

## SUNDAY MORNING BIBLE STUDY

### Genesis 12-13 – The Call of Abram

#### A MAJOR TRANSITION

Watch the “Read Scripture” video from The Bible Project on [Genesis 12-50](#). Chapter 12 marks a major transition in the book of Genesis. The first eleven chapters are what is commonly referred to as pre-history. Each of those stories have been told to set up the story that is about to be told throughout the rest of the Pentateuch, the story of Israel. A lot of those stories, including the Adam and Eve story (as we have seen) is the story of Israel in miniature.

What we have seen through the first eleven chapters of Genesis is that the world and its people are not as good as God intended them to be. And so, God tried to start over with Noah, but that didn’t work. And so, the question becomes, “What is God going to do now?”

#### GOD CHOOSES ABRAM

And that’s where we come to chapter 12. Up until now, the world has continued to spiral out of control, but now we catch a glimmer of hope through this family line. We started with Adam, passed through Seth, and now we go on to Terah. God is going to choose one member of this family, Abram, from Ur of the Chaldeans in Babylonia, to make for God’s self a people and a nation and give them a land. And this people will be the tool that God uses to restore order to the chaos. Israel’s first ancestor came out of Babylon and headed to the promised land, just as the nation would centuries later and the God who was faithful to Abraham will be faithful to those who return from exile as well.

#### OUTLINE OF GENESIS 12-25 – THE ABRAHAM STORY

Genesis 12: 1– 9	God calls and blesses Abram and he moves west into Canaan.
Genesis 12: 10– 20	Abraham risks his blessing in Egypt by giving up Sarai.
Genesis 13: 1 –18	Abraham and Lot divide their territory and Abraham receives Palestine.
Genesis 14: 1– 24	Abraham shows himself a hero and blessed in warfare.
Genesis 15: 1– 21	God renews his promises and makes a covenant with Abraham.
Genesis 16: 1– 16	Abraham risks the promise of a son by taking Hagar to bear Ishmael.
Genesis 17: 1– 27	God renews his covenant and promise of a son, but commands Abraham to take on the sign of circumcision.
Genesis 18: 1– 15	God renews his promise to give a son to Sarah and Abraham.
Genesis 18: 16– 33	Abraham shows his blessing by interceding for Sodom and Gomorrah.
Genesis 19: 1– 38	Lot proves to be the only faithful person in Sodom; it is destroyed.
Genesis 20: 1– 18	Abraham risks the blessing to Sarah with the king of Gerar.
Genesis 21: 1– 21	God gives the blessing of a son, Isaac, and sends Ishmael away.
Genesis 21: 22– 34	Abraham makes a treaty with Abimelech and his people.
Genesis 22: 1– 24	Abraham is willing to sacrifice Isaac in obedience to God.
Genesis 23: 1– 20	Abraham lays claim to possession of the land by buying the cave of Machpelah to bury Sarah and himself.
Genesis 24: 1– 67	Abraham arranges a wife for Isaac to continue the blessing.
Genesis 25: 1– 18	Abraham’s death and burial; Ishmael’s descendants; the blessing passes to Isaac.

The entire story of Abraham is presented to us in a way that stresses two major themes:

- 1) God makes a promise to Abraham that will control all the events narrated in the Pentateuch, as the story already begins to unfold in Abraham’s own lifetime; and
- 2) God blesses Abraham and makes him his specially chosen friend because Abraham is faithful to God.

What exactly had Abraham done at this point to deserve such things? As far as an ancient reader of Genesis was concerned, the answer was: nothing! He is just now being introduced. And God makes him this promise.

And if we look at this passage from the book of Joshua, we get a clue as to what the ancient Israelites thought about Abraham and his relationship with God. According to the book of Joshua, Abraham lives in Mesopotamia on the other

side of the Euphrates in Genesis 12:1-4 and apparently served other gods just like his father and his brother. This is not something that would have earned Abraham bonus points with God.

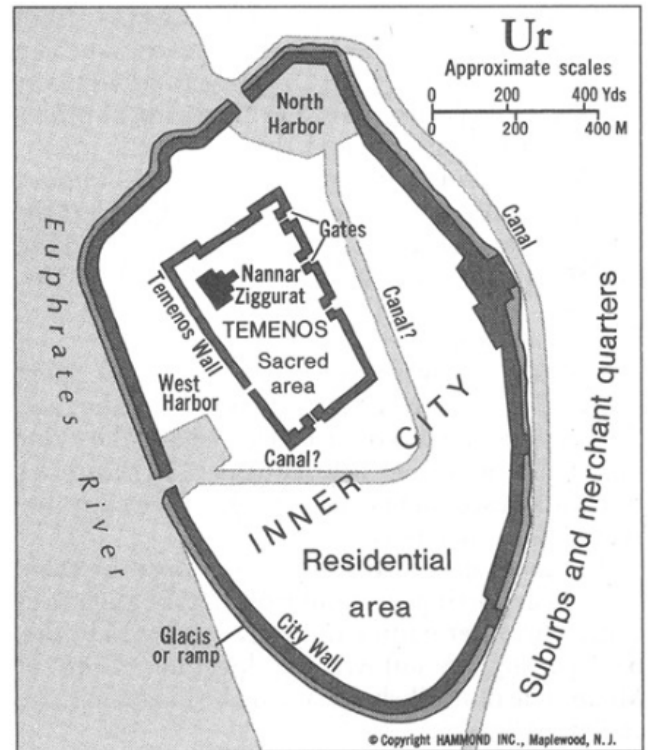
### Joshua 24:2–3 (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. <sup>3</sup> Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

### ABRAM’S FAMILY

What do we know about Abram and his family from Genesis chapter 11?

