

Hey Genesis 13:1-18

Lot and Abram Separate

Families quarrel over many things. But one of the saddest to witness is when families fall out over money. To see brothers and sisters fighting over the inheritance of a departed parent is heartbreaking. What ought to be a blessing, becomes a source of sin. It is ironic that few things can tear apart a family like increased wealth.

Abram had followed God's very general command to "go forth from your country . . . to the land which I will show you" (Genesis 12:1). He abandoned his homeland, his business connections, and even his nearest relatives to set out with only his wife and the nephew. Abram was not poor, he had flocks, herds, and even slaves. Nevertheless, this was still a considerable act of obedience and an explicit demonstration of trust in God.

The journey of some four hundred miles from Haran to Canaan passed without incident. Abram and his family arrived in Canaan, and after a few temporary stops, settled in the southern portion called the Negev. There, the family settled in and hoped they would experience God's blessing and see His promises fulfilled.

However, soon after Abram and his family arrived in the southern part of Canaan called the Negev, the area was struck by famine. The natural place to turn at such a time was Egypt. While there, Abram made the decision to have his wife, Sarai, pretend to be his sister. His motive for this bizarre strategy was that he feared that if she was known to be his wife, the pagan Egyptians would kill him to take her for themselves. Whatever the mental gymnastics going on in Abram's head about preserving his own life, and the promise of seed through his progeny, this was clearly a time when Abram lacked faith in God to keep His promises.

Yet, despite Abram's ungodly behavior in Egypt, the Lord chose to bless him. So when Abram left Egypt, he left an even wealthier man than we he had arrived. As we will see, he eventually made his way back to Canaan, eventually returning to the very place he had worshipped God before. But his increased wealth was not the unmitigated blessing it might seem to worldly eyes. In fact, the new found wealth Abram had accumulated as a result of his deceitful actions led to tension with his nephew, separation, and increased vulnerability to the aliens in Canaan.

This passage contains the first of the Abram-Lot narratives. In each of them the faithful and active Abram is contrasted with his foolish and passive nephew. The tension between them reminds us of the theme of family dysfunction prevalent among the patriarchs. And this tension possessed historical ramifications, as the history of their descendants (Israelites and Moabites/Ammonites) was anything but amicable.

The Return to Canaan

The return trip to Canaan is recorded in Scripture with as little commentary as was the trip to Egypt, though one cannot resist wondering about the conversation between Abram and Sarai. Neither does Scripture make mention of the famine continuing in the land of Canaan once Abram and his family return.

“¹So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, he and his wife and all that belonged to him, and Lot with him. ²Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver and in gold. ³He went on his journeys from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, ⁴to the place of the altar which he had made there formerly; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord” (Genesis 13:1-4).

Abram’s wealth is again given attention, as if to remind the reader of his ill-gotten gains at the expense of his wife’s honor and his own faithlessness. In addition to the usual mention of livestock, there is also the mention of silver and gold. Abram had become very wealthy indeed.

Abram returned to where he had begun in Canaan. He retraced his steps to the place where he had first built an altar to the Lord (Genesis 12:8). And there he worshipped. Abram’s wealth did not preclude him from remembering his God. Though it is not explicitly stated in the text, I think we can assume that Abram’s contrition was real and his repentance was genuine. Abram had returned to his God. Though we cannot absolutely assert that he did not do so, we must note that there was no mention of Abram building an altar while in Egypt. Abram had ever intended to settle there permanently. He knew what land had been promised to him, and his sojourn in Egypt was undoubtedly regretted by all concerned.

Conflict and Resolution

Lot had also benefited financially from the trip to Egypt. “Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents” (v. 5). As we have mentioned before, the fact that Lot was not specifically mentioned during the trip to Egypt does not, in itself, mean that he did not accompany Abram and Sarai on their journey there. The purpose of the narrative of Abram and Sarai in Egypt was to articulate Abram’s faithlessness. Lot was simply not needed in the narrative.

Like his uncle, Lot had acquired livestock. But the mention of tents (rather than silver and gold, as with Abram) might mean that Lot had many servants or slaves instead. In any case, Lot’s wealth was directly a result of his association with Abram. No other explanation for his prosperity is offered by the text. Also, there is no sense that the land is not available to Abram and Lot to settle where they might. It does not seem as though there was a problem with the indigenous Canaanite population then in the land. Rather, Scripture states plainly that “the land could not sustain them while dwelling together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to remain together” (v. 6). The issue simply seems to be finding enough space, not a matter of land ownership. This is not uncommon in primitive pastoral societies, where grazing land and water sources are often shared rather than owned.

