

THE CALL OF ABRAHAM

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I. INTRODUCTION

Wenham exclaims that within the book of Genesis no section is more significant than 11:27-12:9.¹ It serves both as an introduction to and summary of Abram's career. It looks forward to the later patriarchs and beyond them to the nation of Israel and the Davidic monarchy, the great nation that will inherit the land of Canaan.

It also looks back to the primeval history, announcing the divine intervention that will bring blessing to all the families of the earth, whose history has been overshadowed by the divine judgments from Eden to the flood to Babel. But in Abram all the nations of the world will find blessing. We have a focus from the whole of humanity to one particular group of people.

This has inspired many authors to attempt to locate Abram and his descendants in a particular culture and time. Older scholars dated Abram as a contemporary of Hannurabi of Babylon (1728-1686 BCE), whom they identified with Amraphel of Shinar (Gen 14:1). This identification can no longer be retained.² The narrative seems to indicate their existence between 2000-1500 BCE and projects a semi-nomadic lifestyle i.e. they did not move constantly but they moved from one settled existence to another.³

McKenzie insists that Abraham is a historical figure and it is no longer possible to regard Abraham as an entirely fictitious character or as a personification of a tribe, although not all the traditions concerning him have all equal historical value.⁴ However this has been rejected by other scholars.

The difficulty for scholars on both sides of the argument is the lack of proof for their position. Those arguing in favour of the historicity of the patriarchal narratives can only demonstrate, at best, that the stories are consistent with a second millennium dating i.e. they can show that someone like Abraham could have existed at that time. Those arguing against historicity can only demonstrate that certain features in the narrative come from a different time than that of Abraham. But this does not prove that he did not exist, but simply that the narratives may originate at a later period.⁵

¹ G.J. WENHAM, *Genesis 1-15*, in *World Biblical Commentary Vol. 1*, Texas 1987, 281.

² JOHN L. MCKENZIE, *Dictionary of the Bible*, London 1966, 6.

³ PAULA GOODER, *The Pentateuch: A Story of Beginnings*, London 2000, 51-2.

⁴ JOHN L. MCKENZIE, *op. cit.*, 6.

⁵ cf. PAULA GOODER, *op. cit.*, 52.

Paula Gooder notes a parallel between Gen 1 and Gen 11-12: just as the divine command called the world into being, so also the divine command calls Abram to move to Canaan. Just as creation is a movement from chaos to cosmos, so is the journey from Mesopotamia to Canaan is a movement towards order.⁶

Abram's obedience to the divine call, forsaking his homeland and family for worship of the Lord in the land of the promise, stands as an example and an incentive to all his descendants to follow suit. This will bring blessings on themselves and on the world.

II. THE ABRAHAM CYCLE

Paula Gooder explains that the Abraham cycle consists of one major theme supplemented by various additional accounts.⁷ The basic narrative focuses on the promise to Abraham to be a great nation by having an offspring and a land as 12:7 presents. The narrative returns to this promise repeatedly (13:14-18;15:1-21;17:1-27;18:1-16a).

Yet, the plot of this narrative stress the crisis that surrounds this promise: Abraham's descendants are to be blessed but he has no descendants and his wife is old and barren. The unfolding of the solution of this crisis occupies much of the narrative. The crisis continues even when Isaac is born since Abraham is commanded by God to kill him.

Interwoven with this basic plot are various sub-plots:

- a war between Abraham and the kings of Canaan (14)
- the rescue of Abraham's nephew Lot from Sodom (18:16b-19:29)
- the finding of a suitable wife for Isaac (24)
- the deaths of Sarah (23:1-20) and Abraham (25:1-18)

III. FORM – STRUCTURE - SETTING

“Now these are the descendants of Terah.” (11:27) opens the Abraham cycle, which is not completed until 25:11. Among scholars it is not so clear where the introductory unit ends.

Some commentators make 11:27-32 the first section of the Abraham cycle and 12:1-9, the second. Others, like Westermann, see 11:27-12:9 as the opening section which sets out the background to the theme of the patriarchal narratives in general and the Abraham cycle in particular.⁸

⁶ PAULA GOODER, *op. cit.*, 46.

⁷ PAULA GOODER, *op. cit.*, 55.

⁸ CLAUS WESTERMANN, *Genesis 12-36*, London 1985, 140-1.

Wenham argues that the mention of Abram in 12:1 presupposes some knowledge of his identity and an understanding of the location of his original homeland. This information is supplied in 11:27-32. Thus, he concludes that it is unlikely that 12:1-3 was an independent introduction to Abram's story.⁹

The whole pericope is dominated by Abram's journey from his homeland in Ur of the Chaldeans (11:28) via Harran (11:31;12:4) to the land of Canaan (12:5), from Shechem in the North, Bethel in the centre and on to the Negeb in the South (12:6,8,9).

This section is essentially:

- an itinerary (11:31;4-6,8a,9),
- expanded with:
 - genealogical details (11:27-30,32)
 - divine promises (12:1-3,7)
 - Abram's responses (12:4,7-8)

The promises enunciated here for the first time serve to explain the significance of Abram's whole career as well as that of his successors. The fourfold promise of land, descendants, covenant and blessing to the nations is gradually fulfilled in Genesis and the Pentateuch.