- Abram is the son of Terah
- He has two brothers, Nahor and Haran
- His brother Haran died while they lived in Ur of the Chaldeans.
- Abram and his brother Nahor took wives
- Abram’s wife was named Sarai
- Nahor’s wife was named Milcah (whose father was Haran and whose brother was Lot)
- Terah (Abram’s father) took Abram and Lot (Abram’s nephew) and Sarai (Abram’s wife) and they left Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but before they got there, they stopped and settled in Haran where Terah died (see map on next pages).
- Quick note: If we read further in the Old Testament (Joshua 24:2), we learn that Terah, if not Abram himself, was well acquainted with the worship of Mesopotamian gods. It says “Long ago your ancestors – Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods.



Plan of the site of ancient Ur.

### Genesis 11:27–32 (NRSV)

<sup>27</sup> Now these are the descendants of Terah. Terah was the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran; and Haran was the father of Lot. <sup>28</sup> Haran died before his father Terah in the land of his birth, in Ur of the Chaldeans. <sup>29</sup> Abram and Nahor took wives; the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor’s wife was Milcah. She was the daughter of Haran the father of Milcah and Iscah. <sup>30</sup> Now Sarai was barren; she had no child. <sup>31</sup> Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram’s wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there. <sup>32</sup> The days of Terah were two hundred five years; and Terah died in Haran.

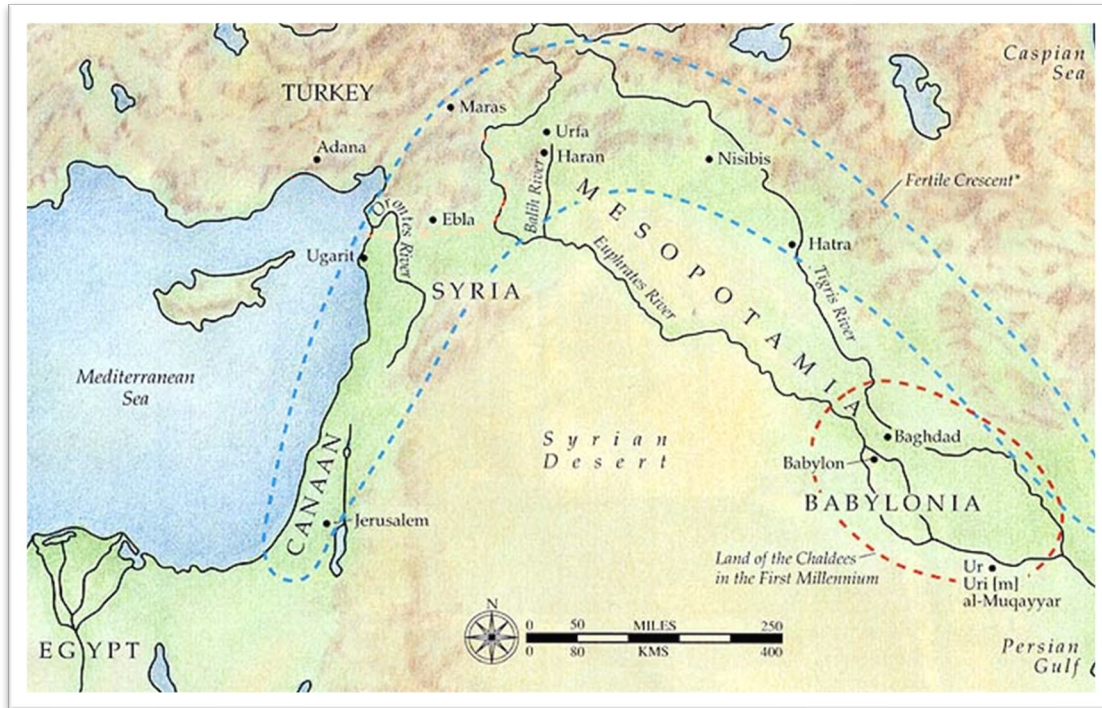
Out of Ur, a city within the Babylonian empire, one family moves. We are not given a reason for Terah's departure. We are told that his destination is “the land of Canaan.” How do these urban dwellers know of this distant outpost? What might they expect to find there? The text is silent. Then, having set up this journey, the narrator indicates that it was aborted: “when they came to Haran, they settled there” (11:31). The final words echo 11:2, when the migrants from the east “settled there” in the Shinar plain. Why is the journey ended before the intended destination? We learn nothing about Terah or his motivations.

### WHERE IS UR?

Ur is one of the oldest cities of southern Mesopotamia. Ur lies ten miles west of the Euphrates (in antiquity, it used to be on the river bank before the river changed course). It is mentioned four times in the Bible: Genesis 11:28, 31; 15:7; and Nehemiah 9:7. In Hebrew it is always mentioned as *‘ur kasidim* where *Kasidim* refers to Chaldeans (as it is called in the Septuagint). The Chaldean Empire didn’t rise until much later than Abraham and the heyday of Chaldean Ur would

have been at the time of the biblical editors working during the Babylonian exile. Ur was the center for worship of the moon god, Sin, and contained a ziggurat dedicated to Sin.

