation that would be taught God's way and witness to him in the world. We learn here about the complexities of the path back to God that gives us hope that if flawed men and women like the three great patriarchs, their wives and families can become men and women who trust and live for God then there is some hope for us.

One major lesson is that, since sin entered into the world through human failure to trust God and grasping at independence from God, the way back to God will be by learning to trust him and be dependent. Genesis shows what this means by describing faith in action over several generations of the same family.

A TALE OF TWO CITIES

The universal project – the building of the city

1. Nimrod and the great cities of Ancient Near East 10.8-12
2. The city tower and ideology of Babel 11.1-9
3. The other Semitic nations and Abraham's ancestry 11.10-30

“And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, ‘Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods” Joshua 24.2. The essence of idolatry: trusting the creature rather than the Creator. The trajectory of idolatry from Eden to Babel.

Nimrod and his kingdom: “The *beginning* of *his* kingdom was Babel...” Nimrod means ‘we shall rebel’. Josephus writes: ‘Now it was Nimrod who excited them (the people of Shinar) to such an affront and contempt of God... He also said he would be revenged on God, if he should have a mind to drown the world again. To that end he would build a tower too high for the waters to be able to reach and so he would avenge himself on God for destroying their forefathers.’

The ideology of the modern skyscraper is that of ancient Babel/Babylon: identity, technological achievement and prowess, the triumph of human rationality, a driving ego pushing out the boundaries, flaunting wealth and power, reaching for the sky and grasping at immortality. According to the later Babylonians their temple was constructed as “a likeness on earth of what he has wrought in heaven”. (Enuma Elish 6.113). The main temple in Babylon, Esagila, was “the house with the raised head” and the ziggurat in the temple of Marduk was called Etemenanki – the house of the foundation of heaven and earth.

The foundation principle of the city of Babel: “Come let us brick bricks and burn them to a burning... let us build for ourselves a city with a tower with its head in the heavens... let us make a name (shem) for ourselves lest we be scattered abroad on the face of the earth.

NT COMMENT

For he [Abraham] was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God... God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city. Hebrews 11.10,16.

LIFE OF ABRAHAM SECTION 1 CHS. 12-15

People matter more than things

God's call and promise

Denial of Sarah in Egypt.

Separation from Lot.

God renews the promise: Abram builds an altar

The capture and recovery of Lot: the ministry of Melchizedek

Abram believes God. God covenants the inheritance.

FROM UR TO CANAAN

11.27 – 12.9

12.1-3 The command of God to leave home and kindred and go to a land that will be shown to him. (note ESV margin pluperfect – “The Lord had said...” implying that the first move 11.31 was the result and that Terah had broken the journey)

When Terah dies Abram fulfills Lord's original command and travels to the land of the Canaanites with Lot. God appears to Abram and promises the land to Abram's descendants. Abram builds an altar near Bethel.

The promise: a) become a great nation; b) to be blessed and to have a great name (*shem*); c) to be a blessing to all nations.

NT COMMENT

“The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia before he lived in Haran and said to him: ‘Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you’.” Acts 7.2

FROM CANAAN TO EGYPT

12.10-20

The famine forces Abram to Egypt. Abram fears for his safety and puts self-preservation (and material wealth) above relationships (marriage), honesty and truth. Abram prospers as a result but God plagues Pharaoh's house until Abram and Sarai are sent away.

FROM EGYPT TO BETHEL

13.1-13

Abram returns to Bethel and “calls on the name of the Lord”. The amount of his possessions lead to tension between the herdsmen of Abram and Lot and eventually to separation. Abram gives Lot the choice as to where to live. Lot chooses the plain of Jordan near Sodom because it is like the ‘garden of the Lord’. Abraham stays in the land occupied by Canaanites. This raises the question of the implications of such choices for business, family, children, isolation, culture etc.

FROM BETHEL TO MAMRE

13.14-18

God renews and augments his promise to Abram of land and posterity. Abram moves to Mamre near Hebron and builds another altar there.

THE WAR OF THE KINGS

14.1-24

War between two coalitions of kings leads to the capture of Lot. Abraham defeats a coalition of kings and rescues Lot, his goods, his women and his people. The King of Sodom tries to get Abram to take the spoil for himself but give up the rescued people to him. Abraham, strengthened by the sudden intervention of King and High Priest Melchizedek, refuses.

NT COMMENT

“For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.” Hebrews 7.1-3

What is the connection between Melchizedek’s ministry to Abraham and that of Christ our Great High Priest to us?

GOD CONFIRMS HIS PROMISE AND MAKES A COVENANT

15.1-21

Abram’s concern: “What will you give me seeing I go childless?”

God the Possessor of Heaven and Earth shows Abram the stars and promises him an heir. Abram believes and his faith is counted as righteousness. God confirms the promise with a covenant. Abram’s seed will go down to slavery in Egypt but eventually come out with great wealth.