Though 11:27-12:9 are united by Abram's journey (11:31;12:5), nonetheless 11:27-32 forms a discreet unit within this longer section:

- 11:27b is a typical opening of a genealogy (5:32 to 9:28-29)
- 11:32 is a typical close (5:5,8)

The 2 sections, however, throw different light on the journey. Whereas 11:27-32 gives background information, 12:1-9 sets out the divine word that prompted his journey (12:1-3) and describes Abram's response (12:4-9). Both sections of 12:1-9 subdivide into 3 paragraphs:¹⁰

A	Divine word	v1	command
		v2	promise
		v3	promise
B	Response	vv 4-5	journey
		vv 6-7	journey
		vv 8-9	journey

v1 and v4 are parallel forming an inclusion. This shows that this section has been carefully composed:

⁹ G.J. WENHAM *op. cit.*, 267.

¹⁰ G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 269.

normal for the father to outlive the son and hence this emphasizes that the father experienced the death of his son.¹⁶

“in the land of his birth” – This land was the family home and this shows that Haran was no longer there at the time of departure.

“Ur of the Chaldeans” – This area used to be identified with Ura in N. Mesopotamia but now it is usually agreed that it is Ur in S. Iraq (Mesopotamia).¹⁷ After Leonard Woolley’s work at Ur the idea that the great and ancient centre of civilization must have been Abram’s homeland, captured the imagination of some scholars. But others object to it since it does not fit the nomadic life of the patriarchs.¹⁸

The Chaldeans did not penetrate Babylonia before 1000 B.C. and thus being mentioned here is anachronistic (wrong in date).

11:29

“Abram and Nahor took wives” - Abram married Sarai who according to 20:12 was his half-sister and Nahor married Milcah, his niece. The first is condemned by Lev 18:9;20:17 but not the latter. This suggests that Lev introduces incest rules that were unknown in the patriarchal times. Hence, this argues for the antiquity of tradition here.¹⁹

“the name of Abram’s wife was Sarai and the name of Nahor’s wife was Milcah” - Sarai means *princess* whilst Milcah means *queen*. *Sarratu* was the wife of the moon god Sin and *Malkatu* was his daughter. Both Ur and Haran were important centres for moon worship. Wenham suggests that it may be the Terah’s family were once involved in such a worship (cf. Josh 24:2,15) though there is no trace of it in the patriarchal narratives.²⁰

“She was the daughter of Haran” - Nahor’s marriage has been described by Spieker as a Nuzi contract (a girl is at the same time adopted and married by her uncle). This has been rightly contested by T.L. Thompson and Westermann who thinks that such a city-dwelling contracts would not be made possible for migratory groups.²¹

“Iscah” - She is no longer mentioned in the Bible. Some have suggested that it is an alternative name for Sarah or that she was Lot’s wife.

¹⁶ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 137.

¹⁷ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 272.

¹⁸ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 139.

¹⁹ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 273.

²⁰ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 273.

²¹ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 138.

11:30

“Now Sarai was barren: she had no child” – Two statements in one sentence that emphasize each other. In this way, a poetic device is used by the author to impress this point on the readers.

This is also a digression within the genealogy. Such digressions within a genealogy are of special significance, and this is no exception. It stands in parallel to 2 Sam 6:23;Judg 13:2;Is 54:1. For Westermann, this parallelism (not only used in poetry) serves for the exposition of the narrative.²²

Indeed, according to Wenham, the whole Abraham cycle is an eloquent witness to the desperate desire for children in the primitive society.²³ Without children, the man had no one to perpetuate his and his wife enjoyed little prestige for she had no alternative career than motherhood.

Further on, in old age, the childless couples had no one to take care of them, and after death none took care of their funerary rites. But this was regarded as vital for the well-being of the soul in the after life.

This traditional motif is given a peculiar piquancy in the Abraham stories in that this barren couple are repeatedly promised a child by God, but there is great delay in the fulfilment of that promise.

11:31

“to go into the Land of Canaan” - Terah leads the migration from Ur for reasons that are not given. He took with him Abram, Lot and Sarai. Nahor and his wife as not mentioned as they play a less important role in the narrative. Canaan seems to be the proper destination of the journey, until they reached Haran.

“but when they came to Haran” – This seems to indicate a change of plan or destination. Harran (Assyrian *harranu* “main road”) often mentioned in the Mari texts as a centre of Amorite activity, lies on the river Balih, 20 miles southeast of Urfa (edessa).

11:32

The formulation of this verse is typical of concluding statements in the genealogy of Chap 5 and thus Westermann suggests that here we have a fragment of the genealogy of Terah, the opening of which is 11:26.²⁴

One must also note that Terah’s death is recorded early. Such a departure from a chronological order fits in the characteristic of Genesis that deals with

²² cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 138.

²³ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 273.

²⁴ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 137.

less significant points first. Wenham suggests that there might be also a symbolic reason for this: true life is to be found in Canaan, and Terah, who set out for Canaan but settled in Haran, died there.²⁵

12:1-3

12:1-3 are very important as the opening of the extended narrative that takes up the rest of Genesis. They are not only the beginning of the story of the call of Abram, but they are the beginning of the story of the line chosen by God, as opposed to episodes in the story of human race as a whole. Speiser comments that “the story begins with one individual, and extends gradually to his family, then to a people, and later still to a nation”.

