Preaching from the Patriarchs
Background to the Exposition of Genesis 15
Robert P. Gordon

This article was prepared for a series in the TSF Bulletin under the title ‘Preparation for Exposition’, which was planned to give examples of ‘the Bible study which resulted in the exposition of the Word of God’, without setting out the exposition itself. Dr Gordon, Lecturer in Hebrew at the University of Glasgow, here shows that academic historical study of the patriarchal period has its contribution to make to the use of Genesis in the pulpit.

The twentieth century has witnessed the rehabilitation of Abraham as a historical person who lived in the first half of the second millennium BC. This is in large measure thanks to archaeological discoveries at such centres as Mari and Nuzi. There is no direct evidence of the existence of Abraham or the story of his life, yet customs and practices basic to the Genesis narratives have been amply illustrated from these centres. The significance of these finds for the patriarchal accounts is qualified, certainly not nullified, by the consideration that they are probably to be dated after the time of Abraham.

Abraham is introduced to us as a member of a pagan family living in Ur of the Chaldees. It is still widely held that this is the Ur in southern Iraq which was excavated about 60 years ago. Such a location would seem to be implied in Stephen’s reference to Abraham’s time in Mesopotamia ‘before he lived in Haran’ (Acts 7:2). If the identification is correct it would mean that Terah took his family from Ur of the Chaldees to Haran (in modern Turkey), yet customs and practices in southern Mesopotamia to another in the north (the names of both Terah and Laban probably reflect the family’s devotion to the moon-god). While precise dates for Abraham and the other patriarchs are not possible (estimates for Abraham vary between 2000 and 1300 BC) the whole of the period within which his story undoubtedly falls was one of considerable population movement. The great events of the international era later in the second millennium were anticipations of the movements of emergent powers such as the Hittites and Hurrians (cf. Gn. 14)—still too weak to act other than in co-operation with one another. The bent of the archaeological evidence for this period is of tribal movements down the Euphrates valley, notably by the Amorites. In moving from Ur to Haran Terah’s family was going against the trend as far as their Semitic (Amorite) brethren were concerned. Equally against the trend was Abraham’s abandoning of city life and embracing the fortunes of a semi-nomad (cf. Gn. 11:1-9).

It is the Hurrian tablets from Nuzi which provide the closest parallels to the patriarchal customs of the Agarim and are noted for their resemblance to the Hurrian culture of the time. Abraham’s period was an important element in the population of Haran and many other Mesopotamian cities. Abraham’s pretence that Sarah was his sister (which is true in a sense: see Gn. 20:12) may be understood in the light of the Hurrian veneration of sisterhood. The status of a marriage could be enhanced by the husband’s adoption of his wife as a sister. The Hurrian law recognized in form of adoption in the case of a childless couple which invited comparison with Eliezer’s position in Abraham’s house (Gn. 15:2-4). Yet another method of dealing with this problem was for a barren wife to provide her husband with a concubine, that by her he might have an heir. This is just what Sarah did when she gave Hagar to Abraham. And, as happened when Isaac was born, if an heir was born to the man’s own wife, then the concubine took precedence over any child born in concubinage. As a result, there is no compelling reason for regarding the patriarchal stories as inventions from the period of the Israelite monarchy which reflect the social customs and practices of the time. On the contrary, the affinity of the narratives is with the second rather than the first millennium. Theology and didactic abound in the Abraham cycle, but they are built on credible historical data.

Fundamental to the Abraham story is a tension between promise and fulfilment which is only partly resolved. The theme of faith in God against all the odds is a major part of the promise of the promised heir (cf. Gn. 15:1-6) and the promised land (cf. Gn. 15:7-21). The call to be God’s nomad imposed a great strain on Abraham as a man and as a believer; the generous appraisal in Romans 4:20 does not deny that he made
mistakes, but shows that God chose to overlook them as he reviewed Abraham's life of faith. Abraham does not appear to have been long in Canaan before the inadequacies of the place were impressed upon him. There was a famine in the land and he felt it necessary to go down to Egypt to keep alive. Genesis 12:10 shows that Abraham did not need to keep alive, for God had called him was no Garden of Eden. Going down to Egypt was a necessary and wise step (cf. Mt. 2:13-21). Traffic of this sort between Palestine and Egypt was common enough in the Egyptian era. It was part of Abraham's instinct for self-preservation, and the measures to which it drove him, must be questioned. He evidently failed to derive strength from the consequences of his promise could not be fulfilled in a dead Abraham.

