



## Genesis - Chapter Twelve

### **II. Genesis 11:27-50:26 - Patriarchal History (continues)**

#### **II.a Genesis 11:27-25:18 - Abraham (continues)**

##### **Summary of Chapter Twelve**

Following their sojourn in Haran, God called Abram to travel on to the land of Canaan. He travelled with his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot and their servants. God blessed Abram and promised to produce a great nation through him. On arriving in the land, Abram built an altar in honour of the Lord and then continued to journey throughout the land.

Because of a severe famine in the land of Canaan, Abram continued on into Egypt. However, because of Sarai's beauty, he feared the reception that he would get for he believed that she would be desired by Pharaoh, and would be killed so Pharaoh could have her. So Abram instructed Sarai to say she was his sister, in itself true, rather than his wife. The Egyptians reported Sarai's beauty to Pharaoh who, believing she was unmarried, took her for himself. But God brought affliction upon Pharaoh for this. Realising the reason for this, Pharaoh confronted Abram, returned Sarai to him and instructed him to leave Egypt.

#### **II.a.ii Genesis 12:1-9 - The Call of Abram**

After the essential background information in 11:27-32, this section moves swiftly to highlight God's invitation to Abram to become a source of blessing for the rest of humanity. The name Abram appears in a text from Dilbat, and Abraham in the Egyptian Execration Texts (20<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Centuries BC). Other names from the patriarchal period, such as Terah, Nahor and Benjamin, are also known from the Mari texts (18<sup>th</sup> Century BC).

**<sup>1</sup> 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.'

### Genesis 12:1-3

The divine speech that suddenly and unexpectedly introduces this section is exceptionally important, for it sets the agenda not only for Abram's life but also for his descendants. By focusing on how divine blessing will be mediated through Abram to all the families of the earth, it marks an important turning point within the Book of Genesis. The repetition of the verb bless underscores the hope that through Abram people everywhere may experience God's favour, reversing the predominantly negative experience of Chapters 3-11. God's plans for Abram have both national and international dimensions, which are developed in the episodes that follow.

Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. God's invitation to Abram challenges him to abandon the normal sources of personal identity and security: his family and country. To obey, Abram must trust God implicitly; all human support is largely removed. The promised outcomes are conditional on Abram's obedience. God would later confirm this command to a later generation, indicating his own active participation: *<<Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many>>* (Joshua 24:3a).

The LORD said to Abram. In Acts 7:2-3, Stephen has God calling Abram before he lived in Haran; therefore, it should be noted that the grammar allows for a reading of 'had said.'

God's purpose for Abram, that he should become a great nation, stands in obvious tension with Sarai's barrenness and the summons to leave his homeland. Abram is challenged by God to establish a new humanity. God would fulfil his promises: *<<The LORD your God has multiplied you, so that today you are as numerous as the stars of heaven>>* (Deuteronomy 1:10), *<<And your servant is in the midst of the people whom you have chosen, a great people, so numerous they cannot be numbered or counted>>* (1 Kings 3:8), *<<O LORD God, let your promise to my father David now be fulfilled, for you have made me king over a people as numerous as the dust of the earth>>* (2 Chronicles 1:9), *<<You multiplied their descendants like the stars of heaven, and brought them into the land that you had told their ancestors to enter and possess>>* (Nehemiah 9:23), *<<Look to Abraham your father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many>>* (Isaiah 51:2), and: *<<Just as the host of heaven cannot be numbered and the sands of the sea cannot be*

*measured, so I will increase the offspring of my servant David, and the Levites who minister to me>> (Jeremiah 33:22).*

**Make your name great.** This was the failed aspiration of the tower builders (11:4).

Although Abram is called to be a blessing to others, much rests on how they treat him. Those who are positive toward Abram will experience God's favour; the one who despises Abram will know God's displeasure. The text speaks of **those who bless** (plural) but of **the one who curses** (singular), emphasising that many more will be blessed than cursed. Indeed, such will be the influence of Abram that **all the families of the earth shall be blessed** in him. This promise is later reaffirmed to Isaac and Jacob; refer to 22:18, 26:4 and 28:14.

**In you.** This may simply indicate 'by means of you,' but it is more likely that this expression is designating Abram as the covenantal representative for a people. To be 'in' some person, then, is to be a member of that people for whom that person is the representative, as confirmed in: *<<But the people of Israel answered the people of Judah, 'We have ten shares in the king, and in David also we have more than you. Why then did you despise us? Were we not the first to speak of bringing back our king?' But the words of the people of Judah were fiercer than the words of the people of Israel>> (2 Samuel 19:43).* This seems to be the way Paul takes it in: *<<And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, declared the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'All the Gentiles shall be blessed in you.' For this reason, those who believe are blessed with Abraham who believed>> (Galatians 3:8-9),* where 'in you' becomes 'blessed with Abraham'; it would also explain the origin of the NT expression 'in Christ.'

