Preaching from the Patriarchs

Background to the Exposition of Genesis 15

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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 must lie behind 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.*

I

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 other patriarchs, 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 by Woolley over forty 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 one centre of moon worship 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 anticipated in the expeditions by 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. The Hurrians are noted for their assimilability in the alien cultures in which they settled. By the mid-second millennium they were an important element in the population of Haran and many other Mesopotamian cities. Abraham's pretence that Sarah was his sister (which was 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 Hurrians also recognised a form of adoption in the case of a childless couple which invites 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 this child 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 that age. On the contrary, the affinity of the narratives is with the second rather than with the first millennium. Theology and didactic abound in the Abraham cycle, but they are built on credible historical data.

II

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 all-pervading and crystallises in the issues 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 (Gn. 12:10-20). The land to which God had called him was no Garden of Eden. Going down to Egypt was a necessary and wise step (cf. Mt. 2:13-23!). Traffic of this sort between Palestine and Egypt was common enough in the Egyptian Middle Kingdom period. It is Abraham's instinct for self-preservation, and the measures to which it drove him, which must be questioned. He evidently failed to derive strength from the consideration that God's 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 appealed to him is 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. Lot's journey east marked the abandonment of the pilgrim vocation and return to urban life—in some 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 confederate kings which forms the background to the episodes described in that chapter. Later he was reckoned an elder in Sodom (Gn. 19:1), but sadly lacking in influence because of compromise. So dependent on city life had he become that when Sodom was destroyed he could not bear to live under any other conditions. The little town of Zoar was a desirable refuge indeed (Gn. 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 topography. There are several instances of the contemporising of archaic names. The word translated 'trained men' in verse 14 (RSV) does not occur elsewhere in the Old Testament but is paralleled in the early second millennium Egyptian execration texts where it denotes Canaanite retainers. It may be that the chapter had an independent existence before it was incorporated in Genesis; the reference to 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. Its original meaning was probably 'Zedek is (my) king', with Zedek a theophoric element. In the time of Joshua, Jerusalem was ruled by a king called Adonizedek ('Zedek is (my) lord'; see Jos. 10:1) and it would seem that the god Zedek was specially worshipped at Jerusalem (Salem in Gn. 14:18 is probably Jerusalem as in Ps. 76:2). Melchizedek is described as 'priest of God Most High'; the divine title 'God Most High' (*'ēl 'elyôn*) is paralleled in Canaanite religious texts. In Abraham's reply to the king of Sodom (14:22) the identification of *'ēl 'elyôn* with Yahweh is made. 'The insertion of YHWH, 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 YHWH. This accords with the biblical idea of individual non-Hebrews who acknowledge the one God.'[1] 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. 13:13), 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 patriarch.) It was involvement with Sodom which had so quickly put all Lot's attainments 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 willingness to give a tithe to Melchizedek fits well 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. After ten years in Canaan (16:3) Abraham heeded 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. To judge from the Nuzi contracts 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 have their names modified, signifying the new phase of life into which they are entering. The first stage in God's covenant-making with Abraham

[1] N. M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York, 1966), p. 117. Quotation from first paperback edition, 1970.

(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 could be forgiven for 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 (22:1). It is at Moriah that the patriarch 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. This was brought home to Abraham when Sarah 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 seem to have tried to discourage him from acquiring land among them. Eventually the deal was made, and the report of the conveyancing agrees well with what is known of land transactions, both Hittite and Mesopotamian. Such minor difficulties did not discourage the man who had stood the test 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 that Isaac 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 lay 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 preceding, but the legitimacy of this 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.[2] 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 13. (This explanation 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 numerical symmetry about the presentation of the Abraham story—a view similar to, but not identical with, the old midrashic expositions of the rabbis. Abraham is put to ten tests and after each 'he receives consolation in the form of a renewed assurance by God, or of a specific act for his benefit'.[3] In one way or another we take Genesis 15:1 to be a fitting sequel to the events of Genesis 14. A man who had just conducted a night raid against enemies much stronger than he would be greatly cheered by talk of a divine shield to protect him. (In more recent times the word translated 'shield' has, on philological grounds, been given the meaning 'benefactor'. The idea of God as a shield for His people, however, has its parallels (e.g., 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 adopted to fulfil this rôle. Speiser points out that two types of heir were distinguished in Hurrian family law: the *aplu* ('direct heir') and the *ewuru* ('indirect heir'), the latter being recognised where there were no natural heirs.[4] Eliezer is commonly regarded as being in the nature of an *ewuru* to Abraham and Sarah. In a recent study Thompson has sought to disprove the special relationship between the case of Eliezer and the Nuzi institution of adoption. He makes the point that the adoption of a servant is not attested at Nuzi; the known cases of adoption concern free citizens. In addition, the Hurrian *ewuru* 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

[2] W. H. Bennett, *Genesis* (Oxford: Century Bible, n.d.), p. 199.

[3] U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part II: From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), p. 294.

[4] E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (New York: Anchor Bible, 1964), pp. 111-2.

with Eliezer.[5] The first of these objections is the more substantial, but only permits the conclusion that Nuzi 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 this into the 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.

While 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 funerary 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 Nuzi. 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 on this occasion 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 Genesis 17:16-18.

