

# OpenTheo

## **The Family of Abraham: Part 2—A Dead Brother and a Barren Wife**

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This is the second part of my series of videos on the family of Abraham. Within it, I discuss the background to the call of Abram in the story of the Flood, Babel, and the death of Haran.

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### **Transcript**

Welcome back. Yesterday, I began a new series discussing the life of Abraham's family, something that covers the vast majority of the book of Genesis. I want us to explore the way in which the life, the events, and the characters of this family are bound up together within one whole tapestry.

That what we're reading is like a vast novel with all the different characters being very closely connected to each other and a unified series of events playing out. This will take a while to put together the pieces to help you to see how all these things fit in, but hopefully by the end of this time, we'll have a clear sense of just how tightly integrated the story of Abraham and his family is. Today, I want to begin with the story of Terah.

Terah is Abraham's father and Terah is from Ur of the Chaldees. And he leaves Ur of the Chaldees originally and he goes and ends his life in Haran. Now, Terah is the father of three sons, the father of Haran, Nahor, and Abraham.

And Abraham, although he's mentioned first in the list of Terah's sons, he doesn't appear to be the oldest. Later on, we'll see in scripture in Acts 7, Stephen talks about the fact that it was when his father died, after his father died, that Abraham left Haran and went to the Promised Land. Now, since we know that Abraham left at the age of 75 and his father died at 205 years and that Terah lived 70 years before he begot Abraham, and Haran, we know that there's something mixed up in this ordering.

Not that it's mistaken, but it's ordered differently from the order of the births. So it's quite probable that Haran was the oldest of the brothers. So we have Haran, the oldest, and then maybe Abraham and followed by Nahor, or followed by Nahor and then Abraham.

Maybe Abraham's the youngest. But what we see within this passage is that there was already a journey that had been undertaken, that Terah had already left Ur of the Chaldees before Abraham goes and goes further into the Promised Land. This text also occurs at the end of chapter 11, and chapter 11 begins in a significant place.

It begins with the story of Nimrod and the descendants of Shem and others heading to the plains of Shinar and founding a city and a tower there, the Tower of Babel. And so this is the foundation of Babylon. These are significant places.

And as you read through the book of Genesis, you'll see again and again, there are significant places introduced to us. So here we have Babel or Babylon that's introduced to us. Early on in chapter 10, we have a vast cast of nations introduced to us, 70 different nations.

And we'll see that number is significant. 70 represents the nations. And so we'll have 70 elders of Israel.

We'll have 70 symbolising all the peoples of the world. And there are significant relationships within these nations as well. So for instance, Ham is the father of Canaan and Canaan is judged as a result of Ham's sin in Genesis chapter 9. And we'll get onto that in a moment.

We also see Ham as the father of Mizraim. And Mizraim is the father of the peoples of Egypt, but also the peoples of the Philistines. When we look through the rest of scripture, we'll see the Philistines and the Egyptians are often held alongside each other.

They're related peoples. And so what happens to Israel in relationship to the Philistines is symbolically related to their connection with Egypt. So significant characters appearing on the scene already.

The plot is beginning to take shape. We're beginning to see some of the pieces being placed upon the board, some of the setting being established. And into this setting, we have this event of the Tower of Babel.

The design of the builders of the Tower of Babel was to build a city and a tower. Not just a tower, but a city, a gathering together of all peoples in a collected place so that they wouldn't be scattered over the face of the earth. And this great tower that reached up to heaven as a sign of their might, as a sign also of their legacy.

This is one of the dangers that we have as human beings. We fear death. Death, individual, but also civilizational.

We fear that we'll be scattered, that we'll be lost, that our peoples will die. And so we want to build a monument, make a name for ourselves, leave something behind. And the concern of the builders of the Tower of Babel is probably primarily this.

They want to create a name for themselves and they do not want to be scattered across the face of the earth. But yet, God intervenes. God deliberates with the heavenly council, let us go down and confuse their languages.

Now, we don't have to think about this as an instant miracle of confusing languages. Rather, it can be a slow process. Building a tower in a city can take hundreds of years even.

And that can be a process. The confusion of the languages could take place over many decades. And gradually, different people groups start to fracture and they no longer form a unified body of peoples.

This is something that I think might be what's taking place. But God intervenes. And there's a similar intervention here to the way that God intervenes at the end of the story of the fall, where God removes Adam and Eve from the garden so that they will not take from the tree of life and live forever.

At that point, it says that the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil. In both cases, we have human beings pretending to a status that is equivalent to that of the divine council, which includes God and also the angelic beings, the rulers of the guardians of the world. And in this situation, God intervenes and judges because mankind has been unfaithful.

Mankind wants to save themselves from death, from individual death, from civilizational death. And the tree of the knowledge of good and evil is a sign of power and might and attaining to the status of the gods. But then the tree of life is something that preserves you from death.

