

Genesis 13 and 14
April 17, 2021

1) Genesis 13:1-7 – Growing Wealth and Increased Friction

- a) In these verses there is an obvious parallel between the story of Abram's sojourn in Egypt and the experience of later Israelites. However, one key difference was the wealth with which Abram left Egypt. "Abram was very rich in livestock, and silver, and in gold." Like his descendants Abram is forced to leave Egypt. In Abram's case it was a friendly expulsion and there was no army pursuing him.
- b) Verse 3 tells us that Abram journeyed through the Negeb, which then and now is an arid region between Egypt and Canaan. It would have provided little sustenance for the large herds that accompanied Abram, especially with his nephew's clan traveling with him. Even as Abram reached his familiar home territory of Bethel, he was unable to locate the needed grasslands for his herds. With vegetation scarce and the large and growing flocks demanding to be fed "there was strife between the herders of Abram's and Lot's livestock." Obviously, friction boiled to the surface as the competing clans sought for the resources needed to sustain their families and flocks. Canaanites and the Perizzites also lived in that region adding even more conflict for the scarce resources. The Canaanites appear countless times throughout the Old Testament and play a prominent role. The Perizzites are mentioned 23 times, often paired with the Canaanites, but no one has been able to provide a clear identity for these people. The point is obvious, the resources are meager while the demand upon those resources is great.

2) Genesis 13:8-13 – Abram the Peacemaker

- a) Following his unethical behavior in Egypt, Abram redeems himself in this episode appearing as the selfless peacemaker offering the most fertile land to his nephew, Lot. Taking Lot to a high spot of land they survey the territory, and Abram gives Lot the choice of where he would like to settle. The authors of this section were the Yahwist or J writers representing the royal court in Jerusalem and they want to provide a good model of peaceful and

wise leadership for all their readers. (As if David did not behave as a warrior king taking land and possessions by force.)

- b) Lot chooses to move to the east choosing the plain of Jordan with the cities of Zoar, Sodom, and Gomorrah. Lot seems to be making the reasonable choice as the writers in verse 10 describe the region as “well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord.” Only later in chapters 18 and 19 do we learn the tragic results of Lot’s choice that will link him to the sad fate of Sodom and Gomorrah, a tragedy that is foreshadowed in verse 13. Abram, on the other hand, settled in the land of Canaan.

3) Genesis 13:14-18 – God’s 3rd Promise to Abram

- a) In Genesis 12:1-3 God elects Abram and promises him many descendants, a great name, and a divine blessing. In Genesis 12:7 God promises to give Abram “this land,” the meaning of which is unclear. Now, in verses 14 and 15 the promise of land is specific and irrevocable. In verse 17 the passage reaches its climax as God repeats the announcement, “I will give it to you.” Though not stated in the Genesis account, the Dead Sea Scroll *Genesis Apocryphon* pictures Abram as standing on the highest spot of the hill country 5 miles northeast of Bethel from where one can see from the Mediterranean on the west to the highlands of Gilead across the Jordan on the east. To use a rather crude analogy, it is as if God has taken Abram to the tourist trap named Rock City outside of Chattanooga where it is claimed you can see in one panoramic view 7 states. (Sadly, that is not true.) To certify this land transaction God instructs Abram to walk the perimeter of his gift from God, marking this territory as his own.
- b) There is clear historical significance to what we read in these verses. These exact words have made a dramatic impact on world history: the crusades, the Zionist movement, the Balfour Declaration of 1917, immigration to the land of Israel, the formation of the nation of Israel, and Middle East conflicts and warfare today. Sibley Towner writes, “millions now seek their security and their future in the rebuilt Jewish state, and among those are significant numbers who base their claim on the promise of the land that God made here and elsewhere in Genesis.”

- c) In verse 18 for a third time, on this occasion near the Oaks of Mamre, Abram builds an altar to the Lord. In Genesis 23:19 the site was identified as Hebron, 19 miles south of Jerusalem. At that location was a Canaanite worship center occupied long before the time of Abram. As we will see in the next chapter there are some vague expressions of syncretism in these early Abraham stories.

4) Genesis 14 – Abram and the Kings

- a) Introduction to Chapter 14 – This is a very strange chapter that was not written by any of the other writers (J, E, D, P) we have encountered so far in Genesis. This was inserted by a later editor based on material from a much older tradition. It has little theological content or historical validity. Von Rad insisted, “This chapter contains some of the most difficult and most debated material in the patriarchal history, indeed, in the entire historical part of the Old Testament... None of the patriarchal stories contain so much that is fantastic, historically impossible, and miraculous.” I considered just skipping over this chapter altogether, however, there are a few intriguing comments in this chapter that are worth our study.
- b) Genesis 14:1-12 – The listing of 4 invading kings naming their country and their dates along with the list of the 5 defeated kings seem to present a valuable historical record of importance. However, such is not the case as Sibley Towner states in his commentary: “The problem is that archaeological exploration has been unable to identify any of the cities in the Valley of Siddim with any extant site. The names of their 5 kings are not attested in extra-biblical sources nor are those of the 4 foreign kings.” The name of the valley, Siddim, appears only in this chapter and the names of 2 of the defeated kings, Rephaim and Emim are lifted from ancient Babylonian legends. Towner concludes, “the account of the war with the 4 kings is so enriched with legend that any core of historical event is probably unrecoverable.” What is important for our story is that the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah flee before the invading onslaught and Lot is captured with all his wealth and possessions.
- c) Genesis 14:13-17 – So, you might ask, why are we looking at this chapter at all? The name Abram finally appears in verse 13 and he is pictured as a