For Lot the uncertainties of the nomadic way of life became too much. It was time for him to part company with his uncle. Abraham's encouraging Lot to go to whichever part of the land appeared to him to be seen as being as much an expression of faith in God as a generous offer to his nephew. Lot's subsequent history forms a superbly-handled sub-plot throwing into relief the trials and triumphs of Abraham's life, and the aban-
donment of the pilgrim vocation and return to urban life—icitys one of its worst manifestations. Genesis 14:12 speaks of 'Lot who dwelt in Sodom', and it is his presence there at the time of the raid of the four kings which forms the background to the episodes described in that chapter. Later he was reckoned an elder in Sodom (Gen. 19:1), but sadly lacking in influence because of compromise. So dependent on city life he had become that when Sodom was destroyed he did not hear nor bear to live under any other conditions. The little town of Zoar was a desirable refuge indeed (Gen. 19:18-23). How much higher Abraham rose can be seen from his encounter with two Canaanite kings, as recorded in Genesis 14:17-24.

Genesis 14 bears signs of great antiquity, notably in one or two details of vocabulary and toponomy. There are several instances of the contemporising of archaic names. The word translated 'traded men' in verse 14 (RSV) does not occur anywhere in the Old Testament but is paralleled in the early second millennium Egyptian excavation texts where it denotes Canaanite retainers. It may be that the phrase had an independent existence before it was incorporated into the text, but the link with Abraham as 'the Hebrew' might suggest this. We have in any case a very detailed itinerary of the four kings which embraces much more than is of immediate concern for the history of Abraham, Lot or Sodom. There is a good historical ring about Melchizedek's name. It is of unknown meaning and was probably 'Zedek' (Eng. 'king', with Zedek a theophoric element. In the time of Joshua, Jerusalem was ruled by a king called Adonizidek ('Zedek is my lord'); see Jos. 10:1 and it would seem that the god Zedek was specially propitiated with sacrifices. In verse 17 'el 'elyon' with Yahweh is made. The insertion of 'YHWI, therefore, can only be meant to emphasise the identity, not the difference, between the God of Melchizedek and the God of Abraham, known to the people of Israel as YHWI. This agrees with the biblical idea of individual non-Hebrews who acknowledge the one God. The point of the intervention by Melchizedek is that he takes from Abraham, whereas the king of Sodom, representative of worldly powers at their worst (cf. 15:13), wishes to confer benefits on him. (Such a didactic element in the story is quite compatible with the desire to preserve a tradition linking Jerusalem with the patriarchal period.) It was intervention with Sodom which had so quickly plunged all the people at risk, so that Abraham had resolved not to compromise in the slightest degree with the king of Sodom (14:22-23). On the other hand, his willing-
ness to take over the emerging pattern of Abraham's life, with its subordination of present gain to future prosperity under God.

Through the interview(s) with God in chapter 15 Abraham is made more aware of the way in which the promises will be fulfilled. In particular, he learns that he will have a son who will carry on his name. What had not been specifically stated was whether Sarah would be the mother of that heir. Sarah herself is mentioned in verse 12:1(1) at an age when Abraham recorded his wife's advice and had a son by Hagar her maid. No matter how socially acceptable this action was, in terms of the grand theme of trust in the God of the promises Abraham was wrong to submit to Sarah's feelings of despair. In the contract it was usually the husband who insisted on the right of concubinage should his wife fail to provide him with an heir. Genesis 17 tells of important new developments in the story. Abraham and Sarah were now about to enter a new phase of life into which they are entering. The first stage in God's covenant-making with Abraham (ch. 15) involved no obligations for the patriarch, but now he was given the responsibility of keeping the covenant of circumcision. Then comes the revelation, so hard to take in, that Sarah will have a son.