### Maps



### HARAN

The ancient city of Haran, which probably derived its name from the Akkadian word *harranu* ('highway'), is located in modern-day Turkey about 10 miles north of the Syrian border. It is strategically located on the historic east-west trade route that linked the Tigris River with the Mediterranean Sea. Haran was one of northern Mesopotamia's important commercial and religious centers, widely known for its dedicated worship of the moon god, Sin. En route to Canaan, Abram and his family lived there for a time, perhaps to care for Terah, his ailing father, who eventually died there. Abram (i.e., Abraham) is living in Haran when he receives the call from God to depart and go to Canaan (Genesis 12:1). He does so, taking with him a sizable household and considerable wealth, amassed while in Haran (Genesis 12:4–5). Abram later found a wife for his son Isaac from among relatives in Haran (Genesis 24:1-7, 24), and Isaac's son Jacob eventually secured refuge in the region with his uncle Laban (Genesis 27:42-28:5) for whom he worked for 20 years. Before returning to Canaan, Jacob married both Leah and Rachel (Laban's two daughters) and fathered 11 sons in Haran (Genesis 29-31). For a thousand years it remained an important trade city and worship center related to the moon god. But after a civic revolt, it was captured by Assyrian forces in 763 BCE. Haran became the last capital of Assyria in 612 BCE, but was captured in 609 BCE by the Babylonians (as recorded in 2 Kings 19:12) who revived the declining worship of Sin and restored Haran as a thriving trade center (Ezekiel 27:23). Also to note: the biblical placename is *הָרָן* (with a *het*) in Hebrew, and can mean "parched," "road," or "crossroad." The personal name Haran is spelled *הָרֵן* (with a *hei*) in Hebrew and means "mountaineer".

Notice how the author of the gospel of Luke retells the story of Abraham:

#### Acts 7:2–5 (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> And Stephen replied: "Brothers<sup>a</sup> and fathers, listen to me. The God of glory appeared to our ancestor Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran,<sup>3</sup> and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives and go to the land that I will show you.'<sup>4</sup> Then he left the country of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After his father died, God had him move from there to this country in which you are now living.<sup>5</sup> He did not give him any of it as a heritage, not even a foot's length, but promised to give it to him as his possession and to his descendants after him, even though he had no child.

<sup>a</sup> Gk *Men, brothers*

We note from the end of chapter 11 that Abram is now living in Haran and he has become established there. His brother Haran has died in Ur, his father Terah has died in Haran, and now it is Abram and Sarai and his nephew Lot. Notice that Abram's other brother Nahor (who was named after their grandfather Nahor) isn't mentioned much. But he will appear again in Genesis 22:20-24 where we will learn that he and his wife Milcah had eight children and he had four more with his concubine Reumah and these sons became founders of twelve tribes equivalent to the twelve tribes of Israel. His granddaughter, born to his son Bethuel, was named Rebekah, who eventually marries Isaac.

Now let's look at the beginning of Abram's call story.

#### Genesis 12:1–3 (NRSV)

**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. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."<sup>a</sup>

The defining moment in Abraham's life, God's call to him to leave his homeland and family and move to an unspecified country that he would inherit.

Notice how this story begins. It starts so abruptly. It's like we are caught up in the middle of another story. As one scholar has put it:

*Once we meet Abraham in Genesis 12, the action goes from zero to sixty in just three verses: "Hi Abraham, I'm the God Yahweh. Now follow me to an unknown place so I can make you the father of a new nation and a source of blessing for everyone else."*

The key word is: You are blessed and you will be a blessing to all people; blessed to be a blessing.

But we also see an echo of the creation story; one that appears again and again: the notion to "be fruitful and multiply". We saw it in the creation story. We saw it again in the story of Noah. We see it here in the story of Abram whose offspring will become a great nation. And we'll see it again later in Genesis. Whereas the story of Adam and Eve looked forward to Israel's story, the story of Abraham looks backward to the creation story.

Genesis 12:1–3 are the first words God has spoken since the flood. Traditionally they are referred to as the call of Abraham, but they are much more than that: they sum up the theme of Genesis, if not the whole Pentateuch. In this call the LORD promises Abraham four things: 1) a land, 2) numerous descendants ('a great nation'), 3) blessing, that is protection and success, 4) blessing of the nations.

#### **BLESS בָּרַךְ / BLESSING: בְּרָכָה**

The noun and related verb, used here for the first time in Genesis, are found five times in verses 2-3. The "blessing" is the opposite of the "curse," which brought pain and suffering to humanity. It is the fruit of obedient listening to YHWH: *abundance of life*, not only for Abram, but for all the "families" or "clans" of the earth. In direct contrast to the formation of world-kingdoms by Nimrod and his descendants, Abram's people will be those gathered in kinship groups and as such form a "*great nation / people*" (goy).