And in some ways, what they were looking for in Babel was both of these things. They

wanted the status of the gods, of great rulers of the world, and they wanted life. They did not want to be scattered.

And so they wanted to maintain this civilizational life and be rooted in this one particular point and have no obstacle that could prevent them from doing so. Now, in both cases, God realizes that if this were to go ahead, there would be a real problem. And so if God says, indeed, the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do.

Now, nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. Now, is God just worried that man's going to accumulate so much power that God is going to fail and they're going to become stronger than God? No, that's not what's taking place. Rather, there is a sense in which sin and man's might will become so great and so consolidated and so unthreatened that it will just go.

It will not be arrested by any force other than God himself. God has to intervene. In the same way, if man were to eat of the tree of life in the state of rebellion, there would be nothing to prevent man from just that whole rebellion from taking an even more condensed form.

And so death is a means by which that sin is prevented from moving as freely as it should, as it would do otherwise. This is also one of the ways in which God exercises grace after the fall. And so we can think about the events that occur after the fall, the judgments upon the different characters as condemnations and curses.

But there's also something else. It's also a prevention of the movement of sin. It's a sort of fire break that God is establishing.

So he creates enmity between the adversary, the serpent and the woman, and so that the woman will not just follow the serpent wherever the serpent leads. Likewise, there's tension created between the man and the woman so that the man will not, as he did at the fall, just meekly follow after the woman in whatever she suggests. On the other hand, man has friction created between him and the world in his labour.

So when man exercises his labour on the world, the earth will not yield to him as readily as it once did. It will resist him. It will bring forth thorns and thistles.

And so in all of these respects, there are firewalls being established. There's friction being established. God is frustrating relationships, creating enmity and tension, but in the form of grace, among other things, so that sin does not just wipe out everything.

It does not run riot over everything else, but rather it can be held in check. And in the same way here, God prevents this one-world civilization from being developed so that sin cannot be so strongly consolidated. What happens instead are the peoples are scattered throughout the different parts of the world.

And this is a good thing. This was always God's intent that the people should be separated. They should fill the earth and subdue it.

That was the calling to humankind, not to gather together in one place, consolidate their power and seek to avoid civilizational death by opposing anything that might fracture them. So this is a significant background to the story of Abraham. You have a people who have gathered together to dwell in a particular place, to make a name for themselves, and to protect themselves from death.

It's a response to the threat of death. It's a response to the threat of separation. And it's a quest for power, for wisdom, and for life, for a legacy.

And this is something that is judged by God. God forms all these different nations that are as a result of a great judgment. So they fill, cover the whole face of all the earth.

Now, this might remind us of things that have come before. One of the things that might remind us of is the events of the flood. That the earth is covered with the water.

The whole face of the earth, there is this scattering of humankind, this judgment upon humankind. And in a similar way here, what you have is a cutting off of this attempt to create this consolidated civilization against God's power. And this consolidation of civilizational life and dominion, rather they have to be separated out.

And so there's a floodlight judgment. And in the wake of this, something else happens. And so the calling of terror is, or the calling of Abraham, the son of terror, is something that needs to be read against the background of what has come before.

What has come before just within that same chapter in our English Bibles. And even within the Hebrew text, the beginning and the end of that chapter is very closely related, even if there is not a chapter division within the text itself in the original. What we see is a similar crisis.

There is a crisis about death and legacy that's playing out here. A crisis of making a name for oneself. What does that mean? How is that to be achieved? As we look through this story, what we'll see is that the characters are playing out in miniature some of these themes.

It will help us to understand what comes next. So what do we see at the beginning of the story of Abraham? What we see is an initial journey made by terror out of the Caldeans and the death of terror's son, Haran. And this casts a shadow over the whole beginning of that story.

There is this beginning of the story in the death of the son and the son, probably the firstborn son, dies before his father, terror, in his native land in Ur of the Caldeans. And this begins a lot of the plot. At that point, Nahor and Abraham take wives.

Nahor takes Milca, the daughter of Haran, and Abraham takes Sarai. Now, the question is, who is Sarai? And there have been thoughtful suggestions that have occurred throughout generations now. It goes back a long way, these readings do, that Sarai was Ishka, the other daughter of Haran.

So what's taking place here? What we see are three sons of terror. We see a judgment upon the world, a scattering abroad, the civilizational death brought upon the builders of the Tower of Babel. And we see the whole face of the world being covered with these peoples.

There's a flood-like event and there's a curse, a judgment. And now there is a new people formed. There is a father with three sons.

And we can remember that with Noah and Shem, Ham and Japheth, his three sons. And within that story, one of those sons is judged for his failure to honour his father. Noah, the father, is drunk after drinking from the wine of his vineyard and he becomes naked in his tent.