**<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.**

**Genesis 12:4**

**So Abram went, as the LORD had told him.** The brief report of Abram's response presents his obedience as immediate and unquestioning. A NT author makes reference to this remarkable step of faith: *<<By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to set out for a place that he was to receive as an inheritance; and he set out, not knowing where he was going>> (Hebrew 11:8).*

**Lot went with him.** Abram may have been responsible for Lot following the death of Haran (11:27-28). Since by this stage Lot is a wealthy adult with considerable possessions (13:5-6), readers may assume that he desires to support Abram's mission.

God had instructed Abram to leave his kindred but he took his nephew. Lot would become a source of trouble and inconvenience for Abram as later

chapters will reveal. Also, the descendants of Lot would also become opponents to the Israelite nation. This shows how important it is to obey God's will to the full and not to amend it to suit human purpose, however noble that may appear to be at the time.

<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 of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.

### Genesis 12:5-6

The persons whom they had acquired in Haran. Abram had under his authority a substantial number of men, many of whom may have been herdsmen, as confirmed in 13:7. Genesis 14:14 mentions three hundred and eighteen trained men born in his house, and 17:12 refers to males whom Abram has purchased from a foreigner. Abram was clearly a very wealthy and influential man, although his wealth would later be surpassed by his descendant King Solomon: <<*I bought male and female slaves, and had slaves who were born in my house; I also had great possessions of herds and flocks, more than any who had been before me in Jerusalem*>> (Ecclesiastes 2:7).

The land of Canaan. Abram migrates with everything he possesses from northern Mesopotamia to Canaan.

Shechem is the first of a number of locations in Canaan mentioned in association with Abram. The site of Shechem is the modern Tel Balatah, which has been extensively excavated. A major settlement here begins around 1900BC Its importance in the patriarchal period is confirmed by its mention in the Egyptian Execration Texts and in the Khu-Sebek inscription, which both date to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century BC.

The oak of Moreh. As a semi-nomadic herdsman with a large retinue, Abram probably camped away from urban populations; these locations are identified by distinctive natural features, e.g. trees, which also allude to the presence of water, so important for the livestock and people alike. This would be the sight of a later battle between the Israelites and Midian: <<*Then Jerubbaal (that is, Gideon) and all the troops that were with him rose early and encamped beside the spring of Harod; and the camp of Midian was north of them, below the hill of Moreh, in the valley*>> (Judges 7:1).

At that time the Canaanites were in the land. This brief observation reveals that other people already occupied the land. It may also indicate that this notice was added after the expulsion of the Canaanites from this area.

<sup>7</sup> Then the LORD appeared to Abram, and said, ‘To your offspring I will give this land.’ So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

### Genesis 12:7

The LORD appeared. This is the first of a number of manifestations of God to the patriarchs. These are often associated with divine promises. On this occasion God promises the land to the descendants of Abram, although he is still childless. In response, Abram builds an altar to the LORD.

A number of altars are constructed by the patriarchs at different locations, refer to 13:18, 22:9, 26:25, 33:20 and 35:7. They are a common feature of the patriarchal period because no central sanctuary existed before the exodus from Egypt. Before the construction of the tabernacle, God was not perceived as ordinarily dwelling on the earth. These altars are places where God may be encountered in worship: <<*You need make for me only an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt-offerings and your offerings of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you*>> (Exodus 20:24).

To your offspring I will give this land. Abram never owned any of this land except his burial plot (23:14-20). Yet God’s promise was enough evidence to assure Abram that he did indeed own the whole country. Moses would later acknowledge the promise: <<*Moses said to Hobab son of Reuel the Midianite, Moses’ father-in-law, ‘We are setting out for the place of which the LORD said, “I will give it to you”; come with us, and we will treat you well; for the LORD has promised good to Israel’*>> (Numbers 10:29).

<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.

### Genesis 12:8

From Shechem, Abram migrates southward to a location between Bethel and Ai, before going much farther in the direction of Egypt. Bethel would become a place of significance for others in Scripture, such as Jacob: <<*God said to Jacob, ‘Arise, go up to Bethel, and settle there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau’*>> (Genesis 35:1), but

was desecrated when King Jeroboam set up one of the golden calves there (1 Kings 12:25-33). However, God would take appropriate action in time: <<***On the day I punish Israel for its transgressions, I will punish the altars of Bethel, and the horns of the altar shall be cut off and fall to the ground***>> (Amos 3:14).

Excavations at the site of Beitan, which is probably to be identified as biblical **Bethel**, have revealed a flourishing Canaanite city during the patriarchal period of the Middle Bronze Age, circa 2000-1500BC. The city contained four well-fortified gate complexes with a massive fortification wall about 11.5 feet or 3.5m thick. A large Canaanite sanctuary has been discovered immediately inside the city wall.

