

Genesis 12:1-9
The Call of Abram - The Context of the Patriarchs

In 1887 John Sammis wrote one of my favorite songs, “Trust and Obey.” The song, itself, is as simple as its theme,

“When we walk with the Lord in the light of His Word,
What a glory He sheds on our way!
While we do His good will, He abides with us still,
And with all who will trust and obey.
Trust and obey, for there’s no other way
To be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.”

Such a song easily describes Abram in the passage we look at today.

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph. Their names are as familiar to us as the stories about them. These individuals represent the beginnings of the nation of Israel, the chosen people of their God, Yahweh. Eventually, after 400 years of slavery in Egypt, the Israelites would receive the Law as they made their way to the Promised Land. They would drive out the inhabitants, at least most of them, and after further turmoil, become a powerful nation. The ascendancy of that nation would be all too brief, however, and soon the people would divide and civil war would ensue. Eventually two nations divided the land where one had ruled, and after a further period of years, each of these two nation-states would be conquered and its people taken away into bondage. Throughout the centuries, these chosen people would struggle to live up to the high standard set by their God to worship Him alone. Their prophets would hold them accountable, and insisted that one day a Messiah would come to inaugurate the Kingdom of God. That is the narrative that begins with Abram.

Themes of the Patriarchal Narratives

Throughout the remainder of the book of Genesis, the four great patriarchs have their stories told. In the telling, certain themes emerge. One of these themes is the importance of having descendants. For example, the Abrahamic narrative (Genesis 12-25) is centered around the ability of Abram/Abraham to trust God for a male child who would continue the line. And even after the birth of Isaac, there was tension between Isaac and the likely rival, his half-brother Ishmael. And there also was the threat that something might happen to Isaac, even through Abraham’s own hand (Genesis 22). The issue of descendants is seen again in the Jacob narrative (Genesis 25-35) with the rivalry between Jacob and Esau and the dispute over which would continue as the chosen seed.

Another theme is land, specifically Canaan. The gift of the land promised by God to Abram is not realized in the lifetime of the patriarchs, other than the purchase of some isolated areas for farming and caves for burials. Occasionally, the patriarchs would build altars, but these were not intended as territorial markers, but rather were used for worship. In the Joseph narrative (Genesis 37-50), the land was abandoned because of famine, and the result was four hundred years of slavery in Egypt. Nevertheless, the promise of land was ever present and was realized in God's perfect timing in later centuries.

Yet another theme is that of family conflict. Family conflict had already entered the narrative with Abel and Cain. We saw it again with Shem and Japheth against Ham. While Scripture does not mention any tension between Abram and either Haran or Nahor, Abram and his nephew Lot disagreed over grazing rights. The relationship between Ishmael and Isaac was as unsteady as was that between their mothers (Sarah and Hagar). Jacob and Esau struggled (and their parents would participate in that struggle) beginning in the womb. Though Jacob and Esau eventually resolved their differences, the history of the Israelites and Edomites was replete with conflict. Jacob's wife Rachel deceived her father Laban, and even stole his pagan gods. Jacob and Laban would have years of conflict that resolved itself only in a very uneasy treaty. And perhaps most shocking, if not surprising, Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. Sadly, this is not an exhaustive list of the family conflicts found among the patriarchs.

A final theme is that of deception. Both Abraham and Isaac tried to deceive others by insisting that their respective wives were, in fact, their sisters. Lot was deceived by his own daughters into acts of drunkenness and incest. But this theme is most common in the Jacob and Joseph narratives, and was practiced on all sides. Rachel participated in the deceiving of her own husband. Jacob deceived his brother Esau, his father Isaac and his uncle Laban. Laban would, in turn, deceive Jacob. Joseph would deceive his brothers once in Egypt. And Tamar disguised herself as a prostitute to deceive Judah.

Historical Context of Abram

While the genealogies of the early chapters of Genesis are impossible to use as a means of arriving at specific historical dates for events such as Creation, the Flood, or the building of the Tower of Babel, the biblical record allows us to safely reconstruct Abram's birth as occurring in the year 2166 BC. This was a time of upheaval in the Tigris Euphrates River Valley, as the Guti, a fierce people from the mountains, had come to power. Their rise to influence may even have been a factor in causing Terah to move from Ur to Haran.

Linguistically, both Sumerian and Akkadian were spoken in the region of the Tigris-Euphrates River Valley, and it is very likely that Abram was bilingual. As mentioned last week, it is also likely that Terah and his family worshipped the local moon god Nannar, known in the Akkadian language as the god Sin. Both the personal names of Terah and his family, and the geographic location also support this assertion. And Scripture states that when Joshua began his review of Israel's history in his farewell address to the people, he remarked, "thus says the Lord, the God of Israel, 'from ancient times your fathers lived beyond the River, namely, Terah, the father of Abraham and the father of Nahor, and they served other gods'" (Joshua 24:2).

At the time Abram began his migration, Haran was a commercial center populated mainly by the Amorites. The Amorites spoke a Semitic dialect with which Abram would have been familiar in order to do business. The Amorites were an expanding people, and had connections throughout the Tigris-Euphrates River Valley and into Canaan itself. The great Babylonian leader Hammurabi was a descendant of these peoples.

Thus when Abram migrated to Canaan, he may have been part of a larger Amorite movement. The Canaanites had ruled the land between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River for centuries when

Abram arrived. The language spoken by the Canaanites was similar enough to that spoken by the Amorites that Abram would have had no difficulty communicating. Over the years, the Amorite migration had pushed the Canaanites to the coastal regions of Palestine and the Jordan River Valley. The Amorites, therefore, tended to settle in the hill country. We will see that Abram, too, settled in the hill country as well.