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The Family of Abraham: Part 3—Exodus from Egypt and the Departure of Lot

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In the third part of my study of the story of Abraham and his family, I discuss Abram's sojourn in the land of Egypt, his journeys in Canaan, and his separation from Lot.

I have discussed some of the themes raised in this video in my book *Echoes of Exodus*: <https://amzn.to/2EyoxGA>

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Transcript

Welcome back. Today is the third of my series on The Family of Abraham. I'm exploring the story of Abraham and his family from chapters 11 to 50 of the Book of Genesis, seeing the way that this family has a tightly interwoven history and how we can learn about the different characters and the significance of the events by tracing some of the parallels and the ways in which they're juxtaposed against each other.

Now, we're going to be looking at chapters 12 and 13 today, which concern Abraham's journey into the land of Canaan for the first time, his time in Egypt, and then his return to the land and separation from Lot. If you look at these two chapters, you'll notice, if

you're paying close attention, that they're structured in many respects as a grand chiasm. So, a chiasm, as I've described on other occasions before, is a bookend structure, where you have bookends coming in to a central section, and it enables you to have a unified narrative that is connected in its various parts.

So, if you look through this passage, you'll see promises and appearances of God to Abraham at the very beginning and at the end. We have going with Lot at the next stage, and then departing, separating from Lot after that. Then you have the description of the Canaanites being in the land, and then in, that's 12 verse 6, and then in 13 verse 7, the Canaanites and the Perizzites then dwelt in the land.

That would seem to be repetitive. It doesn't seem to be necessary. We already know the Canaanites and Perizzites dwell in the land, but the fact it's repeated helps us to see that there is a chiastic structure, that there is this bookend structure being worked out.

Then he goes to Bethel and to Ai, and pitches his tent with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east, and builds an altar there. And then, in the second part of the story, in verses 3 and 4, he returns to that same place. Then we have him journeying to the south at the very, it's verse 9 of chapter 12, and then journeying to the south in verse 1 of chapter 13.

Then we have him going to Egypt, departing from Egypt. We have him as he comes towards Egypt saying that Sarah is a beautiful woman, the Egyptians will see her, say it's his wife, take her, and that if she says that she is his sister, he'll be blessed for her sake. And that's exactly what we see in the next passage.

So this whole passage is a unified text, and it parallels throughout its different parts. There are a number of important things that happen within the span of this passage, and to some extent the larger chiastic structure can alert us to that, but there's more going on here than the chiastic structure would show. It begins with a promise that's made to Abraham and a calling that's given to him.

Get out of your country, from your kindred and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make you a great nation. I will bless you and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing.

I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you. And in you, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. So as we saw last time, this plays off the background of the story of Babel, where the nations, the families of the earth were scattered and they were judged, they were cursed on the basis of their sin.

Whereas here, God is forming a nation through a blessing to be a blessing, to address the problem caused by Babel. He goes out with Lot. Again, as I mentioned last time, Lot at this point would seem to be Abraham's natural heir.

He's the one who is the son of his brother Haran, who has died, and Abraham has taken him under his wing. And Abraham and Lot have a sort of father-son relationship at this point, we might think, but that develops later on. Then he arrives at Shechem.

Shechem is an important point in the story of Abraham. Abraham's just been promised here that his family will be made great. There's nothing said about land yet at this point, just that his family and his name would be made great.

And he arrives at the point of Shechem and builds an altar there. But there is a significance to the site of Shechem. Shechem is the site where the family is divided on a number of occasions.

Shechem is the site where Dinah is seduced and raped by Shechem, and Hamor, and Jacob and others are involved, and this rivalry is established, and this breach within the family, as Simeon and Levi seek to avenge their sister, angry at their father's failure to take action. And there's a sense that they, as the brothers of Dinah, the other sons of Leah and their sister, another daughter of Leah, is someone who's been mistreated badly and their father has not acted. So there's a breach within the family, and Simeon and Levi suffer as a result of this.

They're judged to some extent in the later blessing account in chapter 49. There is also a breach in the family at Shechem as Joseph is sold into slavery by Judah and the brethren. At Shechem, there's another breach in the family.

