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January 14th: Genesis 14 & John 7:1-24

January 13, 2020



Alastair Roberts

Abram's victory over the kings; Jesus going up to the Feast of Tabernacles.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

Genesis 14. In the days of Amraphel king of Shinar, Ariok king of Elassar, Kedaleomer king of Elam, and Tidal king of Goim, these kings made war with Birr king of Sodom, Bersha king of Gomorrah, Shainab king of Admar, Shemiba king of Zeboim, and the king of Bila that is Zoar, and all of these joined forces in the valley of Sidim, that is the salt sea. Twelve years they had served Kedaleomer, but in the thirteenth year they rebelled.

In the fourteenth year Kedaleomer and the kings who were with him came and defeated the Rephaim in Ashtaroth-Qarnaim, the Zuzim in Ham, and the Emim in Sheba-Qeriyathim, and the Horites in their hill country of Seir as far as Elparan on the border of the wilderness. Then they turned back and came to En-Mishfat, that is Kadesh, and defeated all the country of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites who were dwelling in Hazazan-Tamar. Then the king of Sodom, the king of Gomorrah, the king of Admar, the king of Zeboim, and the king of Bila that is Zoar went out and they joined battle in the

valley of Sidim, with Kedaleomer king of Elam, Tidal king of Goim, Amraphel king of Shainab, and Ariak king of Elassar, four kings against five.

Now the valley of Sidim was full of bitumen pits, and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them, and the rest fled to the hill country. So the enemy took all the possessions of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their provisions and went their way. They also took Lot, the son of Abram's brother, who was dwelling in Sodom, and his possessions and went their way.

Then one who had escaped came and told Abram the Hebrew, who was living by the Oaks of Mamre, the Amorite, brother of Eshcol and Aner. These were the allies of Abram. When Abram heard that his kinsmen had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men born in his house, 318 of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan.

And he divided his forces against them by night, he and his servants, and defeated them and pursued them to Hobar, north of Damascus. Then he brought back all the possessions and also brought back his kinsmen Lot with his possessions and the women and the people. After his return from the defeat of Kedulehomer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the valley of Sheva, that is, the king's valley.

And Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said, Blessed be Abram by God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.

And Abram gave him a tenth of everything. And the king of Sodom said to Abram, Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself. But Abram said to the king of Sodom, I have lifted my hand to the Lord God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth, that I would not take a thread or a sandal strap or anything that is yours, lest you should say, I have made Abram rich.

I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me. Let Anna, Eshcol, and Mamre take their share. Genesis chapter 14 is a story that very much belongs within the world of the ancient Near East.

A world of wars between kings, of kings outside the land, dominating over small kingdoms within the land. And the forces involved are significant here. We have Chedda Leoma, the king of Elam, and Elam is the first son of Shem.

Abram is described as the Hebrew within this chapter. He's associated with Eber, perhaps, the younger son of Shem. And so the older son of Shem, when associated with Elam, is displaced by a younger son of Shem, a son of Eber.

This sort of event suggests a relationship with the broader theme of the older son being

displaced by the younger son throughout the book of Genesis. Cain and Abel, Seth, Esau, Jacob, Ishmael, Isaac, Judah, Joseph, etc. And in all of these different occasions, we see a reversal of the natural birth order.

And this might be another example of what's taking place. Now the king of Elam, Chedda Leoma, is ruling over the people of Canaan with his allies, these other kings. And this would seem to be, in part, a fulfillment of the prophecy of Genesis chapter 9 concerning Canaan.

Cursed be Canaan, a servant of servants shall he be to his brethren. And blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem, and may Canaan be his servant. This is a situation where kings from Japheth and a king of Shem are ruling over Canaan.

They're dominating the land. And here comes another descendant of Shem to liberate Canaan and to act on behalf of the land of Canaan. This is the curse that we see in the story of Noah.

And now it begins to play out as these families spread out across the land. There's a flowing out of families at this point. The families of the nations have divided up and they're playing out their different destinies.

Lot and Abraham have divided. Two nations going their own way. And later we'll see Moab and Ammon arising out of Lot.

These are split destinations. Another thing to notice in this chapter is the way that the story of the kings is interrupted at various points with glosses upon the particular place names or the locations or kingdoms. It suggests this is updated for a later audience.

