

## Genesis 11:27-32, 12:1-9!

### The story of Abram- a man who believed and followed after God!

This is the beginning of the story of Abraham and his family. The final thirty nine chapters of the book of Genesis will focus upon three main characters: Abraham, Jacob, and Joseph. God's interaction and work through these individuals and their families becomes **the foundational story** for understanding and appreciating God's call to the nation of Israel to be his special covenant people. This section of a mere sixteen verses functions to introduce us to Abraham's story by providing critical information concerning Abraham, his family and background, his call, and the core promises from God to Abraham. This section marks the beginning of Abraham's foundational story.<sup>1</sup> Let us take a closer look into each of these factors.

- I. **Background Information regarding Abraham. (Gen. 11:27-32)** The first section is rich in helpful information regarding Abraham's background. The section particularly focuses upon his family and home city.<sup>2</sup> This information will play a role in helping us appreciate the story about to be told about him. Let us now begin our investigation by looking at Terah and his decision to **migrate to Canaan**. Why did Terah decide to leave Ur-his home city? It probably is not the same reason that motivates Abraham's subsequent decision to leave Haran. Terah, may have decided to go to Canaan because of "Opportunity"! What exactly was the nature of the opportunity we are not told. This does not matter! What does matters for us is that the story about Abraham begins by telling us the story **about Terah** along with his son Abraham, Sarah, and Lot setting out for Canaan from Ur. This trek would span about 500 miles, or this journey would have taken about a month's time to get there! But, this long journey of 500 miles is interrupted **by a change in plans**. The text informs us that they-Terha and his family stop in Haran which is a major city only 20 miles south of Ur. This is assuming that Ur is located in the north and not the south of Mesopotamia as originally believed.
- a. **Terah's family!** Notice from our text at how inter-connected members of Terah's family are to each other and to subsequent unfolding story. Notice first that Terah is said to have had three sons. This is mentioned twice in our story. <sup>3</sup>Haran (not the city) is probably the oldest and not the youngest son. Haran is specifically mentioned as dying in "the city of Ur the land of his birth." He died but not before giving birth to two daughters " Milcah and Iscah." What is important about this detail is how it affects the major characters of our story. Milcah, Haran's daughter marries Abraham's other brother Nahor! Significance? At some point this couple (Nahor and Milcah) migrates to Haran to join the rest of the family. They will play a key role in the forthcoming story of Abraham finding a wife for Isaac. Where does he find Isaac's future wife? She is the daughter of Bethuel **son of Nahor**. Or she (*Rebekah*) is the granddaughter of Nahor.<sup>4</sup> While Nahor and Milcah and their family do

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<sup>1</sup> Wenham regards this introductory section of extreme importance to the unfolding story in Genesis. "Within the book of Genesis, no section is more significant than 11:27-12:9. It serves as an introduction and summary of Abraham's career." Wenham, Gordon Genesis 1-15 Word Biblical Commentary 1987 p. 281

<sup>2</sup> By home city I mean the place where Abraham and Sarah made their home and where they settled down and worked.

<sup>3</sup> Gen. 11: 26 Terah had three sons. Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

<sup>4</sup> What is even more fascinating is Rebekah is described in the text in reference to Milcah not Nahor. Given the male dominated language of the patriarchal culture, I find this amazing for look to see how customary it is to focus on the father and not the mother.

not make this initial journey with Terah, they will play a part in the larger story being told about Abraham which we will soon see.

- b. **Terah's Decision to Leave Ur.** Terah sets off with one son Abram, his daughter Sarah, whom the text prefers to describe her as his daughter in law, and Lot whose father (Abraham's brother Haran) has at this point in the story has already died. Before jumping into the main story, the narrator of these introductory verses wants us to see and to keep in mind two pieces of critical information. Abraham married Sarah. How old were they? No idea. Not important! Did they have children! **No!** Now this detail is a very important detail. At this point the writer wants us to see that not only did they not have children, Sarah **was barren or infertile- unable to have children.** Keeping this information in our heads, the focus will now be upon the road trip that the family will undertake.

Now this small group of Terah's family then sets out for Canaan. While on route at the very beginning of their journey to Canaan, something unexpectedly happens! They decide to stay in Haran a city 20 miles south of Ur. How long do they stay? A long time! The text states that they "settle there" The final verse of this section informs us that "Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran." Now, Wenham, who may or may not be right declares that "Terah died at 205 when Abraham was 135.<sup>5</sup> This means that Terah chose to stay behind in Haran and was alive for many years after Abraham leaves city of Haran.<sup>6</sup> Why did Terah stay behind and not resume his originally intended goal of going to Canaan? Terah decided to stay in Haran probably because life and living was good there. At some point sometime after the original road trip by Terah, Nahor and Milcah, decided to leave Ur and they too migrated and settled in Haran! Why? Because life was good there! So why then does Abraham leave the good life in Haran after many years and resume the originally intended destination of Canaan, if life there was so good in Haran? **God called him!**