And at Shechem, Rehoboam and the people are divided, and the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom go their different ways. So the breach is in the family of Abraham at Shechem. Present this site as having some significance, particularly as it occurs immediately after a promise that God would make Abraham's name great and that his family would be a great nation.

This is the site of the breaches within the nation, and yet God has promised immediately beforehand that the family will be made great. Passing through that point then is significant. Likewise, after the promise that to his descendants God would give that land, which occurs at Shechem, he moves on from there and goes to Ai and Bethel.

Now Ai is a significant place as well. It's where, as they enter into the land, Achan sins by taking devoted items, and the people lose the battle. They fail to enter into the land.

It's that great defeat. They've immediately won the battle of Jericho as they cross over the Jordan, but yet they lose at Ai. So it's that failure to enter into the land.

And then there's another altar built at that site. So I think there's something going on here, that these sites are connected with the promises. Shechem with the divisions within the family, Ai with the failure or the entering into the land.

So these two promises and these two sites seem to be connected together. This isn't original to me. This came from Rabbi David Foreman, who's very helpful on this passage.

Now they go then down to Egypt. There's a famine in the land, and as a result of the famine, they go down to Egypt to sojourn there. This is an interesting movement, particularly when you read this passage and you notice just how many similarities there are between this and the story later on of the Exodus.

Israel goes into Egypt as a result of famine. They need bread. And so they go down into Egypt.

They're taken into Egypt. They multiply there. And then there's a threat to the men and the women, presumably, are presumed to be taken as wives as the men are removed out of the way.

So the baby boys are killed by Pharaoh, and he wants the women, presumably. Whereas what we see in this passage is something similar. There is a threat to Abraham's life.

Now many people, particularly in evangelical context, have this notion of Abraham as really being sinful here, just selling Sarai off and allowing her to suffer for his own private safety, individual well-being. That's not what's going on here, I don't think. Rather, Abraham's playing for time.

He recognises that he's going into a place where it's quite violent. He's not going to be safe. And he's not just an individual.

As I noted last time, Abraham is probably surrounded with a sheikdom of at least 2,000 at this point. There is a significant number of people depending upon him for safety. And if he is removed out of the way, they will be killed.

And so Sarai's beauty is a threat, because if she's taken in, and if he's seen as her husband, he is an obstacle to be removed by the people. And the Egyptians will kill him, take her, and destroy the people of his sheikdom. Now, to avoid that, he presents himself as her brother.

And that presentation of himself as her brother is a significant relationship, because the brother is the one who would often arrange the affairs of the marriage. He would talk with the other parties and work out the arrangements with the prospective suitors. So it would give him time to play with, and it would also give him leverage.

That was significant. He could play for time in this particular role, and it would enable him to protect both Sarai and his people. Now, of course, this plan fails, but it's important to recognise what's going through Abraham's mind here is not just selfish private interest.

One way or another, Sarai is in danger. But if he presents himself as her brother, he can defend her a lot better, actually, than if he presents himself as her husband. If he's her husband, he's the obstacle to be removed.

If he's her brother, he's someone to be courted, because he's going to be arranging affairs, and so they'd want to get on good terms with him. So he'd be treated well for her sake. And that's exactly what we see.

He predicts that he will be treated well for her sake, but what he does not predict is the fact that Pharaoh is the takes direct interest in Sarai. It's not just one of the other Egyptians. And so Pharaoh just takes Sarai into his house and then begins the courting process, as it were.

That's the way the king would do it. And this is a concern, obviously. This was not something that Abraham foresaw.

It was not something that he had prepared for. God intervenes at this point. God intervenes by bringing plagues upon Pharaoh and his household.

And Pharaoh finds out that Sarai is indeed Abraham's wife. And at that point, he returns her, and Abraham leaves with many gifts. Now, what's going on here? What we are seeing, among other things, is the story of the Exodus playing out.

In a nutshell, the whole story of the Exodus is playing out. There's the threat to the men, there's a threat to the woman, different threats. And then there's Pharaoh, Pharaoh being judged by plagues until he lets the people go, lets the bride go.

And then they go into, they leave the land with many gifts, go into the promised land, wander throughout the land, and then win a battle in the land. So there's a general playing out of the destiny of Israel here. Just as we saw in the sites of Shechem and Ai, these are significant sites in the story of Israel.

