

# Father Abraham, First Pilgrim - Father of Faith

## Introduction - Abraham in the New Testament

- Abraham a major OT point of reference for the writings of the NT - roughly as much as David, and exceeded in number of references by Moses -
- rough parallel - if Civil War corresponds to the Exile in Babylon, and Revolution to the Exodus, Abraham corresponds to the first English settlers in America in the early 1600s -
- NT writers jumping back beyond the great nation-shaping events to what lies before them, before there was a nation -
- except over a much greater time-span - four times greater- Abraham about 2000 years before Christ - a bit like saying that if you want to understand America's future destiny, you have to consider someone like Julius Caesar.
- before the Exodus, before the giving of the Law, there was the promise of God made to Abraham of becoming the father of a great nation and of a great inheritance in the land of Canaan -
- for the NT, this ultimate fulfillment of this promise was made in Christ - Benedictus (Luke 1): thanksgiving for the fulfillment of God's promises of redemption: "to perform the oath which he swore to our forefather Abraham, that he would give us, that we being delivered out of the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him, all the days of our life".
- Likewise Magnificat: after celebrating the great reversal God has done for Israel - scattering the proud, putting down the mighty, exalting the humble, etc. "he remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel; as he promised to our forefathers, Abraham and his seed for ever".
- so with the writers of the NT, we are going to jump back four thousand years, to take a look at Father Abraham
- there are other references to him in OT and NT, but the core material is found in Genesis 11-25
- in this we are going to consider just a small portion, in 11-12, 15, and 17.

## Before Abraham: Genesis 1-11 - Primeval History

- Abraham first appears near the end of Genesis 11 and is central figure until the account of his death and burial in ch 25
- we are only going to look at a small portion of this history, chiefly up to 12:9 with a quick look forward to 15 and 17
- important to understand what came before Abraham - can't understand him except in terms of what history he comes out of

- Gen 1-2:3 - Creation - revelation that visible universe is entirely the work of an almighty Creator, who is utterly free and sovereign Lord, by whose Word and Spirit the world comes into existence as "very good"
- Gen 2:4-5:end - retells the creation with focus on the first human beings, their rebellion against God - their refusal to live by the word of the Creator
- Gen 6-9 - tells about a great flood, sent in judgment on human rebellion, in which the world was destroyed and remade - an uncreation and recreation
- Genesis 10-11 - tells about the dispersal of human race in diversity of nations throughout the world, with special focus on another act of human pride and rebellion against God - the building of a great tower in Babel
- background is universal - the ordered cosmos, the disordered human world - the various nations and cultures and races and languages of the human world -
- twofold testimony - to the power, wisdom, goodness of God, and to the corruption of human culture and civilization which comes under his judgment
- a judgment on human political projects in particular - the Tower of Babel, the prototype of Babylon, what Augustine was to define as the earthly city united by love of self to the point of contempt of God
- difficulties and dangers of human society and culture - misuse of human rationality, the perversity of human will, the injustice and violence that follows on disordered love and pride, disregard for God - dysfunction in the human household - men and women, brothers, parents and children
- left to his own devices, human race doomed to failure, destruction, misery
- what hope, what alternative?

## Genesis 12-17 - Patriarchal History

- no surprise then, that after God's judgment on human political enterprises, God does not establish a new city or a new nation state
- in time there will be a new city, a new nation, a heavenly city: but that is not where God begins
- he begins instead by uprooting an individual named Abram, with his dependents, and making them sojourners, strangers and pilgrims in a land that is not their own
- he is taking them out of one wilderness of the worldly city, making them aliens and strangers in the land of promise, precisely so that he can teach them how to be citizens of the heavenly city
- he does not begin with an appeal to city dwellers, kings, or settled farmers
- he begins not with security of city walls, but with a family tent, of rootless wanderers -
- significant that "Hebrew" - term applied to Abraham and his descendants - seems to have been a common ANE term for "nomad" or "migrant" - people who occupied the social economic and political status that Mexican migrant workers do in the USA
- Abraham would remain a nomad, a "sojourner" all his life, as would his son, his grandson, and his great-grandsons, the children of Israel - they would sojourn in Canaan, and then in Egypt, but always as strangers in the land