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 *'emûnâ* ('faith') may be applied to both God and man. So God is described in Deuteronomy 32:4 as 'a faithful God' (*'ēl 'emûnâ*), 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 faith (as distinct from faithfulness) by verbs (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 propositional (the context is the specific *word of the Lord* in verses 4,5).'[6] 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.[7] 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 his descendants.

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., Gn. 15 comes before Gn 17!) was considered highly significant 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 placing of Isaac upon the altar at Moriah 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 figure in the discussion of faith and the faithful in Hebrews 11. Abraham is commended for *actions* expressive of his trust in God (verses 8-10 and 17-19).

How do we define 'righteousness' in this context? Attempts to find the original significance of the Hebrew root *ṣ-d-q* have not resulted in a unanimous verdict, though there is something to be said for the explanation adopted by, among others, Snaith.[8] In his opinion the root meaning is 'to be straight'. (The root *ṣ-d-q* is commonly rendered in the LXX by *dikē* and its derivatives, particularly *dikaiosunē* —whose importance for Pauline thought scarcely needs mentioning.) But root meanings will help us little in our pursuit of *ṣedāqâ* in Genesis 15:6. Hooke gives the word a fairly full content here: it signifies 'nothing less than the character of God Himself in His dealings with man. The original

[5] T. L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (BZAW 133, Berlin: de Gruyter, 1974), pp. 203-30 (esp. pp. 225-6).

[6] D. Kidner, *Genesis* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1967), p. 124.

[7] *pace* G. E. Wright, *God Who Acts* (London: SCM, 1952), pp. 50ff.

[8] N. H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (London: Epworth, 1944), p. 73.

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.'[9] Skinner attaches more of a positional significance to the word: 'a right relation to God conferred by a divine sentence of approval'.[10] The frequent forensic association of the root *ṣ-d-q* may well be discerned in this occurrence of *ṣᵉḏaqâ*. in circumstances where Abraham's weakness was much in evidence his trust in God was acknowledged by the divine Judge as sufficient grounds for acceptance. Right relationship is often implied in the occurrences of *ṣᵉḏaqâ*; the 'righteous' man is one who meets the obligations of the relationship upon which he has entered. God is always 'righteous' in His dealings with man. Abraham met the obligation of his relationship to God by his faith-dependence.

In verses 7ff. the question of Abraham's possession of the land is raised. Assurance is conveyed through a covenant pledge. While the animals 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 1(?) and 5 it appears that the first part of Abraham's interview with God took place at night. The fact that verse 12 refers to sunset has been taken as an indication that the chapter is of composite origin. This may be the case, but need verses 7ff. be treated as if they were intended to refer to the same occasion as the earlier section? Perhaps the vision really was composite! At all events, the scene is set in such a way as to convey a sense of awe in the face of the ceremony about to take place. Abraham's deep sleep is reminiscent of Genesis 2: 21, where the same Hebrew word describes Adam's supernatural trance.

The total of four hundred years for the Egyptian bondage is a round figure (cf. Acts 7:6). According to Exodus 12:40 'the time that the people of Israel dwelt in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years'. That the Israelites would come out with great possessions accords with Exodus 12:35-36. In view of the fact that Abraham's ancestors were buried in Mesopotamia the reference to his going to his fathers in peace (verse 15) cannot mean that he would be buried in a family grave. The 'fourth generation' (verse 16), representing the end of the period of four hundred and thirty years, must be understood in the light of the Canaanite and Mesopotamian use of 'generation' to denote a lengthy life-span.[11] The Amorites were the inhabitants of Canaan. The statement about them in verse 16 is regarded by Kidner as one of the most important OT pronouncements on theodicy. Joshua's invasion was 'an act of justice, not aggression'.[12]

Throughout the section beginning with verse 12 the emphasis is on the initiative taken by God. God undertakes to bestow the covenant blessings and at this stage no obligation is laid upon Abraham. The divine initiative becomes most express in verse 17. As at Sinai (Ex. 19:18) God's presence is represented by smoke and fire. God passes between the pieces of the dismembered victims, in solemn undertaking that He will fulfil 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 covenant which they had made with God the prophet (Jer. 34:18-20) develops the significance of the divided carcase. As the calf had been divided when the covenant was ratified so the people concerned were liable to as effective a destruction for having broken the terms of the covenant. Of the various Mesopotamian analogues we choose the treaty between Ashurnirari V of Assyria and Mati'ilu of Arpad: 'If Mati'ilu sins against this treaty, so may, just as the head of this spring lamb is torn off . . . the head of Mati'ilu be torn off. . . .'[13] 1 Samuel 11: 7 shares the same outlook. The Hebrew expression for making a covenant translates literally as 'to cut a covenant' and preserves the ritual associations of 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 sovereign grace is never denied, God must fulfil His covenant undertakings; it is men individually who may cut themselves off from the covenant blessings. What God has required in all ages, so that His saving purpose may be fulfilled in men, has already been stated in our chapter (verse 6). Genesis 15 has the gospel in a nutshell.

[9] S. H. Hooke, *Genesis* in *Peake's Commentary on the Bible* (ed. M. Black and H. H. Rowley, London: Nelson, 1962), p. 191.

[10] J. Skinner, *Genesis*[2] (ICC, Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930), p. 280.

[11] See K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1966), p. 54.

[12] *op. cit.*, p. 125.

[13] See J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*[2] (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), pp. 532-3.