

Week 5 – Gen 13:1-18 – Abram & Lot

1 So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb. 2 Now Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. 3 And he journeyed on from the Negeb as far as Bethel to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai, 4 to the place where he had made an altar at the first. And there Abram called upon the name of the Lord.

At the beginning of this story we see Abraham and his family leaving Egypt and heading back towards the Promised Land. The phrasing “he and his wife and all that he had” is the same as in 12:20 and serves to link the previous story in Egypt with this one. That point is important because there are a lot of similar themes.

Here we see the addition of Lot. Previously, in Egypt, there was no mention of because he was a peripheral figure. He is mentioned here, however, because he is about to play a key role in the story.

In verse 2, Abraham’s possessions are mentioned again. Because this and the previous story are linked, the focus on the possessions reminds reader that they were ill-gotten. Also the amassed wealth sets the scene for the dispute that is about to follow. Note that livestock are mentioned first as this was the source of the ensuing dispute.

In verses 3-4 Abraham enters the Promised Land and returns to the site where he first built an altar and once again engages in worship (“called upon the name of the Lord”). The fact that the altar is still there may be a subtle hint that despite Abraham’s actions and what ensued in Egypt the promises of God still stand. It is interesting that there is no reference to him worshiping God or erecting altars in Egypt, which likely highlights the importance of the land and the promises of God.

Note the repetition in these verses, which suggests that Abraham is trying to recapture his previous experience of God. v3 “where his tent had been at the beginning”, v4 “to the place where he had made an altar at first.” Is this a picture of repentance? The text not explicit. Previously, however, we discussed that Abraham’s silence to Pharaoh’s rebuke indicated that he recognized his culpability for what had taken place and therefore in returning to the promised land, specifically the last place he built an altar, at least we can say he is trying to pick up the path where he left off.

5 And Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents, 6 so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together, 7 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.

Here we see the origin of the conflict, i.e. the problem that wealth has created. Specifically the problem are the flocks, which is the one possession that Abraham and Lot share (v2 livestock, silver, and gold; v5 flocks, herds and tents). Nomadic herdsmen usually needed to

continually move to find pastures for their flocks. However, the problem is not just the quantity of animals but the fact they are trying to settle. Note the repetition “could not support both of them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwelt together.” In other words the flocks are too large to settle in one place.

But moving around is also a problem because v7 “the Canaanites and Perizzites were dwelling in the land.” The land had already been settled and so as they move about they are likely to come into conflict with the inhabitants.

So Abraham, just like he did in the previous episode, hatches a plan.

8 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. 9 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.”

In contrast to his plan to head to Egypt and dishonestly claim that Sarah was his sister, this plan is much more magnanimous. Lot is given a choice; Sarah was not. As the patriarch Abraham could have just told Lot what to do but in doing so he would have sacrificed the relationship, which is what happened with Sarah. Abraham probably thought that if he doesn’t maintain good relations with Lot then his life may be threatened by the inhabitants (i.e., the Canaanites and Perizzites). In the next chapter we see Abraham forming a military alliance with the Amorites (14:13) and later with the Philistines (21:32), so he was aware of the potential danger that the various inhabitants of the land may cause. So he offers Lot a choice: take your pick of the land.

10 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.) 11 So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan Valley, and Lot journeyed east. Thus they separated from each other. 12 Abram settled in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom. 13 Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord.

Here we see the outcome of the plan. Abraham settled in Canaan while Lot chose the Jordan Valley, toward Zoar. The exact location of Zoar is unknown but probably lay to the southeast of the Dead Sea. Ptolemy describes Zoar as being famous for its date palms. The description of the boundaries of the Promised Land given in Num 34 and v12 indicate that Lot settled outside of the borders of Canaan. In essence Lot is turning his back on the land and therefore removing himself from the promises of God. Remember by sticking with Abraham he would have enjoyed the blessings, i.e., I will bless those who bless you. But by separating himself he is essentially inviting the curse. His actions are also confirming the promise that the land would belong to Abraham’s offspring. Without children Lot may have viewed himself as Abraham’s heir but his actions essentially eliminate himself as such.

Look at how the text comments on Lot's decision. First, note the allusions to Gen 3. We saw this last week. The parallel language and themes offer a subtle commentary that this is not a good choice.

In verses 10-11 Lot "saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt." The language is reminiscent of Eve's actions in Gen 3:6. Lot's choice is predicated on desire rather than the promises of God. The Jordan Valley was the only place where he could get richer because it was "well-watered" (i.e., an irrigated plain) and it was "like the Garden of God." The text is subtly showing us how Lot's heart interpreted what he saw – not just as a way to get rich though because there is a spiritual aspect – Lot wants the Garden of God without God.

Also, he "journeyed east" v11 – movement east typically is a sign of movement away from God, e.g., Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden toward the east. In Gen 11 the people journey east in order to build the Tower. So movement east is linked with divine judgment.

In addition to the allusions to Gen 3 the text also mentions that the Jordan valley is well watered "like the land of Egypt". That is exactly why previously Abraham chose to abandon the Promised Land for Egypt in an attempt to preserve his life during the famine. The text is suggesting that Lot is about to repeat the same folly.

Finally, there is also explicit commentary that while Lot may have made a good decision in terms of his physical prosperity it was a bad decision spiritually. Lot settled among the cities of the valley but the text notes v10 "this was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah" and the destruction was going to come about because v11 "the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord." The word "destroy" is only used in Genesis for the destruction of these cities and the destruction caused during the flood. Also "wicked" is the same term used to describe the moral inclination of the men on the earth before the flood. This highlights that the destruction in both cases was due to the righteous judgment of God.

