



God's Promise to Abram

Promises Made, Promises Broken

The Point

Our God cares for us as communities, families, and individuals, not as humanity in general.

Contexts

Linguistic

- Verse 6 contains two important terms:
 - ♦ Righteousness [Tsedakah] is “not an ideal, absolute norm...but rather a term of relationship.” A righteous person is a person who abides by the claims that their relationship makes upon them. In the case of Abram/Abraham, he is judged righteous in relation to his covenant with God.¹
 - ♦ Abram/Abraham has faith [he’emin] in God. Faith “refers as a rule to God’s saving act.” It is “an act of trust, a consent to God’s plan in history.” We derive our word “Amen” from this verb.²

Geographic

- In 14:12, Abram/Abraham visits the Valley of Shaveh. According to Josephus, this valley lay within a quarter mile of Jerusalem.³ In 16:3, Sarai gives Hagar to Abram/Abraham after they have lived in Canaan for 10 years. Thus, the story takes place somewhere in the Promised Land.

Historical

- Though Abraham is certainly an historical character, he lived sufficiently long ago and his political impact was small enough that any precise dating of his life is impossible. The best archaeological evidence points to the events of his life happening between 2000 and 1500 BCE.⁴ This was the time of the empire of the Egyptians in Africa and of the Hittites in the Middle East.

Cultural/Religious

- Abram/Abraham is a “semi-nomad,” distinct from the present day Bedouins. It was a lifestyle of “varied forms of economy,” involving both agriculture and the herding of various types of livestock. Abram/Abraham and his family are a wandering people, distinct from the city dwellers that they meet throughout the story.⁵
- The relationship between God and Abram/Abraham has special connections to the present day. Abram’s tale is related not only because he is the biological father of the Israelite people, but also because he is their “father in faith.”⁶ Thus, the promise to Abram/Abraham extends to all of his descendants.

Literary

- The passage leaves off the themes of the last story, i.e. Abram/Abraham's conquests and dealings with kings. Instead, it returns to the themes of Abram and Sarai/Sarah's wish for children, their wandering in the land of Canaan, and their special relationship to Yahweh. In this sense, it continues the story from chapter 12 before the interruptions of the journey to Egypt and Lot's capture.
- ♦ **Genre** – The passage falls into the genre of Family Narrative. Similar to the Icelandic sagas, the family narrative deals with historical figures of the not-so-distant past (for the narrator) whose lives and actions were determinative for the listeners. Characteristic of the Family Narrative is that the family is not seen as a smaller sphere within the larger society. Rather, the family and society are identical. As an example of this, note how differently Abram/Abraham's family life is described from the episode of David and Bathsheba.⁷
- ♦ **Authorial Intention** – The reciter of the family narrative seeks to show how his people originated from a specific family. The "basic idea of this story...is that God chose this family in order to raise up the people Israel from it."⁸
- ♦ **Audience** – In its original oral form, the audience of this story were those who traced their lineage back to Abram/Abraham, biologically speaking. When the story was written down, it still spoke to the biological descendants of Abraham, but it addressed them not only on familial, but also religious terms.⁹

Common Misunderstandings

- The common misunderstandings of this passage all revolve around the two words covered in the Linguistic section.

More Information

- For information on ancient herding practices, see: <http://www.bible-archaeology.info/cattle.htm>
- For information on the British excavation of Abram's hometown Ur: <http://blog.britishmuseum.org/2014/07/22/ur-of-the-chaldees-a-virtual-vision-of-woolleys-excavations/>
- For those who want to dive deeper into the world of biblical nomads: <https://oi.uchicago.edu/research/symposia/nomads-tribes-and-state-ancient-near-east-cross-disciplinary-perspectives-1>

Connections

Narrative Lectionary Connections

- **Last Week (Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17; 3:1-8)** – This week functions to zoom in on the story from last week. Whereas the first week talked in terms of distant ancestors and the creation of the world, this week focuses on a specific pair of people with whom God forges a relationship.
- **Next Week (Genesis 37:3-8, 17b-22, 26-34; 50:15-21)** – At the end of this week, we are left with God's promise of descendants to Abram/Abraham. In next week's lesson, we meet Jacob's sons, the results of God's promise. We also see how God works to preserve Abram's descendants and ensure the continuation of the promise.
- **Other Weeks** – In 1 Samuel 1:9-11, 19-20 (10/16/2016), we see God's response to another childless woman, Hannah. In 2 Samuel 7:1-17 (10/23/2016), God's dialogue with Nathan reveals God's continuing plans for Abram's descendants. In Luke 16:19-31 (3/26/2017), "Father" Abraham makes an appearance in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Finally, in Galatians 3:1-9 (5/28/2017), Paul quotes this passage to illustrate the stupidity of the Galatians.

Other Bible Connections

- The metaphor of God as a shield appears in Psalm 3:4, 18:3, 31 and in Deuteronomy 33:29.
- In John 8:33, Jesus debates what it means to be children of Abraham with a group of Jews.
- In Romans 4:13-25, Paul uses Abraham as the prototype for his claim that people are saved by faith alone.
- In Hebrews 11:8-12, the writer uses Abraham as an example of a biblical hero who lived "by faith".

Thematic Connections

- **God Revealed**—In this week's lesson, we see the importance of relationships to God in two ways. One, we see how God blesses the interpersonal relationship of Abram and Sarai by promising them the child that they long for. Two, we see the importance of Abram trusting in his relationship to God, a trust which God reckons to Abram as righteousness.
- **Promises Made, Promises Broken**—This week's lesson plays off of last week's lesson to show that no matter how often people break promises to God, God continues to make promises to bless and care for people. Despite Adam and Eve's mistrust and lack of faith, God comes to Abram with an offer of an even more abundant promise.

Liturgical/Seasonal Connections

- This passage comes the week after September 11th. The concern that God shows for an individual family connects with the remembrance of the tragedy on this date.

Hymns/ Music

- Some hymns that have Abraham as their subject: *"The God of Abraham Praise," "Can You Count the Stars?"*
- A popular Bible camp song with Abram as the theme: *"Father Abraham Had Many Sons (Kids)."*
- In addition, many hymns have trust in God as their topic, for example: *"We Walk by Faith and Not by Sight."*
- Many praise songs also have this topic: *"Trust in You"* by Lauren Daigle, *"I Will Follow"* by Chris Tomlin, *"I Trust You Lord"* by Mark Cole.

Media Connections

- In 2001, National Geographic published an article about Abraham and his continuing relevance in the Middle East and beyond: <http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/features/world/asia/israel/abraham-text.html>
- “Knee 5” from “*Einstein on the Beach*,” and opera by Philip Glass plays on God’s illustration of the stars in the sky: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CYK-OIOMXk>
- Abraham and his descendants have been the subject of several books concerning Muslim/Jewish/Christian relations, including *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* by Bruce Feiler.

Multimedia Links

- “*The Cave*” an opera by English composer, Steve Reich concerns the life of the biblical patriarchs, and Abraham and Sarah in particular. The entirety of the opera is available online: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U9MTxLCv_nw
- This interactive map illustrates Abraham’s travels: <http://creativelearningideas.com/interactivemaps/maps.htm>

¹ Gerhard Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), 185.

² Ibid, 185.

³ *New Jerusalem Bible*, ed. Alexander Jones et al, (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 35.

⁴ Claus Westermann, *Genesis: An Introduction*, trans. John J. Scullion, S.J., (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 122.

⁵ Ibid, 166-167.

⁶ Von Rad, 166.

⁷ Westermann, 167.

⁸ Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, trans. Mark E. Biddle, (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1997), 158.

⁹ Ibid, 159.