powerful warrior. It is also in verse 13 that the term “Hebrew” 1st appears in the Bible. The term does not yet refer to an ethnic or linguistic identity. At this time, the term is used elsewhere to refer to Palestinians who are refugees, outlaws, or transients. However, in this story Abram is described as a powerful warlord who joins with 3 Amorite brothers and 318 soldiers to defeat 4 foreign kings and to rescue Lot. Verse 16 pictures Abram as the conquering hero, “Then he brought back all the goods, and also brought back his nephew Lot with his goods, and the women and the people.” In verse 17 we read of the king of Sodom who was evidently also liberated greeting the victorious Abram.

d) Genesis 14:18-24 – Abram and Melchizedek

- i) This fascinating story of Melchizedek, the King of Salem and a priest of the God Most High, tells of the blessing he gives to Abram. Melchizedek appears without any introduction and is mentioned only one other time in the Old Testament, Psalm 110:4. Melchizedek makes a reappearance in the New Testament, Hebrews chapter 7. Nowhere in Near Eastern texts is Jerusalem referred to as Salem, but later Jewish and Christian writers make the connection. Jerusalem did not come into Israelite control until the time of David, about 980 BC. (Several years ago, while speaking at another church a woman pleaded with me to preach a sermon on Melchizedek. I kept postponing but finally relented. It was the most boring and uninspiring sermon I ever gave. Wendy heard it and she would agree. There just aren't a lot of ways to make Melchizedek into an interesting character.)
- ii) One reason this passage is intriguing is because it presents a clear example of syncretism, which is rarely emphasized in the Hebrew Scriptures. Von Rad stated, “Such a positive, tolerant evaluation of a Canaanite cult outside Israel is unparalleled in the Old Testament. Above all, Abraham's homage to a heathen servant of the cult is quite unusual from the standpoint of the Old Testament faith.” Melchizedek is described as a “priest of God most high,” as noted in the NRSV footnote: “El Elyon.” That was the name of the high God of Canaanite religion. It is remarkable that this pagan deity, this Canaanite priest, and this pagan sanctuary were identified in any way with the Israelite tradition. This

Canaanite God, El, came to be seen as a manifestation of their own Lord God who went by the name of Elohim.

- iii) In verses 18 and 19 Melchizedek blesses Abram and solemnizes that by offering both bread and wine. In response Abram gives Melchizedek an offering of 1/10 of everything he possessed. Why is this scene included in the Abraham stories of Genesis? Sibley Towner suggests, “The priest of Salem... may have represented to Israel the acknowledgment by the neighboring peoples of the centrality and power of the Abramic nation. Abram, the one in whom all nations would find a blessing, is himself blessed by the nations in this reciprocal act of Melchizedek.” Abram magnanimously refuses to take back any part of the tithe he offered to Melchizedek.
- iv) There may be another important reason this story appears in the Abraham saga. However strange it may be, this episode may have been important to the writers of the J version of Genesis who were associated with Jerusalem and the royal court of King David. In Psalm 110:4 David is called: “a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” Especially when Melchizedek is described in Genesis 14 as the king of Salem, there is a special parallel to David the king of Jerusalem. As Abraham receives a blessing from the king of Salem and as Abraham presents a tithe to the king of Salem, it obviously places King David in a good light to be tied closely to Melchizedek. As stated by Von Rad, “the later Israelites and Judeans have every reason to submit to Yahweh’s anointed and to give him the 10th.... Even Abraham had recognized his duty toward Jerusalem and its king.” The priests serving David in Jerusalem did a good job spinning the Melchizedek story for the benefit their king.
- v) In like manner the New Testament author of Hebrews identifies Jesus with the same Melchizedek and Abraham story in Hebrews 7:1-28. Jesus like Melchizedek is not a descendant of the tribe of Levi, nonetheless, Jesus is described as “a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” The Christian author is arguing that the credentials of Jesus are superior to the inherited credentials of the Jewish priests.

Hebrews 7 ties Jesus to the more legitimate pedigree of Abraham, Melchizedek, and King David.

Questions for Reflection

Do you think the division of land between Lot and Abram was preordained so Abram would settle in the land of Canaan? Why do you think this story appears in Genesis?

In verses 14-17 of chapter 13, the Lord promises Abram: “all the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever.” What do you think this promise means? Did God mean to establish the nation of Israel? Does this give Israel preeminence in any land dispute? Is God a pro-Israeli Zionist? How does this inform your own political views today?

What do you make of the strange stories of Genesis 14:1-12? Does this have any historical relevance?

Genesis 14:13-16 describe Abram as a mighty warlord. Did you ever picture him as a victorious warrior? Do you think this is a historically accurate portrait of Abram?

Genesis 14:17-24 tells a story of Abram and Melchizedek. Other than having a really cool name, why is this story about Melchizedek included in Genesis? Is it related to the pagan nations surrounding Israel? Is it related to King David and the city of Jerusalem? Or is this story included in Scripture so ministers will have 1 more verse to point to when they ask you to give a tithe?