Likewise, this pattern of story is one that's very significant. It's the core narrative of Israel, the story of the Exodus. And here it's being played out in a very basic form, so that we can recognise that when the people do come out of Egypt later on in the book of Exodus, they are walking in the footsteps of their father Abraham.

So Abraham is the father of the people. He anticipates the destiny of the people. He lives out in advance what will later happen to them.

And so there's a participation in the events that occurred to the fathers. This is something that we see in Scripture more generally. So for instance, when we read about the Exodus in the New Testament, it says that they were all baptised into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.

They all ate the spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink. And all these things happened to them as examples for us, upon whom the end of the ages have come. Now, what is the point of that? The point of that is to show that there are symmetries across history, that these symmetries help us to understand our particular place in history.

And that when we enter into these patterns of events, we are entering into a union with those people who have gone before us. So they are our forefathers. They are the ones who have trod this path before us.

And we can learn from their example. We can recognise that they have gone before us, that we are being united with them in this. Now, there are ways in which we can be concerned about this particular story.

Is it a positive thing that he goes into Egypt? Well, clearly it's not good that Sarai is taken. It's clearly not good that it plays out in quite the way that it does. God protects and delivers Sarai and Abraham, but it's a close shave.

And this situation is, we could see as an example of God anticipating, as will later be mentioned more explicitly, the time of Israel's sojourn in Egypt and their struggle there. But there is also this sense of threat. And what could Abraham have done to avoid that? Was he wrong to leave the Promised Land in the first place? I'm not sure I'd say that, but yet there is a sense that there is a danger here that he exposed himself to.

And Sarai too. He could maybe not avoid that, but it is something to reflect upon. What happens next? Well, he returns to the land and he returns to the places that he's been to before.

And at this point, there is a division. We've seen to this point, there are two characters to have a relationship to Abraham that is unclear. Is Sarai going to be put in the slot of wife or is she going to be put in the slot of sister? And she could be both.

Is Lot going to be put in the category of son or is he going to be put in the category of brother? At the beginning of this narrative, when he leaves to go to Canaan with Lot, it would seem that Lot is in the category of son. He's the brother's son and Abraham has taken concern to uphold his brother's name. And yet Lot at the end divides.

They both have great wealth. They both have great flocks and they're competing with each other. They have to separate.

So they go their own different ways. And this leads to separation and Lot goes towards the land of Sodom, which is seen as incredibly wicked. And this movement in the direction of Sodom is in many ways a departure for Lot.

Lot is someone who has, there's been a division now in the family. And this division is one that means that Lot can no longer be classed straightforwardly as son. He is not the

one who is going to be the one through whom Abraham's name is going to be made great.

He's not the one who's going to be the one that establishes the nation of Abraham's. And so there is the problem that is caused by that. Where is his descendant going to come from? And we'll see that later on.

But at this point we should recognise, just register the existence of this particular crisis. As Lot goes, something has changed. Now Lot and Abraham are in many respects seen together as a sort of diptych.

As we look through the story of Genesis, what we'll notice if we look carefully is a series of characters who are juxtaposed with each other. Brothers, sisters, other characters who are related to each other in ways that help us to recognise salient features of each. It's not good-bad straightforwardly.

It can be characters that are both flawed but are related to each other in ways that are significant in other respects. So some examples of this, some which would be good-bad. Cain and Abel.

We have characters like Ishmael and Isaac. Esau and Jacob. Sarah and Hagar.

We have Rachel and Leah. Judah and Joseph. These sorts of characters are played out throughout the book of Genesis.

And another example of this is Abraham and Lot. So Abraham and Lot, who might have been in a father-son relationship initially, are now cast more as brother-brother. And later on we'll see that Lot is explicitly referred to as brother.

And that relationship is one that enables us to hold Lot and Abraham over against each other and their destinies as played out over against each other. So what happens to Lot and what happens to Abraham helps us to recognise something about each character, who they are and what is significant about them. At the very end of this passage, God promises the land to Abraham.

And the Lord said to Abraham after Lot had separated from him, Lift your eyes now and look from the place where you are, northward, southward, eastward and westward. For all the land which you see I give to you and your descendants forever. And I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth, so that if a man could number the dust of the earth, then your descendants also could be numbered.