- in distant future their offspring would settle in Canaan, become farmers, live in cities, establish a kingdom, and in many respects look like other nation-states of the ANE - at least until that state was overthrown by the new Babylonian empire in the 6th c. BC and its people deported - returning Abraham's descendants to the statelessness of their forefather, their longing to journey to the promised land
- this prelude – family background

11: <sup>27</sup> Now these are the generations of Terah: Terah begat Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran begat Lot. <sup>28</sup> And Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his nativity, in Ur of the Chaldees. <sup>29</sup> And Abram and Nahor took them wives: the name of Abram's wife was Sarai; and the name of Nahor's wife, Milcah, the daughter of Haran, the father of Milcah, and the father of Iscah. <sup>30</sup> But Sarai was barren; she had no child. <sup>31</sup> And Terah took Abram his son, and Lot the son of Haran his son's son, and Sarai his daughter in law, his son Abram's wife; and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan; and they came unto Haran, and dwelt there. <sup>32</sup> And the days of Terah were two hundred and five years: and Terah died in Haran.

- Some of those details significance only become clear as the story develops
- the family of Terah, who had left his homeland, Ur of the Chaldees, in southern Iraq, in Babylonia, the historic successor of Babel
- Terah had relocated with his family to Haran (whose ruins are now in southern Turkey, at the north western end of Mesopotamia) – already in movement to the margins of the Mesopotamian city-states – Terah already a wanderer – perhaps read in this some disillusionment with Ur and the city state society of Iraq and its gods
- That means that Abram's wife is childless, his father is stateless, his brother is dead, his brother's son is his likely heir

Now the LORD [had] said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee: <sup>2</sup>And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: <sup>3</sup>And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed.

- There is here a word of command – one that might compel obedience out of sheer awe
- But there is also here a very extensive word of hope and promise – a promise that might well appeal to someone who was stateless, rootless, landless, marginal – a promise that might well appeal to someone with aspirations to greatness
  1. To make him a great nation - To bless him and make his name great (fame)
  2. To be a blessing – to bless those who bless him, to curse those who curse him – your attitude to Abraham determines God's attitude to you

3. To be a source of blessing to all families of the earth

- No little blessing here – one that will bless Abraham greatly and the entire human race – a turning point for human history
- Well being, security, prosperity, prominence

<sup>4</sup>So Abram departed, as the LORD had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran. <sup>5</sup>And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came. <sup>6</sup>And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land.

- but what motivates his obedience is more critical still
- at this point it is not explicitly said, but it will be in Genesis 15:6: when he heard God's promises to him, "he believed in the Lord: and he counted it to him for righteousness"
- Abram's response to God's word of promise is faith, and faith in the promise is what motivates his obedience
- His faith is in the promises, the hope that God sets before him – perhaps, as the son of a wanderer, an uprooted man, Abram longs for roots, land, home, settled ways, children, something great, a God of his own – or a god better than the lifeless gods of Babylon which he had seen through
- No report on Abram's motivations - We may surmise that God appeals to Abram's emptiness and aspirations and ambitions – his desire for greatness
- We need to think about the contradiction that is there between God's word of promise and the reality that Abram experiences when he gets to Canaan – the land that God shows him – not an empty land, a land waiting to be claimed and settled – but a land with people already in it
- Abram has responded with obedience and may now well feel perplexity – God speaks to him again, an epiphany with assurance that indeed this land will be given not to Abram, but to his seed
- Abram responds to the epiphany with worship – and by continuing to journey onwards, and to renew his sacrificial worship and invocation of God

<sup>7</sup>And the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the LORD, who appeared unto him. <sup>8</sup>And he removed from thence unto a mountain on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, having Bethel on the west, and Hai on the east: and there he builded an

altar unto the LORD, and called upon the name of the LORD. <sup>9</sup>And Abram journeyed, going on still toward the south.

