

THE CALL OF ABRAHAM

I. Chapters 12-25 describe the call and growth of Abraham, from the heir of a devout, but apparently now semi-pagan line to the scion on the new People of God.

A. Like other Old Testament heroes, Abraham (whose original name is Abram, but is changed to Abraham) is not presented as perfect, but rather as one who gradually grows in his trust in God.

- The call starts with his father's departure from the prosperous but pagan Ur, continues through Abraham's own journeys and struggles, and dramatically climaxes with his willingness to sacrifice Isaac. He then hands the reins off to Isaac.

B. Abraham's growth in faith is an image of the growth in faith of the people generally. See Catechism 145-57. Like the Apostles later, he trusts God, but not completely. At times he uses schemes, such as telling people that Sarai his wife is really his sister and (at Sarai's recommendation) having a child Ishmael by her handmaid Hagar. But slowly he trusts God more and more.

C. Initially Abraham is called Abram, which means "exalted father" or "the father is exalted."

1. The name is both profound, for he exalts both his earthly father and finally his God and Father, and also poignant, for at first he has no children.

2. When God reaffirms the covenant in chapter 17, but before Isaac is born, He changes Abram's name to Abraham, which means "the father of many nations." That name reflects the fact that he will not only be the father of the Chosen People, but of many others gathered together under the blessing that will come forth from the Chosen People. See Catechism 706.

D. Abram is not particularly power-hungry, but rather tries to avoid clashes, as indicated by his willingness to give his nephew Lot the better land and his intercession even for Sodom and Gomorrah. However, his rescue of Lot indicates that he could be a military commander if necessary. And he apparently commands the respect of a sizable clan.

E. Abraham's wife is Sarai, who is eventually revealed as either his half-sister or possibly cousin. Her name means princess, and her new name Sarah is the more exact form of the word. She is also imperfect, often doubting God and scheming herself. But in the end, she is loyal to Abraham and would become a model wife.

II. The call of Abraham begins with his father Terah, who has three sons, and possibly Sarai as his daughter, who leaves his homeland Ur.

A. Unlike his predecessors, Terah is seventy when he first has children, and apparently has only the three listed, possibly plus Sarai.

1. The three sons listed, Abram, Nahor and Haran will all become important because Haran's son Lot will figure into the account, as will his descendants the Moabites and Ammonites later in Israeli history. Abraham's son Isaac will marry Rebekah and his grandson Jacob will marry Leah and Rachel, all of whom are descendants of both of Abram's brothers. Keeping the family together was considered crucial.

- Chapter 20 indicates that Sarai may have been the daughter of Terah, or perhaps his half-sister, a daughter of Nahor. But, at this introductory point, her relationship to Terah is ignored.

2. It appears that Terah worshipped at least some pagan gods, although he may have had an inkling about the true God. See Joshua 24:2.

3. He initially lived in "Ur of the Chaldeans." There is some dispute about which Ur this is.

a. One leading theory is that the city referred to is the Ur on the lower Euphrates River that was founded by 2500 at the latest. This city was a very powerful and wealthy by about 2100, with extensive international trade and outposts as far as the Mediterranean Sea, as well as its moon worship and its ziggurats. However, about 2000, the country of Elam, which was between Ur and the Promised Land, gained control over Ur. The impending struggle may have been one reason why Terah left.

b. Another ancient tradition is that the city was Urkit, which is in northern Mesopotamia, near the city of Haran.

B. After one of his sons, Haran, dies, Terah leaves the city with Abram, Sarai his wife, and Lot, the son of Haran. Nahor and his wife and children stayed behind for the time at least, although it appears they joined him later. There is also no mention of Terah's wife; she may have already died, or stayed behind.

- Nahor's wife Milcah was Haran's orphaned daughter; that arrangement would not have been unusual.

- The text does not mention Sarai's parentage, but only that she is childless. Abraham seems to be all that she has. (Chapter 20 does indicate that Sarai is related to Abram, from the same father or grandfather. But that fact is only introduced later as Abram tries to explain his conduct; it does not seem to be particularly crucial here.)

- At about the same time Noah dies. There is a handing on of the torch. Now, there will be, in a sense, a third founder, with Adam being the first and Noah the second.
- Abraham shows his familial piety by following his father. As will later become apparent, the family was apparently sizable, for Abraham will lead 318 soldiers from his own people

C. However, Terah does not complete the journey to the Promised Land. He settles down in Haran, a city in the northern part of Mesopotamia that also was known for its moon worship.

