

Abram in the Promised Land

Genesis 12:4-14:24

The Trek Through Canaan

Abram, obedient to God's call, prepared to depart from Haran. He "took" Sarai and Lot (who apparently felt quite close to his uncle Abram) and, of course, also all their possessions and the slaves they had acquired. This indicates that not Terah was the leader, as had been the case when they left Ur, but Abram, who was going to leave his father's house forever, and to act independently from now on.

Under God's providential guidance they went in the direction of Canaan. The route after they had crossed the upper arm of the Euphrates, probably followed the great caravan trail leading to Damascus and further to the south. In that case, he would turn off in a westerly direction at Damascus, and enter from the north what was later called Galilee.

For we read that, having entered Canaan, he "passed through the land," until he came in the neighbourhood of Shechem. There he pitched his tents in the shade of the terebinth of Moreh (literally: the fortune tellers' terebinth), under which tree (which looks somewhat like an oak), in earlier times the heathens apparently had performed their dark practices.

It was there that the Lord appeared to Abram (we have to think of a sign of Divine presence, e.g., fire, or a human form), to give him the promise: "To your descendants I will give this land." Now, therefore, Abram knew that this was the land which the LORD was to show him.

It is remarkable that the LORD did not say "to you," but rather: "to your seed." The promise did not only embrace the land, but also the seed. We

shall see that those two have always been together as the contents of God's promise to Abram. It actually appeared quite impossible. The land was inhabited by a well-distributed population, which in its growth potential had a great advantage over the childless Abram.

But Abram had to learn to live in faith. And this he showed by building an altar for the LORD Who appeared unto him. We see at the same time how this land, which had been dedicated to the idols, was now being sanctified unto the LORD. Shortly after this Abram continued in southerly direction to the area between Bethel and Ai, where he found more room for his sizable herds. Probably he thought it safer there as well because in that area there were no main roads as at Shechem. Also, he was closer to the plains of the Jordan there. Anyway, Abram has stayed there a little longer.

There also he built an altar. The new element in the historic account is that there he called upon the name of the LORD. A comparison with 4:26 indicates that we must think of the institution of a camp service, a regular prayer and sacrificing service for his whole house, including his slaves. It is possible that during the long journey (from Haran more than 1000 km) such worship services had never been feasible, particularly if the caravan was stretched out over a great distance.

The altar as a worship centre has therefore in this place a somewhat different meaning than the altar at Shechem.

And after some time Abram continued further to the southern lands (the Negeb) with its far stretching steppes. We do not know how long he wandered around there. If we consider that Abram was seventy-five when he left Haran and eighty-six when Ishmael was born (12:4 and 16:16), then we may estimate this whole time of slow movement with his large herds, and his stay around Bethel and in the southern country, at approximately six years.

To Egypt

After some time there came a great famine in the land, similar to those of which we read in Isaac's and Jacob's histories. This plague is usually

mentioned in the Bible as an expression of God's wrath over a nation, and here we may have to think of something similar. Yet we must also emphasize the "trying" of Abram's faith. His stay in Canaan was in no way without troubles: As a wanderer he had moved from place to place in a land that was already inhabited, while he was nevertheless the heir to it, and then came that famine, which also outside Canaan's borders was so bad that he could not maintain himself there any longer. Yet he never considered returning to his father's house (Hebrews 11:15), and we have to accept that as an expression of his faith. Then he would rather go to Egypt.

He was aware of the great danger of the abduction of women there.

Actually this threat existed everywhere, although, according to the Biblical information he was confronted with it only twice. From 20:13 it is evident that Abram had requested from Sarai right from the beginning that she would make herself known as his sister when asked. When a married woman was taken the husband was usually killed, to prevent revenge. If the woman was unmarried, then it was the custom that her father or brother, under whose protection she was, were presented with rich gifts. The fact that Abram emphatically repeated his previous request at the Egyptian border indicates that he considered the danger to be quite serious.