- There is a lot more to the story of Abraham, and the story that begins in Abraham
- The initial fulfillment of the promise will be made over four hundred years later, when the Israelites under Joshua begin to take possession of the promised land – and even that will take about three hundred more years, until David establishes total possession
- The full definitive fulfillment beyond Abraham's own expectation will be in Christ – and the Holy Spirit, the land of eternal life – will be given to Abraham's seed, those who believe
- But here already we see the essential foundation of that new way of life
- Life of faith – believing the word of God's promise, the word of hope, which is the word of the gospel
- Life of Hope – acting on, willing the hope that is believed – hope is faith in progress toward the promised goal
- Life of charity – sacrifice seeking fellowship and communion with God – this sacrifice foreshadows Christ's own going up to Jerusalem to suffer, die, and rise again for mankind
- NT supplies important commentary on this narrative – Paul makes it the cornerstone of his doctrine of justification by faith alone apart from the works of the Law – righteousness with which we begin our journey to God is not our own righteousness, but the righteousness of Christ, which we receive through faith – faith being counted for righteousness, even when we are not ourselves righteous –
- Significance of Abraham summed up in Hebrews 11, the celebration of faith:

**11** Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. <sup>2</sup> For by it the elders obtained a good report. <sup>3</sup> Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.

[...]

<sup>8</sup> By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. <sup>9</sup> By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: <sup>10</sup> For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God.

<sup>11</sup> Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who

had promised. <sup>12</sup> Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable.

<sup>13</sup> These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. <sup>14</sup> For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. <sup>15</sup> And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. <sup>16</sup> But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city.

<sup>17</sup> By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, <sup>18</sup> Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: <sup>19</sup> Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.

- Their manner of life as tentdwellers and aliens, and their manner of death, not despairing but full of hope, indicates that they saw this present ethyl existence is one of sojourning and exile away from their true homeland cf. Phil 3:20; Rev. 21:1ff – spiritual expatriate Gal. 4:25 ff
- important as that later development was, the first defining moment for Israel begins before it is a political community or nation, when it is just a stateless person, a family
- begins not with Abraham's choice of God, but with God's choice of Abraham
- God engages Abraham with a word - Abraham's consciousness and will to be engaged in God's project
- God's project, to make Abraham the father of a great nation, and a blessing to all the families of the world
- God has not consigned all nations to perdition - but he has decided to create one nation through whom he will carry out his design of redemption and blessing to all nations
- and he has made himself the tutor, the guardian and educator of this one nation, or rather, of the one man and family from which the nation will come
- God not in a hurry - over four hundred years till something like a politically organized nation of Israel appears
- God lingers over this preliminary stage -
- he is establishing an entirely new way for human beings to live -
- right ordering of the family will be a big part of this educational process - of men and women in the family, of parents and children, and of all of them to something beyond the family, and greater than it, to God

- at its core, Abraham will learn how to be a father - a transmitter of God's new way to his offspring
- a new way of living in right relation (righteousness) to God, to other human beings, his family, other people
- God uproots Abraham and keeps him rootless, sundering him from the world and its wisdom, precisely so that he can teach him a new way of life, a life of righteousness ordered by his holy Word and commandments –
- We will look at some aspects of this new way of life
- But essential thing to grasp is that Abraham is (1) stranger, pilgrim, alien in this world and its city (2) precisely so that he may be a citizen of the city of heaven, the new Jerusalem
- In this regard, Abraham is the prototype and pattern of every Christian
- Especially relevant to our own time – in a society that is rapidly de-Christianizing, and in a church that is trying to keep up with the world, Christians of a traditional or conservative conviction are going to be aliens or even outcasts –
- This is not necessarily a bad thing! An opportunity for us to learn more completely what it means to be citizens of the heavenly city
- A focus on hope of God's promise (gospel) – a response in faith – and hope and charity

## Questions:

**Defect of will** – the origin of evil is not God, not created nature, not the body, nor even the intellect and emotions/feelings, but rather a defect of the will – a perverse rebellion against God and a refusal of the truth, which results in a darkened mind and an inflamed/dulled emotions – and out of which we cannot deliver ourselves – once you have turned away from light into darkness, you can't find your way back on your own

**Comfort in world** – God does protect and bless his people in this earthly life – though not always – the cross is also his gift to those who follow Christ – but the danger of earthly prosperity is that we can get too much at home in the world, too attached to the world, forget our true destination, in the heavenly city, and be so tied to the earthly city that when the culture lurches into chaos we can't resist but follow after – without detachment from the world and its good things we are not truly free to follow Christ

**How do we strengthen our vision of the heavenly hope?** Through immersion in the Word of God, and in the community/fellowship the Word of God gathers into the Worship of God - the Word of God so becomes ours, that it becomes our Word to God (worship) and our Word to one another (witness)