And Ham goes in and calls his brothers to see their father naked as an act of assault upon his authority and also to reveal his father's nakedness. There's a lot of charred language here, which is elsewhere associated with sexual violation. Now, I don't believe that there is sexual violation in view in this text, but the allusions need to be borne in mind.

There is something, a deep assault to the father taking place here and the authority of Noah as a figure. And he calls his brothers in to ridicule his father, presumably. But the brothers bring in the cloak or the robe of Noah and place it upon him, bearing it upon their shoulders and walking back and placing it upon him to protect the honour of their father and also to represent the kingly rule of their father.

So there's something very important taking place there. You have three brothers, one brother who's wicked, who seeks to overturn his father's authority and two other brothers that intervene. And then the son of that brother, the youngest brother Ham, is judged.

His son Canaan is going to be a servant of servants and there's blessing upon Shem and Japheth and Japheth and Shem will be together, but there will be a judgment upon Ham and his son Canaan. What happens then in the story of Abram is again a story of three sons. The first son dies, Haran, dies in the land of Uruqaldiz and he has children.

He has children Lot, Ishqa and Milqa and there is an action on behalf of his brothers to preserve his line. And so Nahor marries Milqa and quite possibly Abram marries Ishqa and she's called Sarai. And that starts the story.

Now why might that be significant? It might be significant because here we see some

people who are concerned with maintaining the name and the honour of someone else. Not their own name but the name of their brother. I've found Rabbi David Former very helpful on this, his discussions, and I highly recommend that you look into what he has said on this passage.

But there are some very deep connections between this and the story of Noah that precedes it. Three brothers, a father and intervening to, in this case, save the brother who has died, save the interests of the brother. Now they end up in Haran.

Haran is not the same word as I've discussed on another occasion as the name of the brother Haran but they're very close, they're extremely close and the fact that they occur in this same place in such close juxtaposition with each other and thematically related just seems odd if there's no connection with them. And a number of writers have observed that in all likelihood there is a thematic or some other connection between these names. What might that connection be? I think the connection would be that Haran and the place Haran, these are both places, these are both that the name of the place is associated with maintaining the name of the brother who has died.

That there is a settling in this land of Haran, the city of Haran, and Terah dies there, that he preserves the name of his son who has died and we see this also within the story of Cain that cities are named for sons and for other people whose names want to be preserved. And so part of the point is if you create all these great cities you can name them and you can preserve a name for yourself. This is part of your legacy, it's part of how you survive civilizational death.

But yet Abraham is called away from Haran and he's called to go to the land of Canaan. Now Canaan we've already encountered before. Canaan was the son who was judged, the son of Ham who was judged for his father's sin.

And here we see these themes start to emerge again. So there's a deep backdrop for this story. There are events already in action, there's been a judgment upon the world, a floodlight judgment with the scattering of all the peoples, the whole face of the world covered.

And now all the peoples are scattered by a curse, what is God going to do? Is God going to form a new humanity? And he does. He forms the new humanity with the three sons of the father Terah and they're all bound up together in different ways. We'll see as we go through the story that it's not that it just concentrates on Abraham and the other characters fall away.

No, we'll see Nahor and we'll see Haran and his descendants come into the picture again. These are important characters and they are part of Abraham's story too. This is a story of the sons of Terah and what happens to them.

Now clearly it focuses upon Abraham in particular but there is a lot more going on that involves these other characters. Now as he leaves Ur of the Chaldees and as he leaves Haran, Abraham takes with him his nephew Lot. Now Lot is the son of Haran.

What is going on there? God has promised, God promises that he would get out of his country from his kindred, from his father's house. He'll be made a great nation, God will bless him, he will make his name great and bless those who bless him, curse those who curse him and in him all the nations of the world will be blessed, all the families of the earth. First of all we need to see this against the background of what happened at the events of Babel.

At Babel the nations were formed by a curse, by a judgment and here the nations are all going to be blessed through this one particular nation that's formed through the bind call. So this is the answer to Babel. There's a new humanity being formed and this new humanity will bring with it a new creation and it will restore all these damaged and these nations that have been judged as a result of the fall at Babel.

So it's a response to that crisis. God is going to form a new people and he's going to train this people, form this people in order that they will be a light to all these other peoples. All the gentiles will be blessed through this person and through his family and as you read through the story this is part of what you're learning.

How this people are formed to be a blessing to all the other nations. It's not just Abraham, it's Abraham and his family. The other thing to notice is that at the beginning of the story of Genesis 11 the people come to Shinar, this plain, and they settle there, they dwell there.

That language isn't that common in scripture but it's something that we find at the end of chapter 11 as well where they come to Haran and they dwell there and that's ominous language. It's the sort of language that we find at the beginning of the book of Ruth where we have a limeleck and Naomi, they go to Moab and they settle there, they dwell there. It's a sense of towering somewhere that maybe you shouldn't be towering.