In spite of the specific promises made, Abraham lapsed into unbelief and made the same mistake as when he had gone down to Egypt at the beginning. But for the intervention of God the promise would have been nullified. So at last the son was born and Abraham realized that he had done well by thinking that he had seen the end of his trials. In fact it is only now, and in connection with the command to go to Moriah and offer Isaac as a burnt offering, that the Biblical writer speaks of God putting Abraham to the test. Abraham has demonstrated not so much his obedience as his faith. The New Testament commentator on this episode observes: 'He considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead; hence, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back' (Heb. 11:19).

The second great issue—that of the possession of the land—was not within sight of being fulfilled. The time to come is when Sarah had died and he had to buy a piece of ground in which to bury her. As a 'stranger and sojourner' (23:4) Abraham was rather dependent on the good-will of the Hittites to whom he put his request. At first they were even to have tried to discourage him from acquiring land among them. Eventually the deal was made, and the report of the conveyance agrees well with what is known of land transactions, both Hittite and Mesopotamian. Such minor difficulties did not deter the Hittites who had shown a friendly attitude at Moriah. One of his last recorded acts was to solemnly commission his servant to go to Padan-
Aram to find a wife for Isaac. What concerned him was that the young lady should be brought down to Canaan and should not be forced to travel to Padan-Aram. 'See to it that you do not take my son back there!' (24:6). It was nothing if not a magnificent declaration of his conviction that the future of his family lie in Canaan and not back in Mesopotamia. III

The opening words of Genesis 15, 'after these things', appear to link the chapter with the section immediately before, but the legitimate genealogy has frequently been disallowed. Bennett's application of the documentary theory led him to suppose that 'these things' refers to Abraham's building of altars and his generosity to Lot, because in the original Yahwistic document chapter 13 was followed by chapter 15, chapter 14 being a separate document of uncertain origin. Such an assumption of mindless editing is quite unnecessary. The promise of protection and reward (15:1) is as well suited to the circumstances described in chapter 14 as to those of chapter 15. (The Nuzi tablet removes the embarrassment of having, in the same source, two similar messages from God encouraging Abraham after Lot had chosen the most fertile tract of land.) Cassuto thinks that there is a numeri-


mistakes, but shows that God chose to overlook them as he reviewed Abraham's life of faith. Abraham does not appear to have been long in Canaan before the inadequacies of the place were impressed upon him. There was a famine in the land and he felt it necessary to go down to Egypt to keep his household alive. When in answer to this Abraham told God that he had called him was no Garden of Eden, Going down to Egypt was a necessary and wise step (cf. Mt. 2:13-21). Traffic of this sort between Palestine and Egypt was common enough in the Egyptian history and it was an instinct for self-preservation, and the measures to which it drove him, which must be questioned. He evidently failed to derive strength from the concrete hope, his promise could not be fulfilled in a dead Abraham.

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The second great issue—that of the possession of the land—was not within sight of being fulfilled. The promise to Sarah was that she would become mother of nations (Dt. 33:29) and the more common meaning of māgēn is 'shield'. There could be a play on the root since 'delivered' in Genesis 14:20 is miggēn. The significance of the promised reward after the rejection of the offer by the king of Sodom is obvious enough.

Abraham's reply (verse 2) shows what was uppermost in his mind. He had no heir apart from his servant Eliezer who had apparently been his chief servant. And Abraham had already defined two types of heir were distinguished in Hurrian family law: the apulu ('direct heir') and the ewaru ('indirect heir'), the latter being recognised where there were no natural heirs. Eliezer is commonly represented as being in the nature of an executor for Abraham and Sarah. In a recent study Thompson has sought to dispel the special relationship between the case of Eliezer and the Nuzi institution of adoption. He makes the point that the adoption of a servant does not amount to an adoption, the knowledge of adoption concern free citizens. In addition, the Hurrian ewaru was still given a (secondary) share in the inheritance in the event of a natural heir being born, and this does not appear to have been the case


with Eliezer. The first of these objections is the more substantial, but only permits the conclusion that Nuzzi does not afford a complete parallel to the case of Eliezer. As to the exclusion of Eliezer from any rights of inheritance—Thompson is reading something into this text. Such is the Hebrew writer's preoccupation with the issue of natural succession that he is little interested, if at all, in how events affected Eliezer.