The story of the kings and the victory over them at this point is serving a purpose that is not merely anachronistic. It's not really the reason why the names are updated. The names are updated in order to show Israel that their forefather Abraham has won the victory over the people within this land.

He's playing out the destiny of his descendants beforehand. When the land of people like the Amalekites is mentioned it is anachronistic. Amalek has not yet been born.

But the point is that the land later associated with Amalek is conquered and it is liberated by Abraham. And this is a sign of the possibility of Abraham's descendants doing the same thing. Genesis 14 then is a conquest narrative.

It is a narrative of Abraham going throughout the whole land conquering a significant tract of territory. He pursues Chedolama and his forces up to the north of Damascus. It's a significant territory that he's marked out by his victory.

And as we've seen Abraham has been building altars throughout the land and walking

throughout the land and then having a certain area of the land being declared as his possession in the future mapped out as the territory that God will give to him. And here we see taking possession of the land and guarding the people within it. He's progressively developing a deeper relationship with the land and its people as we go through these chapters.

So we begin in chapter 12 of having an exodus experience in the land of Egypt. Going down into Egypt because of a famine. Being protected there.

Being delivered with plagues. And then going into the land, wandering throughout the land, spying out the land as it were and now winning a victory within the land. He's going through the history of his descendants in important ways.

He's already been in significant places like Shechem and Ai where they failed to take possession of the land and he's built altars in these places. He's playing out the history of Israel in advance. And so as Israel looked back at stories like this they would see that their destiny has been foreshadowed.

That there's nothing that they will face that Abraham has not faced before them. The kings of the nations, Chedorlaomer and his forces, drive the forces of the land, the Canaanites, down to the asphalt pits. But yet Abraham can defeat them and if Abraham can do it then they may be able to do it too with the forces that dominate the land in their day.

Lot's part in this story is important. He's the one it would seem at this point that Abraham's descendants would be named in. But yet in the previous chapter we saw that Lot went his own way.

In many respects he seems like a bad penny. He's gone his own way but maybe he can be won back. You can imagine Abraham having great hope here as he goes out to rescue Lot.

Maybe Lot will have learnt his lesson. Maybe Lot will come back to him. One of the questions within this chapter is how Lot and Abraham will relate by the end of it, this episode.

Are they going to relate to each other as brothers? Or is Lot going to return to the status of a son-like character? His brother's son who is adopted into his family and who will bear his destiny? These are important questions and as the chapter moves on we'll see that there is a fateful decision that arises. Abraham gathers together his forces. He has influence within the land and it suggests, as we read this chapter, that he has real weight to him.

He's someone who's acting very much like a king at this point. Not just a priest building altars but a judge figure. A figure with military might.

Someone with allies. Someone who can muster military forces. He himself has forces of over 300 men, 318 men and that number is significant.

Why that number in particular? Well it's the gematria of the name of Eliezer who we meet in the following chapter. It's the number of his house-born servant. These are people who are born within his house and they're representing Eliezer, his chief servant.

Now the fact that he can muster this many men suggests that he probably has about 2 or 3 thousand people in his sheikdom. There's a significant number of people surrounding him and all of these are people who can fight for him, who he can call upon to his aid. They're not just regular mercenaries.

These are people who belong to his own house. So he's already acting as a sort of king on some scale. And Abram now is going to move to a grander scale of operation.

He's acting with the peoples of the land, with allies around him and he's combating some early empires. Chedulema and the Japhethite kings come against him and he's someone who can stand for the land he's within and make a conquest within it. He does not take absolute possession of it.

That's something that awaits later developments. But he's able to drive out the opponents and he divides up his forces, attacks by night and pursues the opponents north of Damascus. After he wins the victory he meets with the king of Sodom and Melchizedek, the king of Salem in the king's valley.

Melchizedek, the king of Salem, brings out bread and wine. He is described as the priest of God Most High and he brings out bread and wine. We're seeing here themes of priesthood and kingdom.

Abraham, as he has already gone throughout the land, has built altars, sites of worship, etc. And he's developed allies, Mamre, Anna, Eshkol, other figures like that who have surrounded Abraham and allied themselves with him. And he is met here by Melchizedek, the king of Salem.