You need to be moving on but yet you're settling and dwelling in a place where you shouldn't be and you're engaging in something that is ultimately going to fail and so they dwell in Haran just as they're dwelled earlier in Babel. What else is happening here? At Babel you have a Hamite civilization led by Nimrod and we have the sons of Shem presumably working for this Hamite civilization. Later on we'll see that again within the story of scripture as Israel builds these great store cities and other things for the Egyptians, another Hamite civilization, Mizrahi.

And that connection helps us to understand another theme that's starting to emerge throughout this text. We'll see Egyptians coming into the story again very soon. Egyptians are a important part of this story and we'll see how they have a role to play



within the life of Israel of the family of Abram.

Why does he take Lot? Lot is the son of Haran the dead brother and if he has taken the daughter of Haran and he also takes Lot he seems to be taking in some sense responsibility for the name of the dead brother. This is a Leverite marriage type situation if he does take Sarai if Sarai is indeed Isca. If Sarai is Isca then there is a Leverite marriage type situation where as we find even in some societies to this day but certainly within the ancient world there's a broader concept here not just of the younger brother marrying the older brother's widow but the younger brother or the other brothers taking responsibility for the dead brother's whole family and taking responsibility for their name and that can involve not just the widow but also other situations.

So in the story of Judah and Tamar we'll see the father marrying the daughter or having relations with the daughter-in-law. Here we have relations between the brother of the dead brother and then his niece and so these are relations that are significant ones. Later on we'll see that Sarai is discussed as the daughter of his father but not of his mother and so his half-sister.

Now but we'll also see that that language of sisterhood does not necessarily mean biological sister. Lot is also described as his brother later on in the text even though he's his nephew and so we see here I think quite possibly a Leverite type situation. A broader situation where Abram has taken on responsibility for preserving the name of his dead brother and so he's taken his wife and he's taken he's taken as his wife the daughter of the dead brother and he's taken as it were as his adopted son and brother the son of the dead brother.

Lot and Abram go together. Now what might Abram be thinking in taking Lot and what might he be thinking in association with the promise that's made to him, the call that's given to him? Abram is surrounded with a great number of people. When we look through the story of Genesis we'll see that for instance in a few chapters time Abram has 318 fighting men.

Abram is not just this individual guy going through the wilderness with a tent and his wife and hoping that they'll have kids. No, Abram is a great sheik, has a great sheikdom around him and he has vast flocks and herds. He's someone who has a great entourage around him.

He's not just an individual person. He's surrounded by many. Now what does he think perhaps? He's trying to preserve the name of his dead brother but Lot might be the one through whom his name is going to be made great.

This is his adopted son, brother and maybe it's Lot that will be the one through whom his name will be established. We do not have here a promise of children. What we have is a promise that his name will be made great and in principle Abram could be the father of

the people and Lot could be the one through whom that is achieved.

Later on we'll see that this is not to be the case but here we see events already in motion that will provide some of the crisis points later on where routes that seemingly could have been taken start to turn out to be dead ends. Where is the promise going to be fulfilled now? So Lot might be the one through whom promises to be fulfilled. Lot might be the ancestor, the descendant of Abram in principle.

The one who's going to inherit his name in his house and establish his name more generally but yet it's not to be. And so they leave Ur of the Chaldees and then they leave Haran. They've left in a very important way the legacy of the dead brother behind and they're going to have his name made great by God himself.

So Abram has shown a commitment to the name of his dead brother, to this person who's most vulnerable. There's no way Haran can act in defense of his own honor, in defense of his own name and in defense of his own house. He's died, he's off the scene but yet he still has interest in the world and his brothers act in that point.

Just as Shem and Japheth acted to protect the honor of their father, so here we see Nahor and Abram acting to defend the name of their dead brother and they intervene and then there is a blessing that comes from that. And this is the beginning of the story. This is how the ball starts rolling and we have the crisis already being introduced.

Something that has set the scene, the death of the older brother and now the question of legacy. How is the legacy going to come? Sarai is barren and so is it going to be through Lot. Will Lot be the one who will be the promised seed? Is he the one, or there's no seed promised yet, is he going to be the one though through whom Abram's name is going to be established? Here we see the ball already rolling and the events of the curse of Babel, this judgment, this fall or flood type event being responded to by an act of blessing and call which will yield a great narrative and a great family that comes from this.

Tomorrow I want to return to this and hopefully get into the story of, maybe move on to the story of Abram and Egypt. There's a lot to be discussed about that but for today, thank you very much for listening. Lord willing I will be back tomorrow.

If you have any questions about the story of Abram or more generally please leave them in my Curious Cat account. If you'd like to support this and other videos like it please do so using my PayPal or my Patreon accounts. The links for both of those are below.

Thank you very much for listening.