Egypt was so much more powerful than the rulers of the small city-states. And although Sarai, who was ten years younger than Abram (17:17), had already reached the age of seventy, the beauty of her appearance had not faded, a fact which could be attributed to the longer life-span in those days and her not having had children.

What Abram feared happened indeed. Sarai, recommended to Pharaoh, was taken to the court. And as a result of her behaviour, aimed at saving Abram's life, the King bestowed on him a wealth of cattle and slaves. But the LORD visited Pharaoh and his house with great plagues. No mention is made of their kind, nor of the manner in which Pharaoh came to realize that the cause was the theft of Abram's wife. It could be by way of a dream, or an intuition of one of the priests of his court.

What counts here is the fact that the LORD interfered to deliver. Then Pharaoh called Abram and reprovably asked him why he had dealt with him in this manner. But he dared not take revenge nor did he claim back his presents. He returned Sarai to her husband, sent him away, and had him and his wife with all his possessions deported as unwanted foreigners.

Abram's role in this history is not one of a hero in the faith. In Egypt he did not reach the level of what is related in chapter 22. In itself it is not wrong to use a trick and it is not always mandatory to tell the truth in full detail. But in this case he put his marriage at stake. And this could have led to adultery by the other, had God not intervened. On the other hand, Pharaoh, with his stealing of women and occasional killing of husbands, is not free from blame either, no matter how great the charm was which especially the Semitic women with their lighter skin had for the darker Egyptians. Yet the Bible does not formulate an emphatic condemnation, not over Abram (although Abram is shown as a debtor who cannot answer) nor over Pharaoh (although it mentions God's punishment of this man with his evil practices).

What the Scriptures proclaim here is God's grace over Abram and therefore his deliverance out of this distress. And as in a mirror, we see here the life of the Church with all its weaknesses, which could not exist without God's help and the prayer: "lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one." But another perspective here is the tyrannical power of Egypt, which will once reach out murderous hands to the holy seed and which now already threatened Abram's marriage, thereby kindling God's anger.

We also get the vision here of Satan grimly facing the Church-Woman (Revelation 12:1-4).

Abram's disbelief has been pardoned on account of the seed, Christ, Who, according to the flesh, would once be born out of him, in order to give His life as a price of atonement.

This could not be said of Pharaoh. Why this difference? Because of God's eternal good pleasure.

Lot and Abram Separated

After the departure from Egypt the wandering nomadic life began again, in the southern country, where (although it is not mentioned) the worst of the famine was over. It is not without importance that Abram's wife and all his possessions are mentioned, and that separate mention is made of Lot who went along with Abram. From this we can conclude that Lot with his accumulated wealth held a position of greater independence now. This all indicates prosperity. Of Abram in particular we are informed: "he was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold." Later we read that "Lot also had flocks and herds and tents." These tents point to the number of his shepherds and household. The herds of both had greatly increased, gold and silver resulted from commercial enterprise, and we must not forget Pharaoh's rich gifts. It all speaks of blessings, which as an active force greatly enriched Abram especially. And so, in the steady manner of the shepherds they would go from place to place through the southern lands with *Bethel* as final destination, where the altar was still standing and where the worship services were again continued.

The harmony in the relationship, however, began to be disturbed. The country was too limited for the large herds. Also, there would be no benefit in going further into the land together. Again the Bible mentions the local population, which would be unable to accommodate Abram with Lot. It is true, the fertile land of the Jordan Valley was not far from the camp. One could see some of it from the mountains at Ai. But although the Bible does not specifically mention this, the story suggests that Abram was apprehensive about establishing himself there. It undoubtedly became known to him how deeply corrupted the neighbouring people were. "Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD" (verse 13). Abram will not have wanted to expose to this his people who were wandering around with his flocks. The only way out for the two shepherd-princes was that each went his own way. Time and again new fights broke out between Abram's shepherds and those of Lot. We get the impression that the relationship between those two men was not all that peaceful any more either. And would it have to reach the stage that they would draw the sword against each other? Would Abram have to protect his estate by the use of violence? No, not through blood, but by faith has he been a resident in Canaan. Thus the proposal to separate

came from him. And in the faith that Canaan would once belong to his posterity he generously let Lot have first choice. And Lot chose . . . the plains with all their attractiveness. Although he was a righteous man, he was not without a touch of materialism. He did not consider the moral dangers and eventually he even settled in Sodom, an evil act, which would bring its own punishment along (chapter 19).