**Bless/Blessing** (Heb. barak, "to bless"; berakah, "a blessing, good fortune"; the most common form is the passive participle baruk, "blessed"). When the object is God, a word carrying the sense of "to worship or praise," as in "Bless the Lord" (Ps. 103:1) or "Blessed by the name of the Lord" (Ps. 113:2). When humanity or the earth is in view, a word that typically refers to a bestowal of benefits, often from God, but sometimes from other people. As such, the term is counterpoint to "curse," and the two words often occur together, as in Deut. 27:15–26; 28:3–6, which spell out consequences of keeping or not keeping the covenant. Throughout the Bible, the content of what constitutes "blessing" varies, but includes such good things as vitality, health, longevity, fertility, land, prosperity, honor, and numerous progeny ("curse," on the other hand, results in death, illness, childlessness, and such disasters as drought, famine, and

<sup>a</sup> Or by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves

war). God blesses the first humans, telling them to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1:22). Throughout the Bible God continues to bless individuals (Gen. 24:1; Job 42:12; Judg. 13:24), groups (Exod. 32:29; Josh. 17:14), descendants (Isa. 44:3); and nations (Ps. 115:12; Jer. 4:2). God also blesses animals (Gen. 1:22; Deut. 28:4), land (Deut. 26:15), crops (7:13), houses (Prov. 3:33), and special days or times (Gen. 2:3; Exod. 20:11). People also pronounce blessings on others (Gen. 24:60; 47:7; Exod. 39:43; Lev. 9:22–23; 1 Sam. 2:20; Neh. 11:2): deathbed blessings are particularly noteworthy (Gen. 27–28; 48–49). Abraham is told that all families of the earth will be blessed through him and his descendants (Gen. 12:3). Consecration ceremonies also provide for the blessing of various objects or of animals for a sacrifice (1 Sam. 9:13). Throughout the Bible people pray for God to bless them and those they love (1 Chron. 4:10; cf. Ps. 67:7).

### **CURSE – A pronouncement for harm.**

Whereas the Hebrew Bible uses only one word for “bless,” it employs three different words for “curse”:

**אָלָה** The first (*alah*) is associated with invoking an oath (Judg. 17:2; Neh. 10:29; also Ps. 10:7, where the context implies false oaths): persons basically request that ill come to them if they fail to carry out what they promise.

**אָרַר** A second, much more common, term (*arar*) creates a ban or barrier intended to exclude someone from benefits or to qualify someone for misfortune; pronouncing someone “cursed” in this sense is roughly equivalent to “casting a spell.” This is the word employed when God curses both the snake and the land in Gen. 3:14, 17. Cain is likewise cursed by God in Gen. 4:11 and the “angel of the LORD” declares Meroz to be cursed in Judg. 5:23. Noah curses his son Canaan in Gen. 9:25, and Saul pronounces a curse on anyone who eats food before he can be avenged (1 Sam. 14:24, 28). This is also the word used repeatedly in Deut. 27:15–26; 28:16–19, where curses are stipulated for those who fail to keep God’s covenant (but *qillel* [see below] is used in Deut. 11:26, 28; Jos. 8:34). The word *arar* is also used with regard to the “water of bitterness” test to be applied to a woman suspected of adultery in Num. 5:23–27, and it is used throughout the Balaam story in Num. 22–24 (where Balaam is asked to curse Israel, but repeatedly blesses Israel instead).

**קָלַל** Finally, a third term (*qillel*) describes a wide range of injurious activity, from verbal abuse to material harm. Its basic meaning is “to treat lightly,” i.e., to treat with disrespect, to repudiate, to abuse. This word is used, for example, when the law states “whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death” (Exod. 21:17; Lev. 20:9). One who curses God in this sense (Lev. 24:11, 15; cf. Exod. 22:28, where NRSV has “revile”) shows a lack of reverence for God or for God’s standards. The opposite of curse in this sense is not “bless,” but rather “respect” (as exhibited by one who fears God and holds to God’s standards). The word is also used without any object to say that someone is “cursing” in general (e.g., Shimei in 2 Sam. 16:5, 7; he is angry at David, but is not said to “curse David” but simply to curse, which might imply a general use of abusive or vulgar language).

***A pattern of curse and blessing is sometimes thought to form the basic concept of the book of Genesis.*** The Priestly author of Genesis 1 places the divine blessing on humankind at the beginning of his work (1:28), but the chapters that follow (attributed to the Yahwist, or J, source) present a narrative dominated by God’s curse in response to disobedience (Genesis 3:16–19; 4:11) until, after the flood, there is a renewal of divine blessing (9:1). The cycle of sin and curse begins again, climaxing in the hubris of the Tower of Babel (11:1–9), but it is countered now by a new act of God, the blessing of Abram (12:1–3). This is the beginning of a history of blessing (22:15–18; 24:60; 26:2–4) that culminates in the blessing of Jacob by Isaac (27:27–29) and by God (32:27). Balancing this history of blessing, however, is the history related in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers, until Deuteronomy brings the Torah to a close on the note of covenant, with blessing promised for covenant obedience and curse for covenant breach (Deuteronomy 28). “I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse” (Deuteronomy 30:19); the history that follows (Joshua–2 Kings) demonstrates the tragic consequences of choosing death and curse, a theme fundamental to the preexilic prophets. The relationship between blessing and curse in Deuteronomy and the prophets can be seen by comparing such traditional curses as Deuteronomy



28:30–40; Amos 5:11; Micah 6:15; Zephaniah 1:13; and Haggai 1:6 to corresponding formulations of blessing (Deuteronomy 6:11; Joshua 24:13; Amos 9:14–15; Isaiah 62:8–9; 65:21–23).