The promises in these verses are repeated in fuller detail later to Abraham himself (15:4,7,18-21; 17:4-8; 22:17-18) and then to Isaac (26:2-5,24) and Jacob (28:13-15;35:11-12). However, as Whybry points out, the essentials are already present in 12:1-3.²⁶

were given to Abram for his benefit primarily, but ultimately for the benefit of Israel and all the families of the earth. What is recorded here is not the Abrahamic covenant, although the blessing offered here will be ensured by the covenant. At this point the promises are conditioned upon Abram’s obedient faith.²⁷

12:1

“Now, the Lord” - G. von Rad notes that the Lord is the subject of the first verb at the beginning of the first statement and thus the subject of the entire subsequent sacred history.²⁸

McKenzie states that the God who revealed Himself to Abram is a family god. This form of worship in which the deity of the family was worshipped and enshrined in the family dwelling, is known in the remains of ancient Mesopotamia.²⁹

Rolla Armando explains that Abram knows him not as YHWH, as Israel later does, but as “El Shaddai” (= God Almighty), in which “El” was the common name for a divinity and the other was an attribute.³⁰ There were other attributes which F.M. Cross has detected. According to Alt these could have been local deities at Canaan:

²⁵ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 269.

²⁶ cf. R. NORMAN WHYBRY, *Introduction to the Pentateuch*, Michigan 1995, 53.

²⁷ cf. ALLEN P. ROSS, *Creation & Blessing: A guide to the study and exposition of Genesis*, Michigan 1988, 262.

²⁸ cf. GERHARD VON RAD, *Genesis*, in G. ERNEST WRIGHT et al (Eds), *Old Testament Library*, London 1969, 154.

²⁹ cf. JOHN L. MCKENZIE, *op. cit.*, 6.

³⁰ cf. ROLLA ARMANDO, *Il Messaggio della Salvezza Vol. 2*, Torino 1967, 217.

<i>'el 'olam</i>	Gen 21:33	the Everlasting God
<i>'el 'elyon</i>	Gen 14:18	God Most High
<i>'el ro'i</i>	Gen 16:13	'El-roi
<i>'el bet-el</i>	Gen 35:	'El-Bethel

According to Alt, it is very slowly that Israel would come to know its god as YHWH.³¹

This has lead scholars such as A. Pagolu (1998) to study the patriarchal religion. He concludes that their religion was compatible with their semi-nomadic lifestyle.

Paula Gooder insists that this debate about the patriarchal religion raises important questions about the nature of the God worshipped by Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. If he can be identified with various local deities this may effect the Pentateuch as the story of beginnings. In this case, the story of the Lord relation with Israel would start with Moses and not with Abraham, whose role as an ancestor of faith would be undermined. It is important, however, to recognize that the biblical account in Ex 3 and 6 is very clear that the God who speaks to Moses is the same one since he is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.³²

Ross also suggests that it would be helpful to look at the religion of Ur as a background to the calling of Abram to see what he abandoned. According to Jos 24:2, Terah served pagan gods beyond the Fertile Crescent. But according to Gen 31:53, Abraham, Nahor and Terah worship the true God. Ross suggests that it may be that a knowledge of the Lord was retained in the family but that the worship of pagan gods had dominated. Then with the word from the Lord, the family together followed the true God and migrated back to Haran.³³

In character, in this pericope, he appears as the God of cosmic domain, who can give Abram the land of Canaan, and of justice and righteousness, who gives sanction to moral obligation. He can be approached by his worshippers and he hears their prayers. He receives sacrifice, the common rite for adoration in the ancient world. He demands unreserved faith in his promise and in his power to bring them about. He is also a God who stands alone without any associate or consort; as a family god he has no connection with the gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon.

Abram's morality was that of the ancient world. In no manner does God demand of Abram exclusive worship. This omission is significant, since this feature of Hebrew belief is so much emphasized in later history and yet it is not read back into the story of Abram.

"said to Abram" – The Lord speaks to Abram and this presupposes some knowledge of Abram's identity and hence it is not the beginning of a completely new narrative. As von Rad notes, why Abram is chosen this is not

³¹ cf. PAULA GOODER, *op. cit.*, 49-50.

³² cf. PAULA GOODER, *op. cit.*, 50.

³³ cf. ALLEN P. ROSS, *op. cit.*, 258.

stated. It is a free act of choice on God's part.³⁴ In what God is to say him, Westermann notes that this is not an account of a revelation but a divine oracle is only stated whose situation remains open.³⁵

“Go from your country” – *lek-l^eka* is the verb of Abram's call meaning “get [you] out”. It corresponds to v4. This appears to be a sudden and radical command addressed to a single individual person since he has to abandon all his natural roots. Indeed, Speiser says that “There was nothing in the preceding accounts to prepare us for Abram's mission”. Nevertheless 11:31 makes clear that Terah's original destination was the land of Canaan, and Abram is now commanded to complete the journey that began with his father many years later.

This command meant to “leave” behind nearly all of his roots: land, society, relatives.³⁶ Thus the uncompromising nature of God's words are brought out in the text:

1. ethical dative – *go by yourself*
2. rhyme – 5 words in v2 end in *ka* (your/you)
3. climatic development – country, kindred, father's house

“your country” - In this context, the country to be left is not Ur but Haran to which, presumably, he was less attached.

“your kindred” - The kindred was a group intermediate in size between tribe and extended family referred to as the father's house in OT. Speiser takes the Hebrew structure of “your country and your kindred” to be a case of an expression called *hendiadys*, in which a single idea is expressed by two phrases joined by a conjunction, where the one phrase qualifies the other: your native land.