Again we see the theme of land as well as that of family strife in the narrative. Domestic troubles were never far from Abram. But now, rather than issues between husband and wife, there were issues between uncle and nephew. “There was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock. Now the Canaanite and the Perizzite were dwelling then in the land” (v. 7). As the flocks and herds wandered the land, feeding on the grass and taking refreshment from the available water

supplies, no doubt the animals intermingled. Confusion may have arisen as to which animals belonged to whom. Perhaps one particular servant was more eager to see that his master's flocks and herds got the better grass or fresher water, to the exclusion of others. In any case, the matter escalated until it could be tolerated no longer. The word for strife, *rib*, is not the formal Hebrew word for lawsuit, but a more informal word for quarrelling. It was the word often used to describe the complaints of the people of Israel against Moses during the Exodus. This, then, was not a legal action, but rather was simply discontented bickering.

Curiously, Abram and Lot seem to have been able to get along well enough with the Canaanites and Perizzites then in the land. There is no mention of a dispute over grazing and water rights with the local population. It was only between themselves that issues arose. That may be because Abram and Lot chose to locate their livestock far enough away from the natives that no possible confusion could arise with them. Yet we must remark how often it is the case with families that they can present a united front against others, but cannot get along behind closed doors.

It was Abram who offered the solution. “⁸So Abram said to Lot, ‘please let there be no strife between you and me, nor between my herdsmen and your herdsmen, for we are brothers. ⁹Is not the whole land before you? Please separate from me; if to the left, then I will go to the right; or if to the right, then I will go to the left’” (v. 8-9). Though he, as the elder, had every right to demand that Lot take whatever land Abram might be pleased to allow him to occupy, and though, as the recipient of the promise of God that he would occupy the entire land, Abram still chose to act generously. It seems Abram’s faith in God’s provision and protection had returned.

The idea of separating cannot be overemphasized. This was a watershed event in the lives of the two men. This event became a part of the family history. The story must have been often told around the family table of the time of the quarrel between the servants of Abram and Lot, and the generous offer of Abram to give Lot whatever he wanted. The lesson learned was that faith in the Lord to provide was well placed. So much so that later, Abram’s son, Isaac, applied his father’s experience to his own situation.

“¹⁹Isaac’s servants dug in the valley and discovered a well of fresh water there. ²⁰But the herders of Gerar quarreled with those of Isaac and said, ‘the water is ours!’ So he named the well Esek, because they disputed with him. ²¹Then they dug another well, but they quarreled over that one also; so he named it Sitnah. ²²He moved on from there and dug another well, and no one quarreled over it. He named it Rehoboth, saying, ‘now the Lord has given us room and we will flourish in the land’” (Genesis 26:19-22).

Generosity to others to avoid a quarrel, and faith in God to provide were lessons well learned. Abram had earlier been the cause of strife. Now he sought to ameliorate the trouble. Abram had earlier been manipulative. Now he was magnanimous. And Abram was no doubt behaving practically as well. After all, he and Lot were the only Hebrews in the region. They were surrounded by others and were aliens in the land. If they quarreled between themselves, they would be easier prey for those seeking to take advantage. Yet, as we will see, the very fact that they separated meant that they were more defenseless than had they grouped their resources by staying together.

Notice that Abram was willing to release any portion of the promised land to Lot. He willingly sacrificed what had been promised to him by God. And implicit in the offer is Abram's belief in the promises of God. Abram spoke as if all the land was already his to dispose of at his pleasure. Yet, the Canaanite and Perizzite were still there. In reality, Abram possessed *none* of the land. In reality, Abram was an alien in Canaan. He wandered. He sojourned. He settled temporarily and then moved on. None of the land was then Abram's to give away, but his faith in the promises of God allowed him to speak as if they had already been fulfilled.

Lot's Choice

Lot's decision process is related with language that reminds us of the Fall.

“¹⁰Lot lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan, that it was well watered everywhere - this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah - like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt as you go to Zoar. ¹¹So Lot chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward. Thus they separated from each other” (v. 10-11).

Remember that Eve “saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it” (Genesis 3:6). Likewise, Lot “lifted up his eyes and saw all the valley of the Jordan” (v. 10) and “chose for himself all the valley of the Jordan” (v. 11). Each saw something desirable, and each acted upon that impulse.

It is not that Eve and Lot mistook what they saw. The fruit *was* pleasing to the eye. The valley of the Jordan *was* lush and verdant. Scripture even makes the analogy that the land was “like the garden of the Lord” (v. 10). It was Paradise regained. There was not a barren place to be seen. It was “well watered everywhere” (v. 10). And that is no small detail when one is a herdman in a desert. Though the exact location of Zoar is unknown, the context suggests that it was likely to the south. The Mishnah refers to the city as the “city of palms” and the Egyptian writer Ptolemy claims that it was famous for its date palms. Clearly, what Lot saw was appealing to a person who lived off the land and kept herds and livestock.

But we must also consider the crucial difference between Eve's choice and Lot's. Eve had been commanded not to eat the fruit of the tree. Lot had received no such injunction. Scripture is clear in its declaration that Eve's choice was sinful. The Bible makes no such statement regarding Lot. Eve should have known better. Lot simply looked about him and made a logical decision based on the options available. There is no evidence that, at the time Lot made his decision, he was aware of the behavior of the men of Sodom and Gomorrah.