This meeting is an interesting one. It occurs at a very significant point within the story that invites reflection. Abraham has been playing out the history of the future history of his nation.

He's gone through the story of the Exodus. He's gone through the story of spying out the land, the conquest of the land. And now he meets this mysterious figure from Salem.

And he treats this figure in a remarkable way. This figure blesses him, but he gives him a tithe of everything he possesses. And it would seem that this Melchizedek character is of more significance than he might originally appear to be.

The fact that he appears at this juncture suggests that there's something more to him. If he is playing out the destiny of Israel, what or who does Melchizedek represent? That site will later be the site of Jerusalem. He's met by the king of righteousness, as Melchizedek's name suggests.

So it's a very significant meeting. At the site of Jerusalem, meeting with this mysterious character, it might seem to be an anticipation of a sort of Davidic kingdom. But a Davidic kingship that also has priestly authority.

And so it's not surprising that the book of Hebrews and other parts of later scripture would reflect upon this event. And see within this event something that maybe augurs something greater in the future. Some anticipation of what some figure might arise later on in Israel's history.

And it's not surprising then that Christ is presented as the great Melchizedek. The one who after his victory over the principalities of powers comes as the Davidic king from the New Jerusalem to his people with gifts of bread and wine. Setting a table for them in the presence of their enemies, defeated enemies, feeding them at his feast.

We are the true sons of Abraham. We're fed by the great Melchizedek. And so this pattern as it plays out anticipates later history and the destiny of the people of God.

The king of Sodom says something quite fateful at this point. He says, Abraham, you can keep the goods but I want to keep the people for myself. And what does that mean? It means that the king of Sodom wants to keep Lot.

He wants Lot and his family. And so all the people are returned to the king of Sodom. Abraham might have hoped that he would have Lot restored to him.

But that is not to happen. He's been liberated from captivity to King Chedulema. But he's now back within the land and has a part to play within the society of Sodom.

He's pitched his tent near Sodom in the past but later on we'll see him enter within their gates being one of their rulers. He's one of the people who has influence within that society now. And so this story is one that is a pivotal point.

A point where the destiny of Lot and Abraham separates more decisively. And whereas in the previous chapter it might have been just for a period of time, now it seems more definitive. One question.

As we're reading the story of Abraham it's important to keep in mind that there are a lot of moving pieces. There's Abraham's relationship with the land. There's Abraham's relationship with the people of the land.

There's Abraham's relationship with his wife Sarai. There's Abraham's relationship with

the promises of God. At this point it would be good to step back and reflect upon how all these different aspects of the story stand at this particular juncture.

To take stock of how things stand before the significant events of the chapter that follows. John chapter 7 verses 1 to 24. But not even his brothers believed in him.

After saying this he remained in Galilee. And there was much muttering about him among the people. About the middle of the feast Jesus went up into the temple and began teaching.

The Jews therefore marveled saying, So Jesus answered them, If anyone's will is to do God's will, he will know whether the teaching is from God or whether I am speaking on my own authority. The one who speaks on his own authority seeks his own glory, but the one who seeks the glory of him who sent him is true, and in him there is no falsehood. Has not Moses given you the law? Yet none of you keeps the law.

Why do you seek to kill me? The crowd answered, You have a demon. Who is seeking to kill you? Jesus answered them, I did one work, and you all marvel at it. Moses gave you circumcision, not that it is from Moses, but from the fathers, and you circumcise a man on the Sabbath.

If on the Sabbath a man receives circumcision, so that the law of Moses may not be broken, are you angry with me because on the Sabbath I made a man's whole body well? Do not judge by appearances, but judge with right judgment. The context of the events of John chapter 7 is provided by the feast of tabernacles or booths. We'll see later on in some of the events and some of Jesus' statements that this background is important for understanding what he's doing.

At this point Jesus is generally operating in the context of Galilee, where he is facing opposition and rejection as we see in this and the previous chapter. But in Judea the Jews are trying to kill him. Again, it's worth remembering that the Jews are the Judeans and the Judean leaders in particular.

And so the contrast between the Galileans and the Judeans plays out in this chapter and elsewhere. He's facing challenge within his own family as well. Jesus' mission is surrounded by family and relatives.