## COMPARED TO BABYLON

These packed verses are the antithesis to the Babel story. In the plain of Shinar, all humanity spoke to one another and paid no attention to the voice of YHWH. But now YHWH speaks and a single human responds with trust and unquestioning (for now!) obedience. In Shinar, people sought to make a name for themselves. But now, YHWH promises to Abram to “make your name great.” In Shinar, people sought to build a city. But now YHWH calls humans out of a city. In Shinar, people sought to settle. But now, YHWH calls humans to be on a journey to an unforeseeable destination.

### Genesis 12:4–9 (NRSV)

<sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>Abram took his wife Sarai and his brother’s son Lot, and all the possessions that they had gathered, and the persons whom they had acquired in Haran; and they set forth to go to the land of Canaan. When they had come to the land of Canaan, <sup>6</sup>Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak<sup>b</sup> of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. <sup>7</sup>Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, “To your offspring<sup>c</sup> I will give this land.” So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. <sup>8</sup>From there he moved on 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 invoked the name of the LORD. <sup>9</sup>And Abram journeyed on by stages toward the Negeb.

Abram does what God commands and leaves his land, his lineage, and his father’s house.

Notice how Abraham responds to the call of God: he builds two altars; one at Shechem at the Oak of Moreh, and the other in the hill country east of Bethel and west of Ai. What was the purpose of building altars in response to God’s call?

## ALTAR מִזְבֵּחַ

Altar, any surface upon which any kind of offering to a deity is placed. The actual term for “altar” (Heb. *mizbeakh*) is formed from a verbal root that means “to slaughter” or, more specifically, “to slaughter and cut up for the purpose of sacrifice.” Thus, the word must have originally been connected with the ancient practice of animal sacrifice. However, by the time of its usage in connection with biblical ritual, its meaning had been expanded. In addition to animal sacrifice, altars mentioned in the Bible were used for a variety of foodstuffs, including grain mixed with oil and/or salt and incense, wine, and fruits; they were also used for the burning of incense alone. In animal sacrifice, although the animal parts were deposited on the altar to be burned, the actual slaughtering of sacrificial animals would have normally taken place at a designated spot adjacent to the altar.

## SHECHEM

Shechem (*shek’ uhm*), a city located forty-one miles north of Jerusalem in the pass between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. It dominated an important trade route and controlled a fertile valley to the east where Jacob’s sons pastured their flocks (Genesis 37:12–14). Shechem was a Korathite levitical city of refuge in the territory of Manasseh (Joshua 17:2, 7), although it is also described as being “in the hill country of Ephraim” (20:7). Shechem was the first city visited by Abraham in his migration from Haran (Genesis 12:6), but it figures most prominently in the traditions associated with Jacob. It was the scene of the rape of Dinah by Shechem, the son of Hamor, king of Shechem (Genesis 34; note that in the narrative of the event the prince and the city have the same name).

SIDE NOTE: Korah – A Levite who was the ancestor of a family group belonging to the Kohath line (Exod. 6:21, 24; 1 Chron. 6:22; cf. Heb. 6:7). Num. 16 reports that Korah, the eponymous ancestor of the family, together with 250 leaders of the people, led a revolt against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. Korah’s revolt seems to have involved a conflict between priestly houses over Aaron’s exclusive right to offer incense before the Lord. To settle the dispute, Moses proposed that Korah and his rebels appear before the tent of meeting with censers to see whose incense the Lord would accept. When they did this, the earth opened up and swallowed Korah, Dothan, and Abiram and their families, and fire

<sup>b</sup> Or *terebinth*

<sup>c</sup> Heb *seed*

came forth from the Lord, consuming the 250 rebels. The Korahites, descendants of Korah, later became one of the major guilds of temple singers (2 Chron. 20:19), and their name appears in the superscriptions of Pss. 42; 44–49; 84–85; 87–88. They were also temple gatekeepers (1 Chron. 9:19; 26:1, 19) and bakers (1 Chron. 9:31).

When the Israelites entered Canaan (thirteenth century BCE) Shechem passed peacefully into their hands and became the earliest religious center of the tribes. Indeed, they buried the mummified body of Joseph in a tomb near the city (Joshua 24:32). At Shechem Joshua renewed the Sinai covenant with Israel's tribal leaders, probably at the temple of the Lord of the Covenant (Joshua 24). Abimelech, a son of Gideon by a concubine who lived at Shechem, roused the Shechemites to his support and had himself declared king (Judges 9:1–6), against the spirit and traditions of the old tribal confederacy, which held that the Lord was the only king in Israel (8:22–23). Shechem soon revolted against Abimelech's rule and in reprisal he destroyed the city (9:45). Rehoboam went there to be crowned king in the northern part of his kingdom (1 Kings 12:1). After the revolt of the northern tribes Jeroboam I rebuilt the city (12:25).



Silver coin depicting a temple and altar at the top of a stairway leading up Mount Gerizim ca 198-217 CE

Shechem was destroyed by the Assyrian armies in 722/1 BCE. Shechem was rebuilt ca. 350 BCE as the religious center of the Samaritans. Their temple stood on Mount Gerizim, and at the foot of the mountain they constructed a city designed to rival Jerusalem.

