

Genesis 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 13 January 2020

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[0 : 0 0] Genesis chapter 13. So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had, and lot with him, into the Negev. Now Abram was very rich in livestock in silver and in gold, and he journeyed on from the Negev as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, to the place where he had made an altar at the first.

And there Abram called upon the name of the Lord. And Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together, for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together. And there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's livestock and the herdsmen of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites were dwelling in the land. Then Abram said to Lot, Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole land before you?

Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if you take the right hand, I will go to the left. And Lot lifted up his eyes and saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar. This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other.

Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley, and moved his tent as far as Sodom. Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord.

The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, Lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see I will give to you, and to your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you. So Abram moved his tent and came and settled by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron, and there he built an altar to the Lord.

[2 : 2 9] As we saw yesterday, chapters 12 and 13 of Genesis are tightly structured. There is a relationship between these two chapters as Abraham walks a path, goes down into Egypt, and then returns from Egypt and retraces many of his steps. When he returns to the land, he returns to the places where he has been before. And at this point, he took Lot with him earlier, but now there is a division.

There are two characters that have a relationship with Abram that's unclear. Is Sarai Abram's wife, or is she his sister? How is she going to relate to the fulfillment of the promises? Likewise with Lot.

Is Lot going to be put in the category of son, or is he going to be put in the category of brother? Is God going to fulfill his promises to Abram through Lot, or is Lot somewhere with a different destiny?

At the beginning of the narrative, it seems as if Lot is the person through whom God will fulfill his promises to Abram. Abram takes his dead brother's son with him, and it seems as if he's the one that God might fulfill the promises with. But Lot, in this chapter, takes a different course as they separate.

Both Lot and Abram have significant wealth, great flocks, and they are competing with each other. And as a result, they have to separate, going their different ways, leading to a greater separation as Lot heads towards Sodom. There's division within the family, and it means that Lot can no longer be straightforwardly categorized as a son. He's not the one through whom Abram's name is going to be made great.

[4 : 08] He's not going to be the one through whom the nation is established. Which throws open the question again, how is God going to fulfill his promise to Abram? Now, Lot and Abram are often held alongside each other, juxtaposed with each other. One character is seen to have a certain set of characteristics, and the other, another. In the book of Genesis, there are several such juxtapositions of characters. Cain and Abel, Esau Jacob, Judah Joseph, Sarai Hagar, Abram Lot, and Leah Rachel. We can think of a number of others, perhaps.

But it's not a straightforward good-bad juxtaposition. Often there are characters that are both flawed, but are related to each other in ways that are significant in other respects, highlighting different characteristics by that comparison. Later on as we read the story, Lot will be explicitly referred to as a brother. It's a relationship that helps us to hold Lot and Abram over against each other and see their destinies being played out against each other. We'll see this especially as we get to chapters 18 and 19. At the end of this passage, God promises the land to Abram.

The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, lift up your eyes and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward, for all the land that you see, I will give to you and your offspring forever. God has already promised that he will make Abram and his family great. But what he does in this chapter is promise that he will give them a place, a particular place where they will be made great, that they will inherit, that they will be settled in this particular land. And as we read through the story here, it's important to notice that Abraham is involved in construction. In chapter 11, there was an attempt to make the name of the builders of Babel great.

They wanted to build this great city and tower to build a legacy for themselves that would avoid death. They built a tower and yet God undermined their project and it came to nothing. What does Abram do as he goes from place to place? As God gives him promises, he builds altars. An altar is something that lasts for a long time. But the purpose of the altar is not to make the name of the altar builder great, but the one to whose name the altar is erected. Abram, wherever he goes, is establishing the worship of God. He's seeking to make God's name great. There is a juxtaposition here with the builders of Babel that they sought to make their name great. Abram seeks to make God's name great. He's going throughout the land and at these significant sites between Bethel and Ai, at Shechem, and other such sites, sites that anticipate the later story of Israel, the sites and the events that will define its identity, the scars upon the life and body of Israel, those events that help to determine its destiny.

At each of these sites, in significant anticipation of what's to come, he is building altars, establishing the worship of God in that location. Also notice how Abram holds things with an open hand. He allows Lot, the person on whom his hopes may have been placed for the continuing of his legacy, to depart from him, to go his own way. And he's left with merely Sarai and the rest of his household around him. He has no son of his own. And so he's wandering throughout the land, living in tents.

[7 : 55] He does not have a settled location that belongs to him. He's depending upon the promises of God. And this example of faith is one that we'll see throughout the story of Abraham, that he lives in the land that he will inherit as a stranger. And anticipating God's promises, he builds altars to make God's name great, to seek God's glory, not his own. A question to think about. As Lot looks out over the land, it is described as similar to the garden of God and to the land of Egypt. Why those particular comparisons? What might be some of the important connotations of such descriptions?