Arise, walk in the land through its length and its width, for I give it to you. Then Abraham moved his tent and went and dwelt by the terabinth trees of Mamre, which are in Hebron, and built an altar there to the Lord. Now that parallels with what we see at the very beginning of chapter 12, which is the promise that God will make Abraham's name

great and that he will be a blessing and he will overcome the curse in many ways of Babel.

What we see is as the story develops, the promises become ramped up in different ways. So the story that begins is about his name, it's about his family, it's about making him a nation. And now here we see a promise to give that nation a place, that this particular place will be the place where they will be made great and they will inherit that particular land.

Other things to notice about this, what did we see in chapter 11? An attempt to make the name great, to maintain a legacy, to avoid death. What happened? They built a tower. And what we see in the story of Abraham, as he gets these individual promises, what does he do? He builds an altar.

And an altar is something that lasts for a long time, but the purpose of an altar is not to make the person who built the altar's name great, but to make God's name great. And so there's something about the character of Abraham that is a fitting response to the story of the builders of the Tower of Babel. They were trying to make their own name great by building this great tower.

Abraham is going throughout this land and he's building this altar, these altars in different places. And at significant sites, significant sites that anticipate the later story of Israel, the events that will define its identity, the scars upon the life, the body of Israel, and those events that help to determine its destiny. And his involvement at those particular sites is a significant anticipation of what's about to come, as is the event of the exodus that occurs at the very heart of the story.

Abraham and Sarai go through the story of the exodus in advance, ahead of their people. What we see here as well is this greater anticipation of events that's going to happen later on in this story. So Sodom is already marked out as an evil place.

Sodom will later be destroyed, but this is something that already highlights something that's about to come. This is something that prepares us for that thing that's coming down the road. Now when we've seen these two characters, Lot and Sarai, who may have been brother and sister themselves, and Sarai described a sister and Lot described initially presented as son and later on falling into the role of brother, what we can see is there's a movement in the shape that this promise is taking.

Initially, it seems as if the promise will be one that is fulfilled through Lot and then Lot goes his own way. Lot departs and then Sarai is not clearly the one that this is going to be fulfilled through. Even at a later point in chapter 15, we'll see that Abraham thinks that Eleazar of Damascus might be the one, the servant, the home-born servant might be the one who's going to be the fulfillment of the promises of God to him.

So there is a series of promises that need to play out before this point where it becomes clear that Sarai is the one through whom Abraham and his name will be made great. This is important to register at this point. Another thing that's significant is seeing the way in which more generally Abraham is responding to these events.

First of all, when he's given each of these promises, he builds altars. So he's making God's name great within the land and then he's also holding things with an open hand. He's left his father's house.

It's a very significant thing to do. It's something that is similar language to leaving father and mother for marriage. There's a break, there's a breach in history, something new has started.

There's a departure and a re-establishment. But then there's a wandering throughout the land. He doesn't take possession of the land straightforwardly.

He doesn't put down his own roots. What he does is he builds altars. And so those, as it were, are the roots.

He lives in a tent. Now those altars can survive many hundreds of years, even thousands of years. But this is an initial event, an initial building within the land.

But that initial building is not building a tower and a city for himself to defend his own name and his own reputation, but it's an attempt to uphold the name of God. And then there's also this holding of things with an open hand that he allows a lot to depart from him. He does not pursue lot.

He does not seek to maintain lot within his household. And that, again, is a willingness to follow God, to be prepared to make his, to have his name be made great on God's terms, not his own. This is all significant background for understanding the character Abraham.

And the stories that plays out will help us to flesh out the picture of Abraham more generally. Abraham in the story of the Exodus is not the Exodus type narrative here, is not the bad guy that many people have seen him to be. He's someone who makes a fatal miscalculation, not a fatal miscalculation, but a near fatal miscalculation.

He's someone who's trying to his people. He's trying to protect Sarai. And yet there's something about it that shows the danger that he is exposed to that he has also exposed Sarai to.

And there's something about that event where God has to intervene to deliver that shows that there is, there are dangerous clouds on the horizon. We'll get back to some of these themes in chapter 14 in tomorrow or some other day when I return to these subjects. Thank you very much for listening.

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