NT COMMENT

“What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.” Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due. And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness”. Romans 4.1-2

“Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, “And to offsprings,” referring to many, but referring to one, “And to your offspring,” who is Christ. This is what I mean: the law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void. For if the inheritance comes by the law, it no longer comes by promise; but God gave it to Abraham by a promise... And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.” Galatians 3.16-18,29.

What is the relationship of faith and merit to justification and the inheritance?

LIFE OF ABRAHAM SECTION 2 CHS 16-19

WALKING BEFORE GOD AND JUDGING THE FLESH

The taking of Hagar instead of Sarah and the birth of Ishmael
The covenant of circumcision, 'a seal of the righteousness of faith'
The Lord appears to Abram: "walk before me and be blameless"

Abram pleads with God for Sodom
Lot rescued from Sodom which is destroyed
Lot in the cave: the birth of Moab and Ammon

The section falls into two major parts and focuses on two aspects of what the NT calls "the flesh". In the first part Sarai despairs of having her own children and encourages Abraham to help realise God's promise of children by taking Hagar the Egyptian as wife.

The second part the concerns Lot's struggle with the situation brought about by God's judgement of Sodom and Gomorrah where Lot and his family had been living.

PART A NT COMMENT

Tell me, you who desire to be under the law, do you not listen to the law? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Galatians 4.21-23

NB It is important to differentiate between Hagar's personal experience of God and the use of her story as an allegory in the NT

Thirteen years pass between the end of ch 16 and the beginning of ch 17. Abram and Sarai have to live with the consequences of their actions "in the flesh. An experience readily recognisable by us all.

NT COMMENT

"So I find it to be a law that when I want to do right, evil lies close at hand. For I delight in the law of God, in my inner being, but I see in my members another law waging war against the law of my mind and making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members." Romans 7.21-23

Challenge to Abram (and us): "I am God Almighty; walk before me and be blameless".

NT COMMENT

"But I say, walk by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the flesh. For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh, for these are opposed to each other, to keep you from doing the things you want to do. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law." Galatians 5.16-18.

The concept of circumcision in the OT and the NT

1. Covenant with Abraham regarding his physical posterity
2. A seal of the righteousness of faith that Abraham had while still uncircumcised. Romans 4.9-12

3. A symbol for Israel: the danger of ceremony without spiritual content
4. The circumcision of Christ: Colossians 2.11-12
5. The practical lesson: “For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh.” Philippians 3.3

PART B ABRAHAM, LOT AND THE DESTRUCTION OF SODOM

Abraham pleads for Sodom

The appearance and visit of the Lord to Abraham. The promise of a child in the next year provokes Sarah to laughter which she denies. The Lord announces the destruction of Sodom and Abraham pleads for it.

The angels visit Lot’s house and encounter the wickedness of Sodom. Lot’s sad attempt at compromise. His rescue by the angels, the death of his wife and his tragic days in the cave.

NT COMMENT

“...and if he rescued righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the sensual conduct of the wicked (for as that righteous man lived among them day after day, he was tormenting his righteous soul over their lawless deeds that he saw and heard); then the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials, and to keep the unrighteous under punishment until the day of judgment”. 2 Peter 2.7-10

“If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire. Do you not know that you* are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him. For God’s temple is holy, and you are that temple.” 1 Cor. 3.16-17.

“Likewise, just as it was in the days of Lot—they were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but on the day when Lot went out from Sodom, fire and sulfur rained from heaven and destroyed them all— so will it be on the day when the Son of Man is revealed. On that day, let the one who is on the housetop, with his goods in the house, not come down to take them away, and likewise let the one who is in the field not turn back. Remember Lot’s wife.” Luke 17.28-32

LIFE OF ABRAHAM SECTION 3 CHS 20-15

God's testing of Abraham: the search for assurance and security

Abraham denies Sarah among the Philistines because of false moral judgment

The birth of the promised seed: Isaac,

The expulsion of Hagar and her son;

Abraham's oath to the Philistine and his son at Beersheba;

The offering of Isaac: justification by works and God's oath

Finding a bride for Isaac from the Gentiles. The marriage of the promised son.

The first major lesson in Abraham's life was that men and women are justified by faith without meritorious works. He then had to learn to walk by faith before God and not to put his confidence in the flesh. In this final section God calls upon Abraham in a very specific way to justify his faith by his actions.

NT COMMENT

"Now you, brothers, like Isaac, are children of promise. But just as at that time he who was born according to the flesh persecuted him who was born according to the Spirit, so also it is now. But what does the Scripture say? 'Cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman.' So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman" Gal. 4.22-31.

"Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works; and the Scripture was fulfilled that says, 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness'—and he was called a friend of God. You see that a person is justified by works and not by faith alone". James 2.21-24

The significance of the oath

"For when God made a promise to Abraham, since he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, 'Surely I will bless you and multiply you.' And thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise. For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation. So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us. We have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek" Hebrews 6:13-19.

ANOTHER FATHER AND ANOTHER SON

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” John 3.16

“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” Romans 8.32

ABRAHAM AND THE RESURRECTION

“And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: ‘I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob’? He is not God of the dead, but of the living” Matthew: 22.31-32.