His mother, characters like James and John, who seem to be his cousins. As we compare some of the details between the Gospels this would seem to be the case. James, the son of Alphaeus, is quite likely Jesus' cousin.

John the Baptist is a relative. The brothers of Jesus also become important in the early church. So this was a mission where he's surrounded by family members and opposition from family members and disbelief by family members.

And this provides part of the precipitating events for this chapter. They're not necessarily directly opposed to him but they don't believe in him or understand the nature of his mission or the father's timing. The attempt to make him a king in the previous chapter is a typical failure to perceive the true nature of Jesus' calling.

John's Gospel has a number of episodes that present the greater themes of Christ's ministry in embryo. And this is one of them. There's a surface message, a story of Jesus going down to the feast and speaking at the feast.

But then there's a deeper significance. There's broader themes of openness and secrecy playing in this chapter. Knowledge and lack of knowledge.

Origins and failure to perceive origins. Notice how many of Jesus' statements in the Gospel, and particularly perhaps in this chapter, are cryptic. Requiring later revelation or events for their understanding.

In the Gospel of John, as in the other Gospels, there is a theme of a messianic secret. Jesus hides his identity and reveals it only cryptically. The true character of his calling and his kingship will be revealed in time.

But it will occur through the cross and the resurrection. And prior to those points Jesus avoids a false revelation which would suggest that he is just associated with mere human earthly power. There are parallels perhaps to be observed with John chapter 2. Family members requesting signs.

Jesus saying that his hour hasn't yet come. Jesus going on to perform the requested things secretly rather than more openly as was originally requested. There are of course contrasts.

Jesus' mother is never described as failing to believe in him as his brothers are at this point. The fact that Jesus says that he is not going up to the feast, or not yet going up to the feast in verse 8 according to some translations, has provoked a number of questions. This seems to be, if not an explicit lie, an attempt to mislead.

Jesus invites misconstrual of his meaning and purpose throughout the Gospel. And perhaps it's worth thinking about the way that the messianic secret works in terms of themes of deception. Jesus does not give his full identity out.

Earlier on in the Gospel in chapter 2 Jesus does not fully commit himself to people because he knows what's in man. And at this sort of point Jesus is engaged in a veiling of his identity, a veiling of his intentions, a veiling of his destination. Why does Jesus do this? How can we justify these actions? Well in part I think it is worth recognising that there are people trying to control Jesus' mission, trying to control his vocation.

People who are trying to make him king by force for instance. And his brothers have

their own purpose and intention. They wish for Jesus to reveal himself openly and seek a particular type of power.

And his commitment to his father's mission involves a refusal to commit himself to them, a refusal to give himself into their hands and to their purposes. And so Jesus' deception or misleading at this point is legitimate. It's an attempt to prevent people from taking charge of his vocation, from stealing his vocation from the father.

He owes his father his loyalty, not his human brothers. Jesus' identity at this point is clearly a matter of significant debate among the people and among the Jewish leaders. We can see all these divisions arising among the Jews on account of Jesus' identity.

His teaching stands out and as he speaks to the people it's clear that he has not learnt this from a human teacher. He claims he has learnt it from his father, the father, not from other teachers or from any earthly father such as Joseph. He ends by referring to the healing of the man on the Sabbath in chapter 5. This is the work that they really seem to be opposing him for the last time he was in Jerusalem.

And he talks about the way in which a small part of the body can be removed in circumcision. And that can take precedence over the refusal to work on the Sabbath. And yet he heals a man's whole body and yet they oppose him for it.

When Christ talks about the Sabbath here and in the other Gospels, Christ challenges the teaching of the Jews. And often it's presented as if Jesus is identifying exceptions to the rule of the Sabbath. But Jesus seems to be going further than that.

Jesus is presenting the true intent of the Sabbath. That the Sabbath is made for man and to make a man whole on the Sabbath is not merely a valid or legitimate exception to the law of the Sabbath. It's a fulfillment of it.

This is the intent that God had that man would be restored and made whole by the Sabbath. And so healing on the Sabbath is not just a valid exception but a true fulfillment of what God's Sabbath means. What God's coming kingdom means.

The restoration of humanity. The establishment of humanity in God's grace. One question.

Where do you see John's greater themes of legal witness and authority surfacing in this passage?