III. When Abraham is seventy-five, God calls him to complete that journey to the Promised and receive a great nation and blessing for all nations.

A. Abram, who has shown such filial piety, is now called to leave his father's house for an unknown land.

B. God promises Abraham that he would become a great nation, that that nation and its allies would be blessed by God, and that all nations would be blessed in him.

1. This blessing is the first of five times that God makes promises to Abraham. See Gen. 13:14-17, 15:1-5, 17:3-21, 22:15-18. In chapter 13, God reiterates the promise of land to Abram and his descendants, who will be as numerous as the dust of the earth. In chapters 15 and 17, God will clarify that the nation will descend from Abraham's own son by Sarah. In chapter 22, after the willingness to sacrifice Isaac, God promises that his descendants will be like the sands of the sea or stars of the sky and that all nations will find their blessing in him.

2. This blessing is structured in a seven-fold schema: (1) God will make Abraham a great nation; (2) God will bless Abram; (3) God will make Abram's name great; (4) Abram himself will be a blessing; (5) God will bless Abram's allies, those that bless him; (6) God will harm Abram's enemies, those that curse him; and (7) all nations of the earth will find blessing in Abram.

- The last and greatest blessing indicates that, in every nation, there is something good that God blesses.

C. As with the Apostles called later by Jesus, the text does not describe what Abram was thinking or why he responded so sincerely. Perhaps the reason is that he is the model for responsiveness to the calling of God, which may be due to a number of motives (e.g., faith, repentance, curiosity, desperation.)

- The fact that Abram had no children may likewise have made him eager to do something that would last past his death. Except for those killed young (e.g., Abel) this is the first instance of childlessness recorded in Scripture. As with Rebekah and Rachel later, the years of childlessness emphasize that children are a gift of God.

- In any case, Lot goes with Abram and Sarai, but Terah does not. Abram and Sarai may have effectively adopted Lot as their son.

D Abram soon comes to the Promised Land, at this point called Canaan, apparently without much difficulty.

1. There were already many inhabitants in the northern part of the Promised Land. However, God promises the land to Abram in another sacred scene at Shechem in the north of what will be Israel.
2. Possibly because of the potential for hostilities, Abram journeys further south and settles for a time in Bethel, which would become the capital of the future Israel until David moved the capital to Jerusalem. He invokes the Lord by name and builds another altar there, which would be a future sacred city.
3. Abram then gradually travels further south to the Negeb in the south of the future Israel. He has symbolically claimed the whole of the Promised Land.

IV. However, soon a famine strikes the land and Abram goes down to Egypt, where he creates a very odd situation.

A. The famine must have seemed puzzling to Abram, for he has just been promised great blessings. The Egyptian climate was very different from that of the Promised Land, so it is likely that the famine had not struck Egypt. The famine later in Genesis does strike Egypt, but because of Joseph's guidance, the Pharaoh is prepared.

B. Abram trusts God, but not wholly. His wife Sarai, now in her sixties, was apparently very young looking for her age. (She would live to be 127.) And so, he instructs Sarai to tell the Egyptian court that she is his sister (or niece.)

1. The idea is that an Egyptian nobleman may, if he wants to marry Sarai, find a way to kill Abram, either secretly or through a legal excuse, so that he can marry Sarai. It is noteworthy that he knows the Egyptians will understand that adultery is unacceptable, although Abram thinks they will engage in a subtle murder.

- From about 2050 to about 1660, when an Hellenistic dynasty took over, the Pharaohs' were in a weakened position with a religious figure called the nomarch wielding great influence.

2. Here, as happens later, Abram's faith, like that of so many of the faithful, is real but imperfect. He accepts God's plan but thinks he must improve on it.

- It is very possibly that Sarai was related to Abraham, and so the statement was not a complete lie. But it was still very deceptive and reflected that his trust in God was still only partial.

C. Abram's belief that the Egyptians will want Sarai is entirely accurate. The Pharaoh himself takes her as one of his wives and is favorable toward Abraham because of it.

1. Fortunately, the Pharaoh wanted her to have some time of preparation in the palace before taking her as his wife. God used this time to teach Pharaoh (and Abram and Sarai) about the sanctity of marriage. Pharaoh and the entire household are afflicted with plagues, probably boils or some other physical ailment.