In the latter part of verse 2 poses difficulties for the translator, its purport is clear from verse 3. Eliezer would in the normal course of events have looked after Abraham and Sarah and would have been responsible for the performance of the proper funeral rites when they died. In return he would have inherited all his master's possessions. This kind of arrangement is known from other places as well as Nuzzi. Apart from the natural desire of an ancient Semite to survive through his progeny (to what extent did this take the place of an expectation of an after-life?), Abraham was doubtless thinking of the original terms of his call ('I will make of you a great nation', 12:2). Note that nothing was said for faithfulness about the possibility of Sarah having a son. Abraham could well imagine, and probably did imagine, that the son was to be born to Hagar. That he was still far from thinking that the promise could involve Sarah is evident from 16:1-2.

How do we understand verse 6, and in what way, if any, does Paul's use of it differ from its original significance? The Hebrew word 'mn’âd (faith) may be applied to both God and man. So God is described in Genesis 12:2 as 'a man of faith' (el ‘mn’âd), because of the observable justice in all His actions. This is the word used in Habakkuk 2:4, 'the just shall live by his faith (or "faithfulness")'. Usually, as here, the OT expresses the idea of faithfulness (compare the Fourth Gospel in this respect); cf. also 2 Chronicles 20:20, Proverbs 3:5, Isaiah 12:2, etc. Kidner remarks appositely: 'Note that Abram's trust was both personal (in the Lord, AV, RV) and corporate (El 'mn’âd) because of the observant justice in all His actions. This is the word used in Habakkuk 2:4, 'the just shall live by his faith (or "faithfulness")'.

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How do we define 'righteousness' in this context? Attempts to interpret the original significance of the Hebrew root q-d-h have not resulted in a unanimous verdict, though there is something to be said for the explanation adopted by, among others, Nahum. In his opinion the root meaning is 'to be straight'. (The root meaning of the verb is made explicit by d-k, by d-k and its derivatives, particularly dikâosunâ—whose importance for Pauline thought scarcely needs mentioning.) But root meanings will help us in our pursuit of q-d-h in Genesis 15:6. Hooke gives the sense that it means 'in a straight way'. This signifies 'nothing less than the character of God Himself in His dealings with man. The original

intention in man's creation was that he should be in God's image, after His likeness. By his act of disobedience the image was defaced, the likeness destroyed; now the work of restoration has begun; God has found the response of faith and obedience. He has found a man in whom His own character begins to be formed.' On the other hand, the word is used of the root q-d-h may well be discerned in this occurrence of q-d-h in, circumstances where Abraham's weakness was much in evidence his trust in God was acknowledged by the divine Judge as sufficient ground for acceptance. Righteousness is here implied in the occurrences of q-d-h; the 'righteous' man is one who meets the obligations of the relationship upon which he has entered. God is always 'righteous'. He deals with man. Abraham enjoyed the obligations of his relationship to God by his faith-dependence.

In verses 7f, the question of Abraham's possession of the land is raised. Assurance is conveyed through a covenant pledge. While the animal used were acceptable as Levitical offerings in later times, and the treatment of the birds conforms to Leviticus 1:17, this was much more than a sacrifice. From verses 1f and 5 it appears that the first part of Abraham's possession was God's gift. The point is taken up in Gal. 3, where our text is linked with the promise of blessing to all nations (Gal. 3:6-9): those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith'. James 2:21-24 stresses that the meaning and the place at which fulfillment was the fulfillment of Genesis 15:6. No opposition between faith and works is implied; real faith issues in works. The necessity of an active principle in faith presumably explains why Genesis 15:6 does not itself figure in the argument. Paul is anticipating this in Hebrews 11. Abraham is commended for actions expressive of his trust in God (verses 8-10 and 17-19).