- II. God's Call to Abraham and His Promises to Abraham (Gen. 12: 1-3)** This is a very important section for it introduces us to the main story about Abraham. What is that story? At its core the story of Abraham is **about God's promises to him.** What is so special about these promises? The story about Abraham is about the story of God beginning His plan to deal with sin and the effects of sin through Abraham's descendants and particularly through a descendant (or seed of Abraham). This part of Genesis shows that now through Abraham, God is at work keeping his promise to Adam and Eve, Noah, and Noah's descendants. What is that **core promise**? God from the beginning wanted **to bless humanity.** This text draws attention to this idea once again? For in this section God promises to Abraham that "*All the people of the earth will be blessed through him!*" Ultimately the rest of Scripture will show that God fulfills this promise to bless all people through the **redemption that came through Christ.** This promise to Abraham is the first of many promises by God regarding his promise **to deal with humanity's sin and restore what was lost due to the fall.** Let us take a look at both God's call to Abraham and the promises given to him.

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<sup>5</sup> Wenham *ibid.* p.269 What we do know is that assuming Abraham is the youngest child, then Terah had Abraham when he was 70 and thus lived 135 years after Abraham's birth. If Abraham is 75years old when he leaves for Canaan that leaves at least 60years that Abraham before his father died.

<sup>6</sup> Wenham *ibid.* p. 269

- a. **God calls Abraham and Sarah.** In order fully appreciate God's call to Abraham we need to be careful not to forget the conclusion to chapter eleven, particularly the last two verse indicating the city where we left Abraham and Sarah. Remember, they have settled down in Haran enjoying the good life with friends and family' when **God interrupts** them with a mission. What is that mission or call? Essentially God called Sarah and Abraham to restart the journey that began with Terah years earlier. Terah, remember decided to leave Ur in order to go to the land of Canaan. But this core mission actually **had three parts**:
- i. Abraham and Sarah along with Lot was called by God to leave Haran not Ur. (vs 4). It seems likely that Abraham and Sarah had spent a considerable amount of time in Haran for they had accumulated possessions and servants while living there. (vs.5). Terah his father who settled in Haran is left behind or chooses not to go.
  - ii. God calls Abraham and Sarah to leave Haran for "the land (country) that God would show them" which is the land of Canaan 500 miles away. Most people only see the call to leave and go as constituting the entire call. I see a third component.
  - iii. God called Abraham and Sarah **to be a blessing!** Hamilton in his commentary drew my attention to this aspect of Abraham's call.

Interestingly enough the JPS translation of verse two endorses this idea by translating verse two as: "**and be thou a blessing**" rather than the NIV and ESV translating the original Hebrew as: "so (or and) that you will be a blessing". Most translations do seek to translate the Hebrew imperative verb as a statement declaring the consequence of Abraham's action, and thus as one of God's **promises to Abraham**. Thus it is very reasonable to see this statement "*and or so that you will be a blessing*" as expressing a key idea that is even repeated in this section. The key idea being that God promises to not just bless Abraham, but Abraham **will be the means by which other people** are blessed by God. Yet, if the original Hebrew verb which is an imperative in form is translated as it is most of the time it should be translated **as a command** just like the corresponding earlier command to "**Leave**"! If this is true, then I think it is reasonable to see that the call to Abraham by God **be a blessing** functions to keep in mind the emphasis on the idea that God is calling Abraham and Sarah to do something that will have a huge impact upon others.

- b. **God's promises to Abraham.** God's promises to Abraham are an important aspect of this core section of three verses. What does God specifically promise to Abraham? Why are these promises so important to the overall story being told in the book of Genesis? In addition to these questions we must another important question! Are these promises conditional or contingent upon Abraham complying with God's call?
- i. The Nature of God's blessing. Overall, **God promises to bless Abraham**. This is the summary of what God promises to Abraham. I do not see this promise of God blessing Abraham as being earned or conditioned by whether or not Abraham obeys God. Otherwise, God would be bribing Abraham. Notice the text does not say: "If you go Abraham", I will do such and such! No! God calls Abraham and at the same time promises to bless him. Keeping in mind God's promises to bless Noah earlier; along with God latter making similar promises to Isaac, I see that God

makes promises to them the same way. What is the common thread in God's promises to these three individuals? God's call and promises **are inseparably connected**. One is not conditioned upon the other. Moreover, God's promises may vary from individual to individual. God's promises to Noah are different from God's promises to Abraham. But the foundational blessing to each of them and to all of God's people is the same. **God promises to be with them and us.**<sup>7</sup> This is life's greatest blessing.