### OAK OF MOREH

The oak is often a symbol of strength. As a venerable, mighty tree, the oak is associated with worship (Genesis 13:18), with sacrificial offerings (Hosea 4:13), long life (Isaiah 6:13), and sanctuaries ("the oak in the sanctuary of the Lord" at Shechem, Joshua 24:26). Moreh (Mor' eh; Heb., "teacher, oracle-giver"), a place-name suggesting a location for divine instruction. The Moreh tree, a terebinth (large tree resembling an oak) at the sacred site near Shechem, where Abram built an altar commemorating God's appearance to him (Genesis 12:6–7). In Deuteronomy 11:30, this tree is cited as a landmark for the Gerizim-Ebal pass; in Genesis 35:4, the tree (here: "oak") is where Jacob buried idols near Shechem. Trees in Joshua 24:26 and Judges 9:6 were inside Shechem; the Moreh tree lay outside.

### BETHEL

Bethel (beth' uhl; Heb., "house of God"), an important biblical city on the north-south mountain road north of Jerusalem. Bethel had few natural defenses, but it did have plentiful water from nearby springs. It stood at the intersection of the north-south road that passed through the central hill country and the main east-west road that led from Jericho to the Mediterranean Sea.

Bethel, formerly named Luz (Genesis 28:19), was conquered by the Joseph tribes (late thirteenth century BCE; Judges 1:22–25) and became a part of the tribe of Ephraim. The religious heritage of Bethel for the Hebrews went back to Jacob (eighteenth century BCE). When Jacob was going to Aram, he spent the night at Bethel and had a dream. As a result he built a shrine there and named the place Bethel (Genesis 28:19; 35:1–7). Surprisingly, the conquest of Bethel is not mentioned in the book of Joshua, although the men of Bethel are said to have aided the men of Ai against the Hebrews (8:17).

In the period of the judges (1200–1000 BCE), Bethel was an important town. The ark of the covenant was located there for a time (Judg. 20:18–28), and it was a center of the tribal confederacy. Samuel made regular visits to Bethel on his annual circuit while he was a judge. But the town was not mentioned during the reigns of David and Solomon, its role as a sanctuary apparently being usurped by Jerusalem, the capital city. With the division of the kingdoms during the reign of Rehoboam, Bethel again rose to prominence (late tenth century BCE). Jeroboam I made it a chief sanctuary and set up a golden calf there (1 Kings 12:26–33). Bethel was a royal sanctuary at the time of Amos (cf. Amos 7:12–13). From the evidence of excavation, Bethel was apparently destroyed by the Assyrians (722/1 BCE). During the resurgence of Judah's power at the time of Josiah (ca. 640–609 BCE), Bethel's sanctuary was destroyed and its priests killed (2 Kings 23:15–20),

but the city was spared. Bethel was not destroyed by the Babylonians under Nebuchadnezzar, but was destroyed either by the Babylonian ruler Nabonidus or the Persians.

The town was soon rebuilt and showed continued growth through the Hellenistic and Roman periods (333 BCE–324 CE). The Roman town shows the first use of cisterns, suggesting an increased population or water use beyond the capacity of the springs.

## **AI**

Ai (i, ay'i; Heb., "ruin"), a Canaanite town near and to the east of Bethel (Genesis. 12:8; 13:3). Ai was an important urban center during the Early Bronze Age. It had a temple and a royal quarter. Its inhabitants apparently came originally from Syria and Anatolia. Egyptian influence is evident from the temple of this period and imported alabaster and stone vessels. The city had a massive stone-lined reservoir with a capacity of 480,000 gallons. The Early Bronze Age city was destroyed about 2400 BCE and remained a ruin until about 1200 BCE.

Joshua 8 describes the capture and destruction of Ai by the Israelites. However, at the time commonly accepted for the Israelite conquest of Canaan, about 1250 BCE, Ai was uninhabited. One explanation suggests the account in Joshua 8 is etiological rather than historical, ascribing a well-known ruin to the conquest by Joshua.

## **NEGEB**

Negev (neg'ev; Hebrew negeb, "dry, parched, south country"), the southern part of Judah, and the largest region in the modern state of Israel. The Negev forms an inverted triangle with its base roughly following a line from Gaza past Beer-sheba to the Dead Sea. The line then runs south from the Dead Sea through the Wadi Arabah to the Gulf of Aqabah at Elath, and from there northwestward to Gaza. The Negev is a hot region that receives less than 8 inches of rainfall annually. Although dry, some portions of the Negev can sustain limited agriculture; more usual is the pasturing of flocks.

The presence of sufficient water from springs, wells, oases, or cisterns of sufficient capacity permitted settlement in many areas. And the proximity of important trade routes also led to permanent settlement. Towns would naturally be established to meet the needs of travelers and to protect the route. Many of the settlements or towns on the trade routes of the Negev were established, or at least maintained, as fortresses.

Several highways went through the Negev. The most important was the Via Maris, the coastal road, which connected Egypt with Mesopotamia and Anatolia. The Via Maris skirted along the western edge of the Negev near Gaza. Three other north-south roads went through the Negev. One ran from Jerusalem and Hebron to Beer-sheba and Nissana, and then connected with the Via Maris. Another road came from Hebron to Arad, Hormah, and then to the oasis at Kadesh-barnea. A third road followed the Wadi Arabah from the Dead Sea to Elath/Aqabah.