Yet the irony of Lot's choice is mentioned as well. Scripture records that all this beauty was “before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah” (v. 10). Though that narrative has not yet been related in Scripture, the audience for whom the text was written would have understood the illustration well enough. Sodom and Gomorrah had become, for the people of Israel, symbolic not only of the depravity of human wickedness, but the thoroughness of the wrath of God when poured out on human flesh. Sure the land looked good to Lot at the time, but it would not always remain the lush valley he saw.

Abram acquiesced in Lot's decision. “¹²Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled in the cities of the valley, and moved his tents as far as Sodom. ¹³Now the men of Sodom were wicked exceedingly and sinners against the Lord” (v. 12-13). Abram remained within the promised land, and Lot moved outside of Canaan. Lot entered the Jordan River valley and continued south until he came to the outskirts of Sodom. He must have been aware of the promise of the land of Canaan, yet he ignored it, or perhaps believed that the promise was for Abram (as it was) and not for him anyway. Also, while Abram lived on the outskirts, Lot moved nearer the cities, an interesting choice for a herdsman.

Scripture emphasizes the iniquity of the men among whom Lot now found himself living. They were “wicked exceedingly and sinners” (v. 12). The wording used designated a class of sin that was exceptional. As with the narrative of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 19, the language used in Scripture explicitly draws attention to the degree of sin present in those cities. And while the sexual sin is foremost in the minds of most familiar with Sodom and Gomorrah, they inhabitants of those cities also violated aliens, were proud, and did not care of the disadvantaged.

“⁴⁹Now this was the sin of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy. ⁵⁰They were haughty and did detestable things before me. Therefore I did away with them as you have seen” (Ezekiel 16:49-50).

“⁴Before they [Lot and his angelic visitors] had gone to bed, all the men from every part of the city of Sodom - both young and old - surrounded the house. ⁵They called to Lot, ‘where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them’” (Genesis 19:4-5).

Scripture is not clear on how much of this Lot knew before he made his choice to settle near there. Certainly such sin must have made a reputation for itself. Yet, Scripture does not explicitly rebuke Lot for his choice at this time. He may have heard of the reputation of the cities but felt he was able to live near them without being affected. Perhaps he did not know until he arrived in the area but felt he could not, then, return to Abram, having made an arrangement to separate. Scripture is silent on the matter. Perhaps more importantly, what Scripture does state is that the sin of these wicked people was against the Lord. There is no geographical limit to the jurisdiction and sovereignty of God.

The Promise Renewed

Once Lot had left, God spoke to Abram.

“¹⁴The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, ‘now lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; ¹⁵for all the land which you see, I will give it to you and to your descendants forever. ¹⁶I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if anyone can number the dust of the earth, then your descendants can also be numbered. ¹⁷Arise, walk about the land through its length and breadth; for I will give it to you’” (v. 14-17).

The language God used was not a command, as it may appear in the English translation. Rather, it was a request. It was as if God said ‘please’ to Abram when he directed his attention to the land. The Hebrew

word, *nā*', was used by God only three other times when addressing humans, and in each case, as in this one, it was used when God was asking that person to believe in something impossible.

"He took him outside and said, 'look up at the sky and count the stars - if indeed you can count them.' Then he said to him, 'so shall your offspring be'" (Genesis 15:5).

"Then God said, 'take your son, your only son, whom you love - Isaac - and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you'" (Genesis 22:2).

"¹Now the Lord had said to Moses, 'I will bring one more plague on Pharaoh and on Egypt. After that, he will let you go from here, and when he does, he will drive you out completely. ²Tell the people that men and women alike are to ask their neighbors for articles of silver and gold'" (Exodus 11:1-2).

The magnitude of this promise must be emphasized. The language implied possession and domination of the entire region. God promised Abram all the land he could see, all the land he could walk on, and all the descendants he could count. Not only was the promise of God extravagant in its proportion, it was also infinite in its duration. The land was given 'forever.' Yet, as God spoke, we must remember that Abram had neither the ownership of one square foot of the land, nor any offspring to whom to bequeath it. A generous promise it was, but one, as yet, entirely unfulfilled.

There are two variations between this renewal of the promise, and that made by God when He first called Abram as recorded in Genesis 12. Here, the land was given to Abram as well as to his descendants. This was assurance that Abram, would not be an alien forever. Second, was that Abram would not only have descendants, but that they would be virtually innumerable. God's original promise was enhanced by these amendments.

So, "Abram moved his tent and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and there he built an altar to the Lord" (v. 18). Abram complied with the assurance of God that eventually he would take possession of the land. He relocated from the area of Bethel and Ai to a more central location in the southern center of Canaan. The particular city of Hebron was not founded until about three hundred years after Abram, so this was merely a Mosaic notation for his audience, but clearly Abram was taking possession of the land.

Takeaways

Abram trusted that God would provide for him. He trusted God's promises for land and offspring. So much so that he acted generously toward Lot when they could no longer remain together. May we, too, trust that God will provide, and never let things of this world distract us from trusting God or acting graciously toward others.