Overall the text is saying that preserving his wealth and prosperity was more important to Lot than sticking with Abraham and the promises. What Lot viewed as a great step forward was going to be his ruin, for the cities he settled in were going to be destroyed.

14 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, 15 for all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever. 16 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. 17 Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you." 18 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.

The words "separate," "lift up your eyes," and "look" given by God to Abraham are the same words used in verses 9-10 with regard to Lot. The four points of the compass recall

Abraham's invitation to Lot to look left and right. There is an important contrast here – whereas Lot did these things and greedily saw the Jordan valley, Abraham is invited by God to see the land that the Lord has promised him and his descendants.

In verse 14 there is a small Hebrew particle *na'* that is untranslated in the ESV. Essentially it means “please”, i.e. “Please lift up your eyes.” The term is used frequently in the OT, some 60 times in Genesis alone, but it is only used 4 times when God addresses a human being. In each of these cases God is asking someone to do something that transcends human comprehension: Please have faith that a son will be born to you (15:5), please sacrifice your only son (22:2), please ask your Egyptian neighbors for silver and gold (Ex 11:2) and here please have faith that the land which you see will be yours.

In these verses we see a reiteration of the promises. However, the promise of land and descendants is much fuller here than in earlier statements (e.g., 12:7).

I shall give this land to your offspring (12:7)
all the land that you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever (v15)

Regarding the elaboration about Abraham's offspring, Abraham was previously promised that he would become a “great nation”, which in ancient times could be a relatively small but powerful group. But here his descendants will be uncountable – “like the dust of the earth.”

Also note the chiasmic structure:

v15 I shall give it to you
 Your offspring
v16 Dust of the earth
 Dust of the earth
 Your offspring
v17 I shall give it to you

In ANE oral traditions, chiasms were often used to aid memorization. This structure highlights that this is the key point to take from the story, which makes sense because these are the promises of God. Also, the central part of the chiasm is usually emphasized - in this case the number of Abraham's descendants.

In verse 17, the command to “walk through the length and the breadth of the land,” as we have mentioned before, likely represents a symbolic appropriation of the land. He is foreshadowing the later promise to Joshua that “I will give you every place where you set your foot” (Josh 1:3)

In verse 18 we see Abraham's obedience. He heads toward Hebron. Again, as we saw in his obedience to the call to go to the Promised Land a couple of weeks ago he settled by trees and built an altar. In Gen 12:6, the phrases “oak of Morah” and “the Canaanites were in the land” suggest that this was a site of pagan idol worship and we argued that the mention of

Abraham building an altar was likely a polemic (a strong verbal or written attack on someone or something) against pagan worship practices. Here, it is the oak of Mamre, which according to 14:13 was named for Mamre the Amorite.

What is this story about?

Typology – just as we saw last week there are clear parallels with the future experiences of both the patriarchs and later Israel. For example, Jacob will also travel to Bethel where he meets with the Lord who then reaffirms the promises to him (Gen 28:11-17). He subsequently builds an altar there when he returned (Gen 35:1). Jacob also had to separate from his brother Esau because of the size of their flocks (Gen 36:6-7)

There are also parallels with later Israel. Again the reiteration of the wealth Abraham received upon leaving Egypt anticipates the wealth that the Hebrews would take during the exodus. Lot's decision to choose territory like the land of Egypt foreshadows the grumbling of Israel in the wilderness with their repeated desire to return there.

But in our story today we see two new or expanded features of the promise: that the land will belong to Abraham's offspring forever and that his descendants will be innumerable. These are perpetual themes throughout the rest of the OT. For example, the prophet Balaam who was hired by the king of Moab to curse Israel said that Israel at that time was already beyond counting (Num 23:10). Solomon said the same thing some centuries later (1 Kings 3:8). The perpetual promise of the land also fuels the prophetic hope of Israel in exile that they would eventually return.

So there is already a partial fulfillment of these promises in the OT but the NT recognizes that these promises are ultimately fulfilled in Christ.

Gal 3:8 And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, "In you shall all the nations be blessed... 29 And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to promise.

And for that reason John the following vision:

Rev 7:9 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.

So the promise that Abraham's offspring would be uncountable is fulfilled in Christ because in him, all who believe are considered Abraham's descendants.

Then in terms of the land, the book of Hebrews links the possession of the land with rest and the author specifically singles out the grumbling Israelites in the wilderness (which as we noted is foreshadowed in Lot's desire to live in land like Egypt) as an example of unbelief. But physical possession of the land was never the complete fulfillment of rest that God offered:

Heb 4:8-9. For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken of another day later on. So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God.

The idea of a Sabbath rest and the promise of possessing the land forever go hand in hand. And eternal rest, the possession of the land forever, is only available for those who believe in Christ because he is the true embodiment of the promise.

There is one more link to note. We have seen the ambitions of Lot (reminiscent of Adam and Eve in the Garden) and of Abraham the man of faith (focused of the promises of God). There is a typological connection between the ambition of Abraham and the ambition of Christ.

The promise that God offers to Abraham “for all the land that you see I will give to you” is reminiscent of what Satan offers to Jesus in the wilderness.

Matt 4:8-9 The devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said, “all these I will give to you, if you fall down and worship me.

Abraham gives up his riches to maintain relationship with Lot that he might live and receive the promises. Jesus also gave up his riches (2 Cor 8) to maintain relationship with us and lost his life that we might live and therefore receive the promises of God through him.