But the LORD comforted Abram, who was driven further into isolation by the loss of his steady companion.

For the third time he received a promise. Compared with the previous two, this was more than a mere repetition. A new aspect is that (12:1-3; 12:7) *Abram and his seed would receive all the land* as far as his eye reached from the high lookout post (we may remark that Abram received it “in promise”), also, that it would be an *everlasting possession*, and that his posterity would be *numerous* like the dust of the earth. The Old Testament history contains the initial fulfilment of this promise, but Abram has also known something (Hebrews 11:10) of the ultimate fulfilment which we know from the New Testament, which radiates the light of eternity in this promise. We must not forget that Abram is described as the father of all believers. The Canaan of the promise and the seed without number point, ultimately, to eternity (compare Revelation 21, 22, and others). And the affirmation of that promise within the shadowy limits of that time is received by Abram in the authorization to “walk through the land . . .” as heir.

Abram then broke up his camp and chose his permanent residence at the oaks of Mamre, in the area of Hebron.

The satanic attack on Abram’s faith had been thwarted. Furthermore, we see that it was then God’s time to separate Lot from Abram, for although he belonged to his communion of faith, yet he was not of Abram’s seed.

Abram Liberates Lot

After some time, probably three years after these events, Lot became a victim of war activities.

Sodom and the other cities of the Pentapolis (the 5-city confederacy) in the district, probably south of the Dead Sea, had been subjected under Chedorlaomer, King of Elam (the western part of what was later called Persia), but they had rebelled. With Amraphel (Shinar), Arioch (Ellasar) and Tidal (with its foreign legion) — the names are arranged in alphabetical sequence — Chedorlaomer went on a punitive expedition on which occasion he also punished various other peoples and cities. It is probable that there had been a general revolt against his rule in the subjected territories. When we look at the route, from the country of the Euphrates and Tigris to the Trans-Jordan land, and further to the Gulf of Eilath from where the merchant ships went along the Arabian coasts, then it seems obvious that he wished to safeguard the commercial route to the southern sea. After that the route went in westerly direction and then to the north, where in continuous battle he reached the Dead Sea. Thus this area, where the last battle would be fought, was completely sealed off. In the meantime the people here did not await the attack, but the five kings went to the Valley of Siddim with its many asphalt pits, where they occupied a strategically favourable position. Yet they lost the battle. The kings of Sodom and Gomorrah even fell into a pit, either by trying to hide in it or by accident; the king of Sodom managed to get out of it; the one of Gomorrah perished in it. Then their cities, which will have been the largest (the others are not mentioned), were ransacked and the whole population, with all their stock, were deported, including Lot.

But then Abram appears at the scene of the war. He was still living in the region of Hebron in the plain of Mamre, a brother of Eshcol and Aner, with whom he maintained a good relationship (14:13).

As soon as he received the information of what had happened — the eyewitness report of a fugitive — he mustered his men, a mobile little army of 318 trained young men, born in the camps of Haran, on whom he could count: his camp security service. In alliance with his neighbours and their men he quickly pursued the homebound enemy. In Dan, high in the north, he caught up with them. And protected by the darkness of the night he took the surrounded camp by surprise and completely wiped out Chedorlaomer's army, after which the fugitives were pursued till beyond Damascus and all captives with all their effects were freed,

Lot included. The significance of this episode is indicated by the names which the Bible gives here to Abram and Lot. In Genesis 14 Abram is called a *Hebrew* (the only time in the history about him), and not the son of Terah. Without a doubt, this word Hebrew is derived from *Eber*, who in the time of the confusion of language and the dispersion of the people receives his son *Peleg*, in whom the holy line was continued, and who, with his offspring, was the holy seed of the blessed Shem (10:21, 25, and compare 11:15-17), in contrast with the Arabian peoples, who were from Eber's other son, Joktan.