“your father's house” – This is not the building but the people living in a family group. Wenham points out that the quick progression from land to father's house draws attention to the costliness of obedience.³⁷

“I will show you” – Nothing is told of the land that God will show him. Indeed, as Ross points out, divine imperatives, seldom give the details of what is to happen, although they often specify what is not to be done.³⁸

Such a calling required faith in the Lord. This passage does not specifically state that Abram believed, but Gen 15:6 affirms it together with Heb 11:8. The evidence of Abram's faith was his obedience to the Word of the Lord, which is stressed here. If he had not believed he would not have obeyed, and the promises of God would not have been fulfilled.

³⁴ cf. GERHARD VON RAD, *op. cit.*, 154.

³⁵ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 147.

³⁶ cf. WILLIAM D. RAYBURN – EVAN MCG FRY, *op. cit.*,

³⁷ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 274.

³⁸ cf. ALLEN P. ROSS, *op. cit.*, 262.

Thus, most commentators have regarded this divine imperative as a test of faith: Abram is to give up all he holds dearest for an unknown land promised by God. But Westermann puts this into question claiming that for a nomad this was not a big thing to do and thus one must postulate some crisis for which the divine imperative is the answer.³⁹ Wenham refutes this argumentation on the basis that there is no textual support to Westermann's claim.⁴⁰ The fact that Terah stayed in Harran (11:31-32), whereas only Abram went on to Canan (12:4), suggests that the traditional interpretation is preferable.

Gerhard von Rad explains that the goal of migration is simply "a land", about which Abram knows only that God will show it to him. The narrative's interest here is not simply a representation of what happened at the beginning but in this call and the road that will be taken, Israel saw a basic characteristic of her own existence before God. Taken from the community of nations (Num 23:9) and never really rooted in Canaan, but even there a stranger (Lev 25:23;Ps 39:12), Israel saw itself being led on a special road whose plan and goal lay completely in Yahweh's hand.⁴¹ This would make a lot of sense for the community reading the story after the exile.

Blenkinsopp suggests that everything that is promised is contingent on Abram's obeying the command to leave his old world behind him and go to the land he will be shown. The land, therefore, has logical priority in that everything else depends on the promise that he and his descendants will possess it. The promise of the land implicit in the call to enter it is repeated at several junctures. But it soon becomes apparent that this promise is subject to postponement, a point made explicitly in 15:7-21, which speaks of a return to the land in the 4th generation of the Egyptian diaspora (v16).⁴²

Westermann also draws attention in claiming that this is the calling of Abram since one must distinguish carefully between this summons and the call of an individual such as the prophet which presupposes a larger group among whom and for whom one is called. For him, Gen 12:1 offers no ground for speaking of "the call of Abram".⁴³

12:2-3

Structure of text:

First imperative:	<i>Go</i> (v1)
Promise 1:	<i>I will make you a great nation</i> (v2)
Promise 2:	<i>I will bless you</i> (v2)
Promise 3:	<i>make your name great</i> (v2)

³⁹ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*,

⁴⁰ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 274.

⁴¹ cf. GERHARD VON RAD, *op. cit.*, 154.

⁴² cf. JOSEPH BLENKINSOPP, *op. cit.*, 110-1.

⁴³ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 148.

Second imperative: *you will be a blessing* (v2)
 Promise 1: *I will bless those who bless you* (v3)
 Promise 2: *the one who curses you I will curse* (v3)
 Promise 3: *in you all the families of the earth will be blessed* (v3)

Ross suggests that the symmetry strengthens the meaning that God's calling has a purpose and that Abram's obedience brings a blessing.⁴⁴ Grammatically the main verbs: make, bless, make great, be, bless, curse, find blessing – are all subordinate to the imperative “Go” (v1). This uncovers a divine internationality: “Go... so that I may make you... bless you...”. The promise of blessing is central: 5 times the verb or noun derived from “bless” is used. It occurs 88 times in Genesis and 310 times in OT.

G. von Rad explains that the substance of God's blessings in the OT is predominantly a material increase in life, especially in the sense of fruitfulness. This is manifested in human prosperity such as long life, wealth, peace, good harvests and children (cf. Gen 24:35-36; Lev 26:4-13; Deut 28:3-15). This promises counteracts the crisis of Sarai's barrenness (11:30). Material blessing are tangible expressions of divine benevolence the highest of which is God walking with his people (Lev 26:11-12).⁴⁵

According to Westermann, blessings not only connect the patriarchal narratives to each other but also to the primeaval history in the sense that the promises of blessing to the patriarchs are a reassertion of God's original intentions for man.⁴⁶

But this is contested by Blenkinsopp saying that this programmatic statement does not provide such a link between the early history of humanity and the ancestral history sine nothing in Gen 1-11 prepares us for it: the blessings of Abram do not remedy for the situation in the early chapters (the curse of the soil and the confusion of tongues). Language and style, also, have very few common features.⁴⁷

The theme of blessing is also a pun in these verses. There is a play on the name “Abram” since every mention of the term “bless” evokes the name “Abram” i.e. it is a paronomastic (a play on words) allusion to Abram's name.

The 5 time use of the root “bless” in vv2-3 consciously negates the 5 curses on man and his world pronounced in the preceding chapters: 3:14,17;4:11;5:29;9:25. But what is, according to Westermann, decisive in the meaning of the word “bless” is that God's blessing does not show its effects in individual acts and deeds, but in a continual process.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ cf. ALLEN P. ROSS, *op. cit.*, 263.

