

## Abraham, Father and Pilgrim - Called out of Chaos

- Thanks to Jeremy Bergstrom who pinch-hit for me last week on very short notice, after I came down with a sinus infection
- Sorry to have missed the first meeting of the fall, and our first experiment with a new format of including a response panel - purpose here is not to get us off topic, or to provide a soapbox, but to sharpen the matter under discussion, clarify it and make it more fully digestible

### Introduction - Abraham

- our broad theme to start with this fall is that of the Christian Man as Stranger and Pilgrim - an important Biblical image on the one side, and on the other, one that speaks to our experience as Christians, not least in the present day, when we find ourselves in a rapidly secularizing society and also at times church engaged in the reinvention of the moral code and of social institutions
- isolated by these changes, we may well feel like aliens and exiles in our own country
- making sense of this predicament is crucial to living the Christian life as men
  
- today I want us to take a look at the figure of Abraham, Father Abraham, the Father of those who believe, and the prototype of the Christian as stranger and pilgrim in the world
- Abraham is 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 fulfilment of this promise was made in Christ - Benedictus (Luke 1): thanksgiving for the fulfilment 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".

## Before Abraham: Genesis 1-11 - Primeval History - *A return to Chaos?*

- Abraham appears elsewhere in the OT, and is discussed in NT esp Gal 3 and Rom 4, but the core tradition about him appears in Genesis 11-25
- we are only going to look at a very small portion of this history, chiefly up to 12:9
- 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 - testimony 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 OUT OF CHAOS and is assessed as good in its parts and as a whole "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 good Creator is what brings moral evil into the world, alienates man from God, male from female, man from the fruitfulness of the earth and woman from the fruitfulness of the womb, and brother from brother - all these relationships which should be happy, harmonious, are now fraught with guilt, blame, hostility, reluctance.
- ch 5 ends with appearance of cities, civilization - but built upon an ethos of vengeance
- none of this conflict is in the nature of things themselves, you see - but in the defect of the will, and our alienation from God
- where the will is turned away from the truth of God's goodness revealed in his Word, it embraces darkness, the mind is clouded and the emotions are either inflamed (lust, anger, envy, pride) or dulled (coldness, indifference, narcissism) - cf. Eph 4
- Gen 6-9 - testifies both to God's judgment on the fallen world, and his mercy to our moral infirmity - it tells the story of the great flood, sent in judgment on human rebellion, in which the world was destroyed and remade - a kind of uncreation and recreation in which the heart of man is unchanged
- 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 - prototype of Babylon, what Augustine was to define as the earthly city united by love of self to the point of contempt of God
- dysfunctions of the individual, household and family we saw in Gen. 3 and 4 (and again in Gen 9) are dysfunctions of political society, of civilization and the entire human race - infected with the same virus of pride, and comes under the same judgment of God -
- twofold testimony - to the power, wisdom, goodness of God, and to the corruption of human nature, culture and civilization which comes under his judgment
- - misuse of human rationality, the perversity of human will, the injustice and violence that follows on disordered love and pride, disregard for God -
- left to his own devices, human race doomed to failure, destruction, misery - **RETURN TO CHAOS**
- what hope, what alternative?

## Genesis 12-17 - Patriarchal History - Called out of Chaos - a New Beginning

- at the beginning of Gen 12 we find the alternative, God's new way for the human race - first some family background, from end of Gen 11

**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.**

- the family of Terah, who had left his homeland, Ur of the Chaldees, in southern Iraq, in Babylonia, the historic successor of Babel and relocated with his family to Haran
- 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 - a command to leave it all behind - the Mesopotamian world in which he is already an alien
- But there is also here a very extensive word of hope and promise –
- 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
- Command: after God's judgment on human political enterprises, not surprising that God does not establish a new city or a new nation state
- 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 time there will be a new city, a new nation: 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

**<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.**

- obedience - motivated by what? not said explicitly, although the word will be used in Gen 15:6 in relation to Abraham's response to God's promise - obedience motivated by faith in the promise, faith in the hope set before him in God's word - a word which we may accurately describe as gospel, good news
- faith is not self-generated, nor is it a response to what is already present and visible - it is precisely what cannot yet be seen but which is declared by a word of promise - this is what faith is - a kind of knowledge of what cannot otherwise be known except by trusting in a word
- 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

**<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.**

- 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 - that is a double promise, of land and offspring
- Abram responds to the epiphany with worship – and by continuing to journey onwards, and to renew his sacrificial worship and invocation of God
- we may discern in Abraham's response here the entire shape of man's response to God's word of promise -
  - faith that believes the word of promise,
  - hope that reaches forth to attain the promise, and

- charity, which seeks fellowship and communion with the promise giver by means of gift and sacrifice.
- There is a lot more to the story of Abraham, and the story that begins in Abraham
- very quickly we find out that Abraham has got a good deal of the old chaos still in him - neither he nor his wife knows what marriage is, and what a family is, and Abraham is going to have to be educated about what it means to be a father
- in a word, Abraham is not naturally a righteous man - but we are told in Genesis 15:6 - the same verse that says that Abraham believed God's promise, that "this was counted to him for righteousness"
- Paul brings out the implications of this in Gal 3 and Rom 4 - long before the Law came, even before circumcision, righteousness before God, right relation to God, was founded not only any moral achievement of our own, but on faith in God's promise - that's not doing anything for God, it is receiving something from God - receiving righteousness from God, by means of faith in his promise
- new beginning for us is not in ourselves, or in human society, but precisely outside ourselves, in God - chaos within provides us with no place to stand - and so we find that stability outside ourselves, in God
- 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. [vv 4-7] <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.**

- point here - their manner of life as tent-dwellers and aliens, and their manner of death, not despairing but full of hope, indicates that they saw this present existence is one of sojourning and exile away from their true homeland

- they have been uprooted, made strangers, exiles, aliens - precisely in order that he may make them citizens of a new city, a new human community, of righteousness, right relation to God and man
- not just exiles and aliens, but pilgrims - travellers with a sacred destination in view seeking God and his blessing, hope of promised blessing
- point of detaching them from the worldly city may make them feel like travellers in the wilderness - but it is the worldly city itself which is the spiritual wilderness, the place of alienation from God, of chaos and disorder - now detached from it, in sojourning in the wilderness, God guides and trains them into his new way - he trains them to be citizens of the new and heavenly city
- in OT terms this finds an initial fulfilment in the settlement of Canaan and the kingdom of David, hundreds of years later
- but in NT terms that kingdom was but a partial and preliminary fulfilment - not an earthly Jerusalem "in bondage her children" but the heavenly Jerusalem, "which is the free" (Gal:4:25ff)
- Augustine - earthly city is the community of men united by love of self and self-glory to the point of contempt for God - heavenly city, the city of God, is the community of men united by love of God and his glory to the point of contempt for self -
- that's what we are in pilgrimage towards - and in training for its citizenship, its way of life

**For our conversation [citizenship, way of life] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ:<sup>21</sup> Who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself.**

- 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 –
- condition of learning this new way of life is that Abraham is (1) stranger, pilgrim, alien in this world and its city - 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

## **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)
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# Abraham, Father and Pilgrim - Called out of Chaos

## Introduction - Abraham in the New Testament

- A. 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.
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- E. **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. [vv.4-7] <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.