The Hebrews spent much of the wilderness wandering period (ca. 1290–1250 BCE) around the oasis of Kadesh-barnea in the southern Negev (Deuteronomy 1:19, 46). The Amalekites, a seminomadic people, also lived in the Negev (Numbers 13:29). After the fall of Judah and during the exile, the Edomites gained control of the Negev.

### **Genesis 12:10–20 (NRSV)**

<sup>10</sup> Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land. <sup>11</sup> When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; <sup>12</sup> and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. <sup>13</sup> Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account." <sup>14</sup> When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. <sup>15</sup> When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. <sup>16</sup> And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels.

<sup>17</sup> But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. <sup>18</sup> 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? <sup>19</sup> 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 be gone." <sup>20</sup> And Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had.



## HUNGER

A famine strikes the land. Abram's trust in YHWH is tested by need for food and water. To whom do we turn when hungry and thirsty? Instead of turning to God, Abram turns directly to Egypt (a story played out again later). Throughout the biblical journey, God's people confront hunger and thirst, starting at Genesis 12:10, and running through the wilderness wanderings in Exodus-Deuteronomy. Rather than sit down and die or pray for a "miracle", Abram comes up with a practical solution: he becomes a migrant, heads down to Egypt "to reside there as an alien." He stops seeking YHWH's direction and acts on his own. He abandons the land of YHWH's promise and seeks to live amid a people who will see him as a "foreigner".

## PIMPING HIS WIFE

Apparently, Sarai, in her old age is remarkably beautiful (remember, Abram was 75 when he moved down from Haran; and so that makes Sarai... hmm... perhaps in her 80's by this time). So, afraid for his life, Abram is willing to pimp his wife and put her at great risk. He asks Sarai to say that she is his sister, instead of his wife. She does. It works. The Egyptians see her as an object of beauty and take her to Pharaoh, offering Abram a large payment of animals and slaves in exchange for his "sister" (all because of her beauty).

But apparently, God is not pleased. What happens in Egypt shouldn't stay in Egypt. So, God sends plagues to afflict Pharaoh. Echo, echo, echo, echo... Ironically, it's Pharaoh who realizes he's being punished and that Sarai is Abram's wife. He gives her back to him, complaining, "Why have you done this to me?" and then pays him off saying, "Take her and be gone!"

We're going to hear a similar scenario later. Famine causes entrance into Egypt. An Israelite becomes Pharaoh's property. Pharaoh's household are plagued. Pharaoh wants God's people out. God's people leave with a lot of loot.

Key point: Notice the pattern. Exile and captivity are God's punishment. But they are never the end. God always provides a way out.

Also notice, the "good pharaoh" has provided a "blessing" to Abram, not only in preserving his life and providing an abundance of goods, but also in the lesson of the story: listening to YHWH's voice alone is the only way to life.

## HAGAR AND ISHMAEL

Later, Sarai is going to recommend that Abraham sleep with her servant, Hagar, so that Abram can get a son. A son is born, and they name him Ishmael. Even though it was Sarai's idea, she gets jealous and Hagar runs for her life. Years later, she comes back, and Sarai tells Abram to get rid of her and her son. Abram agrees and sends them into the desert with a small amount of water. They survive only because of God's intervention.

## WHAT DO WE NOTICE?

These stories tend to mirror Israel's story. Even though Abram has been called by God, his behavior leaves something to be desired, which reminds us of Israel's continuous struggle with God.

The key questions, however, are:

- "Will Abraham believe that God will keep God's promise?"
- "Will Abraham remain faithful to God if it *appears* that God is not being faithful to him?"

The same question is asked of all God's people:

- "Do we trust that God will keep God's promise to us?"

What we are going to see throughout the rest of Genesis are the stories of Abraham and his descendants (particularly the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's sons) and how they continually fail. But, we will also see how God is continually faithful to God's covenant; how God will continually rescue this family and bless them.

### Genesis 13:1-7 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb. <sup>2</sup> Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. <sup>3</sup> He journeyed on by stages from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, <sup>4</sup> to the place where he had made an altar at the first; and there Abram called on the name of the Lord. <sup>5</sup> Now Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, <sup>6</sup> so that the land could not support both of them living together; for their possessions were so great that they could not live together, <sup>7</sup> and there was strife between the herders of Abram's livestock and the herders of Lot's livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites lived in the land.

### CHOICE

The crisis that follows the departure from Egypt is the inverse of famine, yet the basic choice (this time by Lot) remains the same. We hear that Abram is now "very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold" (13:2). Abram and his entourage weigh heavily on the land because of their abundant possessions, so that the land teeters under the load (13:6). The traveling band has become what to us seems an oxymoron: wealthy and honored homeless people. The wealth and power, though, do not make for shalom but for "strife" or "quarreling." It is a matter of too many people and possessions in too small a space. Someone will have to move on. Abram generously offers his nephew Lot the choice: you go one way, and I'll go the other.