⁴⁵ cf. GERHARD VON RAD, *op. cit.*, 155.

⁴⁶ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 150.

⁴⁷ cf. JOSEPH BLENKINSOPP, *op. cit.*, 100.

⁴⁸ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 149.

The blessings to Abram are fourfold: the promise of nationhood, a great name, divine protection and mediatorship of blessing. Behind these, E. Ruprecht has plausibly detected echoes or royal ideology: an oriental monarch (2 Sam 7:9).

“I will make you a great nation” - Abram is to become a great nation which stands in to Moses in which it is promised that his descendants, and not Abraham’s, should become a great nation (Ex 32:10). According to Speiser, a “nation” is a political unit with a common land, language and government. On the other hand, “people” primarily draws attention to the consanguinity of the group.⁴⁹ Thus this very first word to Abram encapsulates the full range of divine promises subsequently made to him.

“make your name great” (v2) – This stands parallel to the promise to David in 2 Sam 7:9 “I will make for you a great name”. Otherwise only the name of God is described as “great” (Josh 7:9). Westermann observes that the promise of a great nationhood and name are one of the clearest links between the story of the patriarchs and the history of Israel.⁵⁰

“You shall be a blessing” (v2) – This occurs only in 2 other passages in Scripture: Is 19:24 and Zech 8:13. Its meaning is uncertain. Some say that it is the passive participle of “you shall be blessed” and thus meaning “you will be the embodiment of blessing”. Westermann gives it a more active sense: because Abram has been blessed “he will be a source of blessing to others”.⁵¹ Wenham suggests that the closest meaning would be that of Zech meaning that: “May God make me as blessed as Abram”.⁵²

**“I will bless those who bless you
And the one who curses you I will curse”** (v3)

The chiasmus and parallelism in this verse make it a poetic couplet in parallel to Gen 27:29 and Num 24:9: “Blessed are those who bless you, and cursed are those who curse you”. But, as Wenham points out,⁵³ it differs from them in 3 ways which accentuate the closeness of the relationship between the Lord and Abram as being stronger.

12:3 employs the first person (I will bless/I will curse) instead of the more passive participle “blessed” found in Gen 27:29/Num 24:9. Thus emphasizing God’s concern for Abraham’s welfare i.e. retribution and justice are not left to the impersonal operation of fate but the Lord himself will intervene.

12:3 uses the word “disdain” (treats lightly - *qalal*) and not “curse” (*‘arar*), as in Gen 27:29/Num 24:9, to describe those opposed to Abram as referring to a judicial curse pronounced on evil doers. The formula used elsewhere “cursed are those who curse you” sets out a balanced between evildoers and their

⁴⁹ cf. E.A. SPEISER, *People and Nation of Israel*, in *Journal of Biblical Literature* 79, 1960, 157-63.

⁵⁰ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 150.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 276.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

rewards of being cursed. Here, however, the punishment is heightened: those who simply disdain Abram will be cursed by God. This is what happens to anyone who disrespects and treats Abram and his faith lightly: he will be removed from the place of his blessing. The wording records this threat as a necessary part of the outworking of the promises.⁵⁴

The standard formula in Gen 27:29/Num 24:9 uses the plural “those who curse you” but 12:3 uses the singular “the one who disdains you”. This implies that those who disdain Abram will be far fewer than those who bless him. He will flourish to such an extent that few will fail to recognize that God is indeed on his side.

“All the families of the earth” (v3) – The family or clan is a group intermediate between a tribe and the father’s house. Not every individual is promised blessing in Abram but every major group in the world will be blessed. The subsequent stories in Genesis illustrates these principles in action. Groups well disposed to Abram and his descendants prosper: those that oppose them do not.

“shall be blessed” (v3) – This is a niphal found only 3 times in Scripture (12:3;18:18;28:14). The hithpael occurs 7 times. However, both have the same meaning. The rarity of its usage has lead to its imprecise meaning here. It has been interpreted:

- *be blessed* – this is seen in a passive sense and supported by the *New Revised Standard Version*, *Saydon* and *Ghaqda Biblika Maltija* (both translate it *jitbierku bik*) . The Septuagint adopts this translation which was taken over by the NT in Acts 3:25 and Gal 3:8.
- *find blessing* – this is seen in a receptive sense and it is supported by Schmidt and the *New American Bible*.
- *bless themselves* – this is a reflexive sense e.g. may we be blessed like Abraham and it is supported by the *Revised Standard Version*.

Wenham explains that a reflexive sense is possible and it may be conceded (but not that it should be so) since this is the natural way to interpret the hithpael. Some of the stem of such a verb clearly have this meaning e.g. Deut 29:19 “one who... blesses himself in his heart”.

G. von Rad thinks that the universal salvific meaning of v3 demands the passive but the reflexive would not do because of the theological implications. It would reduce Abraham only as a formula for blessing, with which he disagrees.⁵⁵ Westermann⁵⁶ disagrees with this and asserts that this opinion is without foundation since, as Wenham⁵⁷ admits, the reflexive tense also carries the implications of the receptive and passive sense.

⁵⁴ cf. ALLEN P. ROSS, *op. cit.*, 264.

⁵⁵ cf. GERHARD VON RAD, *op. cit.*, 155.

⁵⁶ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 152.

⁵⁷ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 277-8.