2. The text does not say how Pharaoh found out the reason for the plagues. However, the chances are the Sarai was unaffected, and Pharaoh had her questioned.

3. Unlike a later episode, Abram does not try to justify his actions, and Pharaoh simply drives him away.

D. However, Abram has retained the great wealth that Pharaoh gave him and thus returns to the Promised Land with great wealth, which would be primarily in the form of cattle and precious metals.

E. It becomes clear in Lot has been with him and also received a fair amount of wealth in the process. However, the lack of any mention of Lot in Egypt until the departure indicates that there may have already been strains in this relationship.

V. When Abram, Sarai, and Lot get back to the sacred area between Bethel and Ai, a dispute breaks out and the families separate.

A. As often happens, when the danger is gone and there is a fair amount of wealth, disputes begin arising over who should get what.

B. Abram, using natural prudence, but perhaps not prayerfulness, decides that it is best to part ways and offers Lot the choice of

which land to take.

C. Lot, who is not immoral, but not heroic or generous either, takes land to the east that looks better, but is actually much worse, both politically and morally.

1. This land is near the southwest of what is now called the Dead Sea. The area right around the Jordan River, which is what Lot first saw, is still very lush and prosperous. The area closer to the Dead is desert now, but was apparently much more fresh and prosperous then. The whole place seems to him as like a second Eden as far as Zoar, south of the Dead Sea.

2. The text indicates that the people there were very wicked, a point that Lot ignores.

3. Even naturally, he might have known that good land in the midst of wicked people is a cause for strife. More importantly, he should have valued moral standards above worldly prosperity. He ends up getting neither.

D. Once Lot departs, Abram goes west to Hebron and establishes that as his center, making it a central holy site into the future. See Josh. 20:7, 21:11-13; 2 Sam. 2:4.

E. Here, God promises him more descendants that the dust and all of the land around him. The promises are building and becoming clearer.

VI. In chapter 14, a war breaks out, as could be expected, and Lot is caught up in it, but eventually rescued by Abram.

A. Apparently, some kings from the south and east, including that of Babylon (Shimar) and Edom (a country to the southeast of the Dead Sea who took over Ur) had gained dominance over the region twelve years earlier, just before Terah left Ur.

1. Verses 5-7 indicate that there was a general rebellion against those kings.

2. As part of this rebellion, five cities from the area to the south of the Dead Sea (also called the Salt Sea) rebelled against them. Those cities were Sodom, Gomorrah, Admar, Zeboiim, and Bela, also called Zoar. All of them except Bela would later be destroyed by fire and brimstone.

3. Some scholars have argued that this account too is symbolic. However, there seems to be too much detail for that. Furthermore, the account is very realistic. The fact that the area is now desolate can be traced perhaps to a combination of a weather shift and to devastation, such as that now in Haiti.

B. The kings from the east invade the region and first defeat the armies to the west of the Jordan River. They then turn and defeat the local armies of the five cities mentioned, with the armies of Sodom and Gomorrah being devastated. Because those two cities are now undefended, they turned and sacked them. Lot and his family live near Sodom, and are captured.

- It becomes clear later that the king of Sodom himself escaped and fled to an area near Salem, later to become Jerusalem.

C. Word comes to Abram, who is apparently now at peace with his neighbors. Despite his peaceful, non-confrontational nature, he is willing to wage war to save his foolish nephew.

1. Apparently, Hebron, which is more in the mountains and with less desirable land, was out of the action.

2. Abram musters 318 warriors from his own household, which indicates that his household was probably well over a thousand. Noteworthily, these 318 soldiers were not hired mercenaries, or even servants.

- The size of Abram's house and their loyalty to him is becoming manifest.

3. It appears from verse 24 that the people who live with him also join in, thus creating a sizable army. It would appear

from the fact that they did not capture the kings of the opposing armies that Abraham's army waited for those four kings, and presumably a fair amount of their army, to be away. Those kings were presumably not expecting any action from that area, which they had ignored.

4. The army, apparently under the command of Abraham, conducts a surprise nighttime attack and pursues the forces of the conquering kings north past Damascus, about 160 miles away. Through the victory, he recaptures all of the people and goods captured.

VII. The post-battle scene introduces the mysterious figure of Melchizedek and hints at Abram's growth in holiness.

A. Abram does not go immediately back to Hebron, but to Salem, whose name means peace. Instinctively, he knows he should visit Melchizedek, the priest-king of Salem and offer God a tithe through him. He understands that Melchizedek, whose name means "king of righteousness" is the representative of God, a priest of God Most High.