- ii. God gives Abraham specific promises! God promises Abraham the following: **Progeny** or Multiple descendants. **Prominence** or His name will be greatly honored and remembered. **Prosperity** or God will ensure that not only will he prosper (successful crops & increased herds) which Abraham already enjoys, but God will watch over him as evidenced by the expression: "I will bless those that bless you, but whoever curses (or treats you unfairly) God will curse." **Property.** An unstated aspect of God's promised blessing to Abraham is the promise to give the land of Canaan to his descendants. This explicitly comes out in the concluding section that follows. God tells Abraham, "to your offspring or seed, I will give this land." (vs. 7) What makes two of these promises seem so unlikely to happen is the context in which the promises are given. Sarah, remember, is unable to have children. Abraham at this point has no heir. The land currently being promised to Abraham is currently owned and occupied by some else.

**III. Abraham responds to God's call and promises. (vs. 4-9)** The six concluding verses focus upon Abraham's **twofold response to God's call**. Abraham believed God. Abraham worshiped the LORD who made promises to him.

- a. **Abraham trusted God and obeyed God's call. (vs. 4-5)** God said leave! Abraham, Sarah, and Lot left Haran -the place that they had settled down and made home together with their father Terah. They left Terah behind. They took all the possessions and servants that they had accumulated and left Haran for "the land that God would show them taking this 500 mile journey. Why did they leave the comfort and security of Haran for a country that not their own with people and a language not their own? **Because God called them.** Abraham obeyed! Abraham also trusted God and believed that this was God's call and plan for Sarah, Lot, and himself. Notice the concluding point of these two verses. "They arrived there." **Point:** God kept a promise. He safely enabled them to fulfill the mission. Sarah, Lot, and Abraham made it to the land that God wanted them to go to.
- b. **Abraham once in Canaan does not settle down. (vs. 6-9)** The writer now concludes his introduction to the story of Abraham with four final concluding verses. These four verses focus on three related themes: 1) Abraham and his companions are on the move. 2) God clarifies his initial promise to Abraham. 3) **Abraham builds altars to God** who has appeared to him.

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<sup>7</sup> Gen. 26:3,

- i. Once arriving to Canaan, Abraham and his companions do not settle down and make a home there. Contrary to the example of his father Terah who had the best of intentions of going all the way to Canaan but who never made it because he and his family “settled down” in Haran. Abraham, on the other hand on arriving in Canaan does not settle down Abraham once he arrives there but is said to be repeatedly “on the move”. Verse 6 states that “Abram traveled through the land as far as Shechem a Canaanite city located about 35 miles north of Jerusalem, then south to an area east of Bethel another Canaanite city located 10 miles north of Jerusalem.<sup>8</sup> Then from Bethel, once again he and his family are on the move once again “setting out and continuing to journey to the very south of the land that God promised. This time Abraham and his family arrive in the Negev which is the area of land that borders Egypt. It is not clear if Abraham spends months or years traveling up and down this land. The bottom line is that he does not settle down and make it his home.
- ii. God amplifies his promise to Abraham specifically promising for the first time that the land that God is showing to Abraham will someday belong to his offspring. (vs.7) This is the first time that God specifically promises that the land that God had called Abraham and his family to journey to would be given to his offspring as part of package of promises that God offered to him.
- iii. Abraham **builds altars** in response to God appearing to him. (vs. 7, 9) I think this is highly significant and worth noting. At Shechem and at Bethel, Abraham builds and calls upon the LORD who both appeared to him and promised him “I will give this land to your offspring.” What is the meaning of this action of “building an altar? I think it is an expression and act of worship by Abraham. It is the means by which Abraham to the LORD that expresses confidence (belief) that God kept his promise to him. Building and altar not only acknowledges what God has done for him in the past, but it expresses trust and confidence that God will keep his promises to him in the future as well. Remember, Noah built an altar<sup>9</sup>presumably out of recognizing that God had delivered his family from the massive flood. Here Abraham like Noah is giving thanks to the LORD for keeping his promise to bring him safely to Canaan, but also in advance for the anticipated fulfillment in generations to come. <sup>10</sup>For incredibly according to Wenham this act of building and altar is an act of worship by Abraham that recognizes and giving thanks for God’s blessing to him in advance of their fulfillment. This is an incredible act of faith given by the fact that the land that is promised to him is currently owned and occupied by someone else and that there is little hope that Sarah and who currently do not have even one child do not even have hope of any children given their circumstances.

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<sup>8</sup> Walton, John Genesis The NIV Application Commentary Zondervan 2001 p.395

<sup>9</sup> Gen. 8: 18 Noah came out of the Ark with his family and “built an altar....sacrificing burnt offerings. Why? Thanking God for keeping him and his family safe from the flood.

<sup>10</sup> Wenham p. 280-284 It is Wenham who insightfully interprets the significance of Abraham’s actions as describing Abraham as travelling from one end of Canaan the land of promise to other end. He stops at one place pitching his tent moving on to the next but at each stopping point making and altar and calling upon the Lord. “At each place Wenham argues that Abraham symbolically taking possession of it.” Moreover, Wenham argues further that “by building an altar he symbolically is demonstrating his conviction that one day it would belong to his descendants.”