When the families of the earth bless themselves in Abram i.e. call a blessing on themselves under the invocation of his name, they receive the blessing. Consequently, were the name of Abram is spoken in prayer for blessing, the blessing of Abram springs forth, it know no bounds and reaches all the families of the earth. For this reason, if those who bless Abram are blessed, and all the families of the art bless his name, thus, all will be blessed in Abram.

Accordingly, this clause brings the passage to a triumphant and universal conclusion showing a progressive build up in the good that will result from obeying God's command:

- Abram alone is blessed
- Abram's name used as a blessing
- Abram's blessers are blessed
- All families find blessing in Abram.

According to Konig, it joins two main ideas. First, that Abram's name will be used in blessing, and secondly, all clans will be blessed in him. What all this implies is what Westermann insists, namely, that what the verse is saying is that God's action proclaimed in the promise to Abraham is not limited to him and his prosperity, but reaches its goal only when it includes all the families of the earth.⁵⁸

12:4

“So”– This marks the consequence of v1”Go”.

“Abram went”– *wayyelek* emphasizes the fulfilment of the divine command in v1 indicating a departure from a fixed place of origin. This verb corresponds to the primary verb of the call *lek-l'ka*.

The same verb, *halak*, is used again in v5 (*to go* to the land of Canaan), and at the end of the narrative in v9 (*journeyed on by stages* to Negeb). The repetition of this common verb reflects the central point of the story: Abram's obedience to the call.⁵⁹

According to G. von Rad this shows that Abram obeyed blindly and without objection. Abram remains dumb. This is one of the passages where Abram becomes a model. Throughout the entire story one must always remember that to leave home and to break ancestral bonds was to expect from ancient men almost the impossible.⁶⁰

“as the Lord had told him”– *dibber* continues to emphasize that Abram's migration is a result of his obedience and not of a natural migration.⁶¹

⁵⁸ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 152.

⁵⁹ cf. ALLEN P. ROSS, *op. cit.*, 264-5.

⁶⁰ cf. GERHARD VON RAD, *op. cit.*, 157.

⁶¹ cf. ALLEN P. ROSS, *op. cit.*, 265.

“Lot went with him” – presupposes knowledge about Abram’s nephew Lot given in 11:27-31 and prepares the way for the stories in Gen 13-14.⁶²

“Seventy five years old” – according to Wenham this implies that Abram left Harran 60 years before his father died (11:26,32) and this remark shows Abram putting the call of God above loyalty to his family (cf. Deut 13:7-11; Mt 10:37).⁶³ Cassuto notes that Abram’s life shows an interesting symmetry: 75 yrs with his father, 25 yrs without father and son, 75 with his son. The advanced aged of Abram and Sarai and her barrenness (11:30) provide a tension for the narrative.

12:5

Cassuto observes a leaving formula: *so-and-so* (the head of the family) *took so-and-so* (members of the family) *and such-and-such possessions*. This stands parallel to 11:31 (Terah); 36:6 (Esau); 46:5-6 (Jacob); Ex 18:2-4 (Jethro).

But there is a contrast to 11:31 in the sense that whereas Terah set out for Canaan but settled and died in Harran, Abram actually reached Canaan. Both took various relatives with them but Abram also acquired movable property including herds and the persons they had acquired. His acquisition of wealth in Harran foreshadows his profitable visits to other foreign parts.

“the persons who they had acquired” - Wenham sees the persons acquired as slaves⁶⁴ but Ross disagrees since *nefesh* would not have been used for slaves.⁶⁵ Neither they are his children since Sarai is barren. Cassuto argues that this expression probably refers to proselytes. Ross concludes that if Cassuto is right, then, the narrative implies that, already in Harran, Abram had been sharing his faith in the Lord.

“Canaan” – Its boundaries loosely defined in 10:19 and more precisely in Num 34:2-12, seem to correspond fairly closely to those of the Egyptian province of the same name in the 15th – 13th centuries.

12:6

“Abram passed through the land” – This is the land of Canaan. He travelled from North to South. Wenham notes that the most likely route would have taken him south through Damascus, along the shore of the Sea of Galilee and then on to Shechem identified with Tell Balata (east of modern Nablus).⁶⁶ Shechem was a very important centre in the second millennium BC. It was a

⁶² cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 152.

⁶³ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 278.

⁶⁴ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 278.

⁶⁵ cf. ALLEN P. ROSS, *op. cit.*, 265.

⁶⁶ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 279.

city located about 65km north of Jerusalem, between Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim.

“the place” – Rayburn suggests that this designates a holy place cf. Deut 16:7.⁶⁷

“the oak of Moreh” – In certain areas some trees were known as sacred trees used for idol worship (Hos 4:13). Wenham suggests the Tabor oak for worship.⁶⁸

Moreh is traditionally seen as a proper name⁶⁹ but its original sense is “teacher” which suggests that it was a place where the divine oracle could be obtained.⁷⁰ An oracle may refer to the person or place through which the god or spirit reveals hidden knowledge. The idea, for Rayburn, is that a large tree was known before Abram’s arrival as a place where diviners or soothsayers sat and gave prophecies or oracles.⁷¹ G. von Rad explains that this was the focus of Canaanite cultic centre.⁷² For Wenham, here, the name *Moreh* anticipates that the Lord will appear there.⁷³

NRSV makes Shechem and the oak of Moreh appear as 2 separate locations, which may be true since the sacred rite was in or near the town of Shechem. Others identify Shechem as the location of the sacred oak.