- Tithing would become a crucial part of Jewish offerings, with the Levites frequently receiving tithes to support their ministries. See, e.g., Duet. 12:6-17, 14:22-27, 26:12-15; Lev. 27:30-33; 2 Chron. 31:6 The tithes would then open the way for more generosity and blessings. See Sir. 35:8-10; Mal. 3:10.

B. The only other part of the Old Testament that mentions Melchizedek is Psalm 110, which describes the future king as "a priest forever in the line of Melchizedek." The implication is that Melchizedek, which may not been more of a title than a name, represents a primordial priesthood that predates even Abraham.

- The letter to the Hebrews picks up on this theme and argues that the later Levitical priesthood was only an image of this primordial priesthood that Jesus would fulfill as the great king and high priest. See Heb. 7.

- The letter emphasizes that Melchizedek has no ancestry and no recorded death and thus is a timeless priest. The later Levitical priesthood was just an accommodation that would prepare the way for one who would restore the priesthood and kingship together.

C. Jewish commentators said different things about Melchizedek.

1. Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish thinker of the first century B.C. who tried combined Greek philosophy and Jewish theology, thought he was a primordial representative of human reason.

2. Josephus Flavius, a Roman Jewish historian, thought he was a model king who had maintained the worship of the true God in the midst of pagans.

3. Some of the apocryphal Jewish books around the time of Christ refer to him as Shem, the just son of Noah. If one takes the years stated in Genesis literally, would have still been alive when Abraham was called, and in fact for 133 years later. See Gen. 11:11. St. Thomas refers to a commentary on Hebrews 7 that supports this view. Or it could have been a descendant in his family who inherited his title.

4. Some of the Qumran scrolls, which were written by an Essene (or Essene-like) monastic community who lived near the Dead Sea at the time of Christ, present Melchizedek as an angel who would return again in the Messianic age to punish iniquities and restore justice.

C. In any case, Melchizedek receives the offering, brings out bread and wine, and blesses Abram.

1. Neither Melchizedek nor the text gives an explanation for the bread and wine, which would later be taken up by Jesus as the great symbol at the Last Supper and thus for the Mass.

- As manna in the desert, bread would become a symbol of God's providence. Wine is often a symbol of prosperity and joyousness in the presence of God. See Ps. 4:8, 104:14-15, Joel 2:24, Is. 55:1.

- In Christian thought, the notion of a bread of life and a spiritual drink also reminds one of the manna and water that sustained the Chosen People in the desert. See John 6:30-40; 1 Cor. 10:2-3. Bread and wine are also a symbol of unity, both with each other and with God, for many grains are combined to make bread, and many grapes to make wine. See 1 Cor. 10:16-17.

2. The blessing recognizes one God, who created all things and who cares about His children. There is a contrast with some pagan thought, which recognized that there is a final God somewhere (e.g., Chronos of the Romans, El of the Philistines or the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle), but who could not imagine that He could care about mere mortals.

- Some commentators have argued that Melchizedek is simply an advanced Canaanite priest. However, that would not explain why Abram would make an offering to him, nor how he understands that radical notion of one God, who loves mortals.

D. The scene ends with the king of Sodom making an offer to Abraham that Abraham and his army keep the goods, but free the residents of Sodom. Because of his holy calling, Abraham refuses anything for himself except compensation for his losses.

1. The king of Sodom was probably making an offer, hoping that Abraham would be satisfied with keeping only the goods and not take any slaves. The offer was presumably the same for Gomorrah.

2. But Abraham realizes that to take the belongings of Sodom would bring part of that wicked town into his home; and, as one consecrated to God, he will not permit that.

- Furthermore, not knowing that Sodom will soon be destroyed, he understandably worries that, at some future time, the residents or king of that town may think that he is in their debt.

- In addition, Abraham does not want any implication of some sort of alliance with Sodom or Gomorrah.

3. Abraham permits the other leaders of his army, Anre, Eschol and Mamre to accept their share of the booty.

- At one level, they can accept the offer because the refusal of payment is required only by Abraham's consecrated status and determination not to rely on anyone else.

- In addition, Abraham had apparently agreed that they could keep their share of the booty. As a result, he probably could not (morally or physically) prevent them from taking their share.

E. These events begin to show Abraham as both intelligent and naturally powerful, on the one hand, but also increasingly holy and trusting in God on the other.