

Genesis 12: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Genesis chapter 12. Now the Lord said to Abram, Go from your country, and your kindred, and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonours you I will curse.

And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So Abram went as the Lord had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran. And they set out to go to the land of Canaan.

When they came to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the Oak of Moriah. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. Then the Lord appeared to Abram and said, To your offspring I will give this land.

[1 : 03] So he built there an altar to the Lord, who had appeared to him. From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel, and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west, and Ai on the east.

And there he built an altar to the Lord, and called upon the name of the Lord. And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negev. Now there was a famine in the land.

So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, I know that you are a woman beautiful in appearance.

And when the Egyptians see you, they will say, This is his wife. Then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared for your sake.

When Abram entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house.

[2 : 06] And for her sake he dealt well with Abram. And he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys, and camels. But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.

So Pharaoh called Abram and said, What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say she is my sister, so that I took her for my wife?

Now then, here is your wife, take her and go. And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him, and they sent him away with his wife and all that he had.

The call of Abraham in Genesis chapter 12 plays out against the backdrop of the events of Babel. At Babel, a number of men sought to make their name great, to build a legacy for themselves, to build a tower that reached to the heavens.

In Genesis chapter 12, God promises that the nations that have been scattered will be blessed through believing Abraham. He has called and promised that God will make his name great.

[3 : 13] In contrast to the men of Babel who sought this achievement for themselves, God is going to do this for Abraham. There is a radical break that Abraham is called to make with his past.

He has to leave country, kindred and father's house behind him. He has to abandon the legacy that has been given to him. This is the first great test of Abraham.

Is he going to leave his past? And it's important to notice here that it is connected with the last great test of Abraham. The story of Genesis chapter 12 begins with the call, Now the Lord said to Abraham, Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land I will show

you.

And I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you and make your name great so that you will be a blessing. And there is a threefold intensification. Your country, your kindred, your father's house.

And in chapter 22, we see a similar call. After these things, God tested Abraham and said to him, Abraham, and he said, Here I am. He said, Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.

[4 : 30] It's a similar sort of call. The first is calling him to give up his past. And the final call is a call to give up his future, it seems, the son that he's invested all his hopes in.

Chapter 12 and 13 are bookend structures. As we look through these chapters, we'll see what scholars call a chiasm or there and back again structure.

And it helps to understand some of the ways in which details are repeated. If you look through the passage, you'll see promises and appearances to God at the very beginning in verses 1 to 3 of chapter 12 and at the end in verses 14 to 17 of chapter 13.

At the very beginning, he goes out with Lot in verses 4 to 5 of chapter 12 and then he separates from Lot towards the end of the section in verses 5 to 13 of chapter 13.

And then you have the description of the Canaanites being in the land in verse 6 of chapter 12 and in verse 7 of chapter 13. It seems to be repetitive, but yet it makes sense if you have this there and back again structure, the Canaanites and the Perizzites dwelling in the land.

[5 : 49] Then he goes to Bethel and to Ai and he pitches his tent with Bethel in the west and Ai in the east and he builds an altar there in verse 8 of chapter 12.

And then in the second part of the story, in verses 3 and 4 of chapter 13, he returns to the same place. Then we have him journeying to the south in verse 9 of chapter 12 and then journeying to the south in verse 1 of chapter 13.

He goes to Egypt in verse 10 of chapter 12 and then departs from Egypt in verse 20 of chapter 12.

And then he goes into Egypt saying that Sarah is a beautiful woman.

The Egyptians will see her, say that it is his wife, take her and then he suggests that he say that she is his sister and that he will be blessed for her sake in verses 11 to 13.

And it's exactly what we see and what immediately follows in verse 14 to 16. So this whole passage is a unified text and it's parallel through its different parts.

[6 : 55] And as we see this working out, it helps us to see that this is a significant movement that's taking place. Some of the things to notice here. First of all, that he goes out with Lot.

At this moment in time, Lot would seem to be Abram's natural heir. He is the one who is the son of his brother Haran who has died. Abram has taken him under his wing. And Lot and Abram have a sort of son-father relationship at this point.

And it might seem that Lot is the one who's going to fulfill the promises that God has for Abram. He arrives at Shechem. Shechem will be an important point in the story of Abram.

Abram has just been promised here that his family will be made great. Nothing yet said about the land, just that his family and name will be made great. And then he arrives at the point of Shechem and builds an altar there.

But Shechem is a place where the family is divided on a number of occasions. It's the site where Dinah is seduced by Shechem. And there's a breach in the family at that point.

[7 : 59] As Simeon and Levi seek to avenge their sister and their father fails to take action. We see a similar thing in the story of Joseph.

There's a breach in the family at Shechem as Joseph is sold into slavery by Judah and his brethren. Another breach in the family. At Shechem, Rehoboam and the people are divided.

And the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom go their different ways. And so all these breaches in the family of Abraham at Shechem present this site as having some significance. But yet it's at this very site that God promises that he will make Abram's name great and that his family will be a great nation.

The very site where the breaches are found in the nation at later points in history is the site that God has promised beforehand that the family will be made great. So passing through this point is an important thing.

Later he arrives at Bethel in Ai. Ai is a significant location too. It's at Ai that they fail to enter in and take possession of the land.

[9 : 06] Achan sins by taking devoted items and the people lose the battle. But yet it is at Ai that God promises that he will receive the land.

His offspring will receive the land. He builds an altar there. And so at these two pivotal sites in later history of Israel we see Abram building altars.

Walking through the footsteps that his descendants will later walk. And that's exactly what we see in the story of his sojourn in Egypt. There's a famine. He goes down to Egypt as a result of a severe famine.

When he's in Egypt Sarai is taken. There's a threat to the bride. There are plagues upon the Egyptians and Pharaoh. Israel or Abraham's house prospers and they're blessed.

He's dealt with well on account of Sarai. He's given sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male servants, female servants, female donkeys and camels. Pharaoh is afflicted until he releases Sarai and sends Abram and Sarai their way.

[10 : 18] It's a story of the Exodus. In advance of what happens in the book of Exodus itself, God is playing out the pattern of the Exodus in the great ancestor of Israel.

Abraham walks in the steps that his descendants will later walk. He anticipates the path that they will walk. Now why does he deceive Pharaoh in this particular way?

Why does he present himself to be the brother of Sarai rather than her husband? Well, if he presents himself as her brother, he's in a better position to protect himself and also in many ways her.

As her brother, he can stall for time. He will be courted by Pharaoh. Pharaoh will try and get on his good side and he's the one who would negotiate marriage arrangements.

Whereas if he's her husband, he's the obstacle to be removed. And it's important to remember that Abram's concern here is not merely his own skin. Abram, as we see later on, has a large fighting force with him.

[11 : 27] 318 men. Which makes it likely that Abram is surrounded by around 3 or more thousand people in his sheikdom. He's someone who's leading a vast company of people.

And if he is killed, all of them are put at risk. And so the way that Sarai is presented is not merely for his own sake. It's presumably for the sake of the people around him as well.

One question. As we read this passage, we see Abram anticipating the path and the experience that his descendants will have in history. And yet, there are other elements of this story that anticipate Abram's own life and other events further on in his story.

And maybe in his immediate descendant, Isaac. What are some of the ways in which this event may have repercussions? The experience in Egypt that it may have repercussions years later.

What are some of the consequences that this event might have as it plays out in the story of Abram and Isaac?