“the Canaanites were in the land” – Westermann points out that the author is making a historical point, contrasting the situation in his day with that of the patriarchal age i.e. this happened in far distant past, long before the Israelite tribes migrated to Canaan.⁷⁴

For Wenham the author’s primary concern is to explain why Abram could not take immediate possession of the land about to be promised to him: it was already occupied by others and these others were pagans.⁷⁵

For Ross, this shows that Abram, the pilgrim, thus found himself in alien territory where pagan ideas were handed down and this created a tension for Abram. Throughout the book of Genesis the Canaanites are antagonists. This shows that the reception of the promise would not be without difficulty.⁷⁶

⁶⁷ cf. WILLIAM D. RAYBURN – EVAN MCG FRY, *op. cit.*,

⁶⁸ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 279.

⁶⁹ cf. WILLIAM D. RAYBURN – EVAN MCG FRY, *op. cit.*,

⁷⁰ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 279.

⁷¹ cf. WILLIAM D. RAYBURN – EVAN MCG FRY, *op. cit.*,

⁷² cf. GERHARD VON RAD, *op. cit.*, 157.

⁷³ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 279.

⁷⁴ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 154.

⁷⁵ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 279.

⁷⁶ cf. ALLEN P. ROSS, *op. cit.*, 265.

“The Lord appeared to Abram” – Previously Abram only had a word from the Lord but now we have the first recorded appearance of the Lord to a patriarch (17:1,18:1) which in turn foreshadows his appearance at Sinai and in the Tabernacle (Ex 3:2,16). What form of thespian and revelation took place is not clear. The heavenly appearance, as Ross explains, was sufficient to sustain Abram in Canaan.⁷⁷ It also introduces the first explicit promise of land and descendants, promises implied in 12:1-2 but not spelled out.

“To your offspring I shall give this land” – Jacob notes that this monumental statement, the shortest of all the promises, names both people and land. They are united by the verb *give*. This is uttered for the first time. The promise of descendants and land are central to Genesis. But their significance at this stage is much disputed.

Westermann argues that in this case the land promise is secondary, because the mention of descendants and the term “give”, involving a solemn act of conveyancing, are too remote from Abram’s situation. It addresses a later situation when possession of the land had become a vital question for the tribes beginning to settle in Canaan.⁷⁸

On the other hand, J.A. Emerton argues that a promise of land fits in well with the context in that 12:1-13:18 portrays Abram visiting the major sanctuaries of Canaan, Shechem, Bethel and Hebron.⁷⁹

“he built there an altar to the Lord” – Abram’s first act, on being informed that he had reached his goal, was to build an altar and presumably offer sacrifice as he later does at Bethel, Hebron, Mount Moriah. Sacrifice was the normal mode of worship in OT. However, Westermann argues that since sacrifice is not mentioned here, it was not offered. Abram built an altar to show that he believed the promise of the land: one day it will be his descendants.⁸⁰

Wenham thinks that this denial by Westermann is perverse in the light of Noah’s example and Gen 22. Both building an altar and offering sacrifice were expressions of faith in the promise and were integral to the worship of God. Wenham thinks that only an altar building was mentioned here because it survived longer than the sacrifice as a witness to God’s promise and the patriarch’s response.⁸¹

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁷⁸ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 155.

⁷⁹ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 280.

⁸⁰ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 155.

⁸¹ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 280.

12:8

“he moved on” – This has the meaning of leaving Shechem, which lies in a valley to the hills east of Bethel. Bethel was once called Luz (28:19). Its newer name is used here as an anticipation of the later change. It is usually identified with Beitin, 10 miles north of Jerusalem.

“Ai” – This is a town in very short distance east of Bethel.

“West... East” – West in Hebrew is the sea, a reference to the Mediterranean, which lies along the west side of the country i.e. Bethel was where the sun goes down, and Ai was where the sun rises.⁸²

“pitched his tent” – Presumably Abram did so wherever he went showing that this time he settled near Bethel for some time (26:25;33:19;35:21).

“invoked the name of the Lord” – This implies more than a simple act of prayer but it shows that Abram worship in a regular formal way. The expression *wayyiqra' b'sem YHWH* is first used in 4:26 and it refers to a public proclamation of faith. In the Bible it is used for prayer or praise. In the Mosaic material it seems to be broader.

The phrase “the name of the Lord” indicates the activities and the attributes of the Lord. Ross points out that when Abram’s proclamation is combined with the wording of the call, one can see something of the nature of true faith. The Lord promised to make Abram’s *name* great (making Abram famous) and Abram responded by proclaiming the *name* of the Lord (making YHWH famous in Canaan). When one recalls that the Shinarites were involved in their disobedient enterprise in order to make a *name* for themselves (11:4), one can see how different the man of faith was.⁸³ Thus, those who seek fame through disobedience will be given an infamous name, but those who seek to exalt the name of the Lord through their obedient service will be made famous.

12:9

“Negeb” – This means “the dry land”. It is an area lying between the hills of Judah and Kadesh-Barnea. Its rainfall is too low for normal agriculture and thus sparsely populated.

The verse summarizes several stages in Abram’s journey southward through which Abram not only sees what was promised to him; he walks through it, and he lives and worships in it. Symbolically he has taken possession of it.

⁸² cf. WILLIAM D. RAYBURN – EVAN MCG FRY, *op. cit.*,

⁸³ cf. ALLEN P. ROSS, *op. cit.*, 267.

V. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS

Wenham suggests that the actions of Abram are an acted prophecy: they foreshadow the day when Israel will take possession of the whole land and worship the Lord there.⁸⁴

The narrative thus looks forward to the conquest of the land, and beyond that, to the establishment of the Davidic empire. David himself was promised a great name (2 Sam 7:9) and he made Israel a great nation. But that did not exhaust the scope of those promises.

Ps 47:10 encourages all the princes of the peoples to acknowledge the God of Abram. In the prophets there is a specific allusion to Gen 12 in Isa 19:24, where Israel is going to be a blessing in the midst of the earth alongside her archenemies Egypt and Assyria. Jer 4:2 makes also a reference to these promises.

Moreover, the pilgrimage of Abram provided Israel with their central march. Abram came to Shechem, Bethel, Ai and the Negeb; they would go up from Negeb to Bethel, Ai and Shechem where the covenant would be enacted (Josh 24).

VI. THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE

The theological significance of this text is manifold. It uncovers a plan of history showed a God who is revealing Himself. In this plan Israel is seen to be willed by God as called into being through an act of faith demonstrated by obedience and proclaimed through worship. Such promises accepted in faith by Abram acquire an important theological significance in the NT corpus.

It unfolds *a plan of history* in the sense that God's universal action represented in the primeval story, continues through the action with Israel's ancestors and then with the people of Israel, towards the goal which God has for all the families of the earth. This is different from salvation history as a rescue event which did not begin with Abram but with exodus. By contrast, the promise of blessing to Abram is aimed at a blessing which embraces mankind.⁸⁵

The narrative unit also includes the *idea of revelation* of God first by word and then by appearance. This is absolutely essential for a theological interpretation of history. Ross insists that to separate it from the report of Abram's journey would destroy the meaning.⁸⁶

The *existence of Israel* is another theological theme. Israel would learn by this account that their very existence as a nation was by God's election of one man who responded by faith i.e. their beginnings are rooted in the will of God.

⁸⁴ cf. G.J. WENHAM, *op. cit.*, 283.

⁸⁵ cf. CLAUS WESTERMANN, *op. cit.*, 158.

⁸⁶ cf. ALLEN P. ROSS, *op. cit.*, 260.

This Israel was to be a *people* and a *land*, and this is the heart of Abram's promise. However, as Whybry explains, the author of Genesis has created a dramatic tension between promise and reality since there is a postponement of the fulfilment of the promise of the land (15:13-16). The other promise, is only partly and by no means fully fulfilled in Genesis. Abram does prosper as a sign of God's blessing but the further promise of becoming a great nation victorious over enemies and also be a blessing to other nations remained yet to be fulfilled.⁸⁷

The fulfilment of the promises were always dependent on a *faith demonstrated by obedience* emerges as a theme in itself too. Abram's obedience was not a simple act of faith but his was a conversion of a pagan. The Word of God came to him and he left his world and relatives to follow the Lord's command.

Then this *faith is proclaimed through worship*. The building of the altar and the proclaiming of the name of the Lord are critical to the story; they show that the covenant people in the Land of Promise have as their task the proclamation of their faith through worship.

This text has also its resonance in the NT which uses the *Abrahamic promises* in bringing the salvation to the world through the seed of Abraham. With the advent of Christ, however, the promise of the seed and the blessing find their fullest meaning in the plan of God.

The NT looks at the advent of Christ as ushering in the age in which all the nations will be blessed through Abraham (Acts 3:25; Gal 3:8). His faith is held up as a model of God's dealings with all men (Rom 4; Gal 3); in particular his willingness to forsake his homeland is an example to us who should look for "the city... whose builder and maker is God" (Heb 11:8-10).

For St. Paul, the figure of Abram played a vital role in his argument about the relationship between Christianity and the Law. In Rom 4 he argues that, as Abram's faith was reckoned to him as righteousness (Rom 4:3 based on 15:6) before circumcision was instituted (Gen 17:24), Abram can be regarded as the ancestor of the uncircumcised as well of the circumcised.

Paul interprets the promise "all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gen 18:18) as referring to the Gentiles and the word "to your offspring" (Gen 12:7) to Christ, not the Jews. These verses helped Paul to support his argument that the promises to Abram were fulfilled in Christ.

Spiritual & Pastoral Significance

Abram's call shows that he who truly believes the Word of the Lord will forsake all else so that, through obedience, he might become worshipper of the Lord and begins to serve in his program to bring blessing to the world.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ cf. R. NORMAN WHYBRY, *op. cit.*, 54-5.

⁸⁸ cf. ALLEN P. ROSS, *op. cit.*, 268.

Hence, one's relationship with God introduces him into a communitarian dimension: like Abram he becomes a blessing for others in Christ through the use of the charismas God bestows on the individual subject.

This means that one is required to know God's promises in Christ (forgiveness, salvation, eternal life). Hence, pastoral service should be also concerned with introducing people to the Bible as a source to come to know God's promises in Christ.

The response to such promises is not a definite response in the life of the Christian and assistance in one's personal journey of faith is required so as to learn how to read the way God is revealing Himself to the individual subject is his subjective human experience, especially to live the ambiguity of faith when the promises believed in seem to be not totally fulfilled, as in the case of Abram. This process does not only apply to the individual but also to the Christian community at large.

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