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How do we understand verse 6, and in what way, if any, does Paul's use of it differ from its original significance? The Hebrew word 'mâinâ (faith) may be applied to both God and man. So God is described as 'faithful' in 12:2 as 'a faithful God' (11:21; El 'mâinâ), because of the observable justice in all His actions. This is the word used in Habakkuk 2:4, 'the just shall live by his faith (or "faithfulness")'. Usually, as here, the OT expresses the idea of faithfulness as the trustworthiness of a relationship (compare the Fourth Gospel in this respect); cf. also 2 Chronicles 20:20; Proverbs 3:5; Isaiah 12:2; etc. Kidner remarks appropriately: 'Note that Abram's trust was both personal (in the Lord, AV, RV, NKJV) and corporate (in the Lord's word (of the Lord in verses 4,5)." In Christian proclamation the appeal for faith in a personal God must always be coupled with a presentation of the evidence for the truth of the Gospel. It is not enough to say that God reveals Himself in acts which man must interpret and from which he must infer the character of God and His own destiny. Biblical faith claims a firmer foundation than the restriction of God's self-disclosure to His actions would allow. If God does not explain His actions man cannot arrive at certain knowledge. And there are many areas where truth cannot be conveyed except in propositional form. Abraham believed God in the absence of any act of God from which he might have drawn inferences about the divine will for himself or the significance of the future. The verse was seminal for the NT development of the doctrine of justification. That righteousness was reckoned to Abraham before the covenant of circumcision was initiated (i.e., Gen. 15 comes before Gen. 17) is strongly implied by Paul (Rom. 4:9-12). This showed that acceptance by God was not dependent on the observance of the rite of circumcision. Indeed, for Paul the proper significance of Genesis 15:6 is that Abraham's acceptance was not dependent on any work or merit he might plead (see Rom. 4:3). Such a message did not only make the Jew aware of his true position before God, it offered great hope to the Gentiles (Rom. 4:16-25). This latter point is taken up in Gal. 3, where our text is linked with the promise of blessing for all nations (Gal. 3:6-9): 'those who are men of faith are blessed with Abraham who had faith.' James 2:21-24 stresses that the gift of the Spirit at the moment of belief was the fulfilment of Genesis 15:6. No opposition between faith and works is implied; real faith issues in works. The necessity of an active principle in faith presumably explains why Genesis 15:6 does not contain a figure of justification? Paul speaks in Hebrews 11. Abraham is commended for actions expressive of his trust in God (verses 8-10 and 17-19).

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Throughout the section beginning with verse 12 the reader is aware of the logic by which God undertakes to bestow the covenant blessings and at this stage no obligation is laid upon Abra-

8ham. The divine initiative becomes most express in verse 17. As at Sinai (Ex. 19:18) God's presence becomes so apparent that the fire God passes between the pieces of the dismembered victims, in solem undertaking that He will fulfill the promises made. Illustration of this procedure comes from a passage in Jeremiah and from extra-Biblical sources. In speaking of those who broke a promise which they had made with God the prophet (Jer. 34:18-20) develops the significance of the divided cacease. As the calf had been divided when the covenant was ratified so the people concerned were divided as an effect of having broken the terms of the covenant. Of the various Mesopotamian analogues we choose the treaty between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Matti'lu of Assyria. Matti'lu is against this treaty, so may, just as the head of Matti'lu is torn off... the head of Matti'lu be torn off..."8 "I Samuel 11:7 shares the same outlook. The Hebrew expression for making a covenant translates literally as 'to cut off the firstborn'. This was a common rite in the covenant ceremony. It was in the reign of David that Abraham's descendants actually came to control the territory detailed in verses 18-21.

For Paul it was a fact of the utmost significance that this unconditional covenant was ratified centuries before the Mosaic covenant at Sinai (see Gal. 3:15-18). The principle of salvation by grace (implicit in the promise to Abraham) preceded, and was never superseded by, the covenant of law. The principle of righteousness by faith which Paul discovered, God must fulfil His covenant undertakings; it is men individually who may cut themselves off from the covenant of salvation. What God has required in all ages, so that His saving purpose may be fulfilled in those who believe. Paul uses the word 'faith' almost as a universal substance (verse 6). Genesis 15 has the gospel in a nutshell.

6 verse 4.
7 verse 6.
8 verse 16.
9 verse 11.