**He pitched his tent.** Even in the land God gave him, Abram never lived in a house - he lived in a tent. Tents are the home of those who are just passing through and do not put down permanent roots. However, it should also be noted that God also never requested a permanent residence in a single land for he desired the whole world to turn to him, not just a dwelling place in one small nation: <<***Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'***>> (2 Samuel 7:5-7).

<sup>9</sup> And Abram journeyed on by stages towards the Negeb.

### **Genesis 12:9**

**The Negeb** or Negev is the southern region of Canaan. Hebrew *negeb* means south.

#### **II.a.iii Genesis 12:10-20 - Abram and Sarai in Egypt**

A severe famine in Canaan forces Abram to seek refuge in Egypt. Because of the Nile River, the land of Egypt was better placed to provide food for man and beast during a time of drought.

The events described in this section raise many questions that go unanswered, creating a sense of ambiguity as to how the behaviour of everyone involved should be judged. As is common in biblical stories, the narrator gives no direct evaluation of the participants' actions, leaving the reader to figure out the ethical questions.

In this passage, the first readers, i.e. the Israelites following Moses, would have seen how God kept his promise to Abram, in spite of all threats, and in spite of the morally dubious actions even of Abram himself.

<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.

#### Genesis 12:10

Now there was a famine in the land. Famines were not uncommon in the region: <<*In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons*>> (Ruth 1:1), and: <<*Now Elisha had said to the woman whose son he had restored to life, ‘Get up and go with your household, and settle wherever you can; for the LORD has called for a famine, and it will come on the land for seven years’*>> (2 Kings 8:1). Abram was not wrong for being concerned about famine and feeding his family, but Abram was wrong in thinking God would not provide for his needs in the place where God called him to live. After all, God called Abram to Canaan, not to live as an alien in Egypt. Abram, like so many others after him, found it easier to trust God in the far-off promises than in the right-now needs. Thus Jesus taught his disciples to pray: <<*Give us each day our daily bread*>> (Luke 11:3).

<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.’

#### Genesis 12:11-13

You are a woman beautiful in appearance. Fearful that his life will be endangered because of Sarai’s beauty, Abram devises a ruse, based on a half-truth: <<*Abraham said, ‘I did it because I thought, There is no fear of God at all in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife. Besides, she is indeed my sister, the daughter of my father but not the daughter of my mother; and she became my wife*>> (Genesis 20:11-12). Abram’s selfish actions imply that he thinks God is unable to protect him. Yet when the plan backfires, it is the Lord who rescues him (v.17).

This episode makes no mention of the fact that Sarai was in her mid-sixties at the time. For her to be considered such a beauty in the sight of a man like Pharaoh indicates that some women at least kept their attractive appearance for much longer than is the norm four thousand years later. Or it may be that the culture of the day appreciated the beauty of a mature woman over that of those who were youthful.

**<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.**

#### Genesis 12:14-15

Pharaoh is the title given to the king of Egypt, not a personal name.

The woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. Understanding the place Abram and Sarai have in God's redemptive plan, it can be realised just how serious this is. God did not want Sarai's womb to be defiled by a gentile king, because the Messiah will come from her line of descendants.

**<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.**

#### Genesis 12:16

For her sake he dealt well with Abram. God blessed Abram even when he did not do what he should. God continued to protect Abram, even when Abram acted deceitfully. God did not retract his promise to Abram because the promise depended on God, not on Abram. The same applies to all of God's promises.

Some biblical scholars have maintained that the mention of camels in Genesis is anachronistic, on the assumption that they were not domesticated until about 1100BC. Archæological finds of camel bones, however, suggest that some camels were in use by humans as early as the 3<sup>rd</sup> Millennium BC. While the evidence is limited, it is hardly surprising, given the use to which camels were put. In Genesis they usually appear in passages that involve long-distance journeys through or close to deserts; refer to 24:10-64, 31:17, 31:34 and 37:25. The scarcity of camels in the period of the patriarchs made them a luxury of great worth, and thus their listing here and elsewhere may serve to emphasise Abram's wealth.

**<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.**

## Genesis 12:17-20

The LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai. Pharaoh's taking of Sarai brings divine punishment on him and his house. This event is similar to that which prefigures the exodus from Egypt when God punishes another Pharaoh for his mistreatment of Abram's descendants (Exodus 11:1). Such affliction is also recorded on other occasions, such as: <<***The LORD struck the king, so that he was leprous to the day of his death, and lived in a separate house. Jotham the king's son was in charge of the palace, governing the people of the land***>> (2 Kings 15:5), <<***Because God has loosed my bowstring and humbled me, they have cast off restraint in my presence***>> (Job 30:11), and: <<***Surely he has borne our infirmities and carried our diseases; yet we accounted him stricken, struck down by God, and afflicted***>> (Isaiah 53:4).

What is this you have done to me? Sadly, a pagan king had to rebuke Abram. The king shows Abram that, if he trusted in God and told the truth, everything would have been all right. However, God was in the business of growing Abram into a man of great faith, and this requires circumstances where Abram must trust God.