Lot himself gazes over the land and sees lush, verdant agricultural land laid out in the Jordan plain. Its attractions parallel the attraction of the woman in the Garden to the fruit of the forbidden tree (3:6). YHWH has not explicitly warned Lot against choosing the rich farmland as the woman was warned against eating the wrong fruit. We are, though, expected to notice that his gaze and decision take place without listening for direction from YHWH. This is underscored by the contrast when YHWH speaks directly to Abram, telling him to "lift your eyes now and look" (13:14). The link with 3:6 is made explicit by the mention in 13:10 of "the garden of YHWH." But there is a difference: it is also "like the land of Egypt." In other words, there is abundant water as in the Garden of Eden, but its ability to produce rich food is like Egypt: it provides not naturally growing tree fruit, but irrigation-produced grain. It is not YHWH's chosen destination at all (creation), but rather, a human-made substitute. Lest we, with Lot, miss the point, the narrator adds ominously: "this was before YHWH had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah" (13:10).

Seeing only what looks good in his own eyes ("chose for himself"), bereft of YHWH's available guidance, Lot's judgment is implicitly cursed. Once the separation between Abram and Lot is complete, the narrator underscores the mistake: "Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against YHWH" (13:13). It is a blanket condemnation of the way of life in the "cities of the plain"; people like Cain, Lamech, Canaan, Nimrod, and the city Babylon. Yes, they have an abundance of food. But how they get it and what they do or don't do with it is central to their status. Faced with strife, Abram offered "the other" (Lot) the opportunity to make the choice.

### PERIZZITES

One of the older population groups of the land of Canaan, usually listed as one of the six or seven groups inhabiting the land (Exod. 3:8, 17; 23:23; 33:2; 34:11; Deut. 7:1; 20:17; Josh. 3:10; 9:1; 11:3; 12:8; 24:11; Judg. 3:5; 1 Kings 9:20; cf. Gen. 15:20). Occasionally the Perizzites are mentioned with the Canaanites as the two native peoples of Canaan (Gen. 13:7; 34:30; Judg. 1:4–5). They evidently lived in the central highlands, particularly the forested hill country of Ephraim (cf. Josh. 17:15; Judg. 1:4–5). Their identity is uncertain. Some have connected them with the Hurrians; others, with the Amorites.

### Genesis 13:8-13 (NRSV)

<sup>8</sup> Then Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herders and my herders; for we are kindred. <sup>9</sup> 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, then I will go to the left." <sup>10</sup> Lot looked about him, and saw that the plain of the Jordan 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 had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah. <sup>11</sup> So Lot chose for himself all the plain of the Jordan, and Lot journeyed eastward; thus they separated from each other. <sup>12</sup> Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled

among the cities of the Plain and moved his tent as far as Sodom. <sup>13</sup> Now the people of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord.

Before the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah! Lot journeyed eastward! We know what that means; remember the theme we talked about last week. And what's with the comment about Sodom? We will soon see.

#### Genesis 13:14-18 (NRSV)

<sup>14</sup> The Lord said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Raise your eyes now, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward; <sup>15</sup> for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. <sup>16</sup> I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your offspring also can be counted. <sup>17</sup> Rise up, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you." <sup>18</sup> 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.

There is a clear tendency for promises to be reaffirmed after an act of faith or obedience on the patriarch's part. For example, in chapter 13 after Abraham has generously offered his nephew Lot the choice of the land so as to defuse the dispute between their herdsmen, the LORD appears to Abraham and enlarges on the promises. Similarly the last and most dogmatic statement of the promise to Abraham comes after he has demonstrated his total commitment to God's demand in chapter 22.

The Hebrew words used of the four directions where Abram was asked to direct his gaze were: "North" צפונה (tsafonah), "South" נגבה (negbah), "East" קדמה (kedmah) and "West" ימה (yamah). In English, these words signify exclusive and very specific directions, but given Hebrew's intense physicality as a language we are able to see the origin of these words. Grammatically, the ending -ה (hey) when attached to a word signifying location shows the directional movement, similar to English "to the...." The Hebrew phrase נגבה (negbah), translated as "to the South" literally means "to the Negev" (the wilderness of Negev). The phrase ימה (yamah) translated as "to the West" literally means "to the sea." Similarly, קדמה (kedmah), translated as "to the east," evokes an image of "going back to something from an earlier time." Its root is connected to the idea of "antiquity" or the distant past. From a Biblical perspective, this suggests the Garden of Eden that God planted "in the east" at the beginning of history (Gen. 2:8), as well as the direction of the rising sun. The Hebrew phrase translated as "to the North" צפונה (tsafonah) is connected to is connected to Mt. Tsafon or Zaphon (see Isa. 14:13) on the border of Syria and Turkey. This mountain lay to Abram's north when God told him to look in all directions. Whilst we consider north to be our main orientation point, ancient Israelites oriented themselves towards the east.

When the Lord told Abram to walk through the length and breadth of the land, like Noah, he obeyed God's command, and he came to the vicinity of the famed oaks of Mamre in Hebron, where again he built an altar to the Lord. We read about this in the last verse of Genesis 13: וַיֵּצֵאֵהָל אַבְרָם וַיָּבֵא וַיֵּשֶׁב בְּאֵלֹנֵי מְמַרָּא אֲשֶׁר בְּחֶבְרוֹן וַיִּבְנוּ-שָׁם מִזְבֵּחַ לַיהוָה: And Abram moved his tent, and came to dwell at the terebinths of Mamre, which are in Hebron; and he built an altar there to the LORD. (Gen. 13:18) The Hebrew word used for altar is מִזְבֵּחַ (mizbeach). It is connected with the verb "to slaughter" and "to sacrifice."

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