While in Terah's house the religion had been corrupted, in Eber's it had been maintained purely. Later, this name is found back as a name in Israel and all those who belonged to Israel's religious circle (Exodus 1:15ff. and 1 Samuel 14:21). By that time, however, the name had no longer that strong meaning of purity as in Genesis. And *Lot* is called Abram's *brother*, which must here also be regarded in a religious sense. He was not of Abram's generation, but he did belong to Abram's communion of faith. And thus Abram's battle is characterized as a war of liberation, not waged for the benefit of Sodom, but for the deliverance of his fellow believer and his house.

Melchizedek

On the way back via Salem (Jerusalem) to Hebron in the south, the meeting with Melchizedek, king of Salem, took place in the valley of Shaveh (probably the same as the Valley of Kedron, 2 Samuel 18:18, where the name "King's Valley" is also mentioned). Melchizedek went out to meet Abram and took with him bread and wine, symbols of royal honour. Moreover, he was a priest of the most high God. The fact that he blessed Abram indicates that he was superior to Abraham. This also became evident from the fact that the patriarch gave him the tenth part of all the spoils, which, according to the rules of war, belonged to the winner.

At the same place also the King of Sodom came to meet Abram. When he noticed Abram's generosity he cunningly offered that Abram should keep the loot, while the people would be returned to himself, obviously to re-establish authority. Abram looked through this temptation and flatly refused, in order that it could never be said that he had enriched Abram.

The patriarch expected everything from his God, Whose honour was at stake here. After all, was he not the heir according to the promise? Abram could wait for God's time. Only the tithes for Melchizedek, and the expenses and share of his allies was what he claimed. And besides: Sodom's king as the loser had no business proposing any dividing of people and spoils.

Hebrews 7:1-13 reveals that Melchizedek-in-his-priesthood is like God's Son with respect to the eternal priesthood, of course, not in regard to his person. For he had his priesthood not by hereditary succession, not from his father or mother, nor could it be explained from his genealogy; no date of installation in his office is mentioned and there is no indication of a succession in office at his death, as was the case later with Aaron (Numbers 20:25, 26). In Melchizedek we see a glimpse of the eternal priesthood of Christ Who still bears that office in heaven for our benefit today.

The opinion has been expressed that this story of Genesis 14 was already written down in Melchizedek's time, and kept in Salem where in David's time it fell into David's hands with the taking of the Fortress of Jebus, and that this inspired him, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to write Psalm 110. In Psalm 110:7, according to this opinion, we see the description of Abram, while the Psalm as well as the battle of the peoples of Genesis 14 points to the end of time (compare Psalm 110:1, 2, 3, 5, 6).

Questions

1. (Re: 12:7) Does the promise of seed and land regard Canaan and Israel only?
2. (Re: 12:7) Does it also apply to us that notwithstanding the apparent state of affairs, we, like Abram, must live by faith only?
3. (Re: 12:8) What consequence does the fact that Abram built a worship centre have for us?
4. (Hebrews 11:9) In what respect are WE "foreigners"? Did Abram's alliance with Mamre, Eshcol, and Aner not clash with his position as "foreigner"?

5. (Re: 12:13) Abram and Sarai presented themselves as brother and sister. Was that a lie?
6. (Re: 12:18, 19) Was Pharaoh's rebuke to Abram fair?
7. (Re: 13:8, 9) What lesson is there for us in the proposal to separate?
8. (Hebrews 6:20) What difference of significance is there between the priesthood of Melchizedek and that of Aaron?