

Genesis 12

The theme of the Bible, in one sentence, is: The salvation of man through Jesus Christ to the glory of God. God made man in His image but man sinned against God, thus separating Himself from God (Isa. 59:1-2). Now, God will have to sacrifice Himself (He will choose to do so) in order to reconcile man to Himself. In order to die for sin, God has to become man. The Word must become flesh (John 1:14). The man through whose family God will choose to become man is the descendent of Eber, the Hebrew, Abram. Matthew will link Jesus to the family of Abraham in the first verse of the first book of the New Testament. Moses passes over the first 75 years of Abram's life to begin with God's call of Abram to trust and obey God by leaving the pagan environments of Ur and Haran.

God has been silent for ten generations since Noah (11:10-26), but now is the time for Him to break the divine silence and speak from heaven again. This time it will be to a man who lives in the same type of pagan environment in which Noah lived. But Jehovah God is different from the gods Abram's family worshipped (cf. Josh. 24:2); He speaks, without an idol and without priests. Jehovah God speaks from heaven and we marvel that Abram was able to consistently put his trust in an unseen God, in contrast to the pagan surroundings.

Abram was named by his parents (Gen. 11:26) and he is so called 61 times in the OT. But God will change his name to Abraham (17:5), by which he will be called another 175 times, making him a significant person in OT history. Not to be too outdone, Abraham is mentioned by name in the NT 74 times. We will point out, as we move through his history, various uses of his life's events by NT writers as they are relevant for Christians. His death will be recorded in 25:8; chapters 12-25 are therefore concerned with the life of Abram.

We are also introducing a new term, perhaps, to our readers: patriarch. Since it is a Greek word, it is only used in the NT (Acts 2:29; 7:8-9; Heb. 7:4). The word means "father" or "forefather" and Hebrews 7:4 refers to Abram as a "patriarch." David is called a patriarch in Acts 2:29, but generally speaking, the "patriarchs" are Abram, Isaac, Jacob, and the twelve sons of Jacob. The next generation after Jacob's sons will, of course, become the nation of Israel.

TRANSLATION - 12:1-3:

1 Then Jehovah said to Abram, "Leave from your land and from your relatives and from the house of your father to the land which I will show you. **2** And I will make you a great people, and I will bless you and I will magnify your name and you should be a blessing. **3** I will also bless those blessing you and those cursing you I will curse and in you will be blessed all the families of the earth."

WORDS:

"People" (vers. 2; 567 times) usually refers to a political, ethnic, or territorial group, a nation. It is used 27 times in Genesis. "Bless" is used 327 times, with the noun used another 71 times. It was first used in 1:22, 28; 2:3; 5:2 and 9:1. It is a significant Bible word, used most densely in Genesis (88 times). Note how many times this verb or noun is used just in this context (5 times in 12:2-3). "Magnify" (117 times) is the related verb for the adjective "great."

GRAMMAR:

Grammatically speaking, the verbs subsequent to the command "go" are subordinate to the command. In other words, God is requiring Abram to "go" so *that* God can bless him, etc. Compare that with Christ's command to "make disciples" in Matthew 28:19-20.

COMMENTS:

God's requirement for Abram to "leave" (vers. 1) begins with the relationships more distant ("land") and concludes with the relationships closer ("house of your father"). Compare that with God's command later for Abram to sacrifice Isaac (22:1-2). This all illustrates the cost

of obedience. These words in 12:1 and the words in 22:1 are the first and last communication from God to Abram, both beginning with a command. Abram would not inherit his father's estate, if he had one. Nor would he find solace in his father's religion.

We can outline God's promise to Abram in seven phrases or expressions, but they all are summarized in four main ideas: land, seed (in the sense of a family), wealth (in the sense of "blessings" or reputation, a "name"), and protection.

Relative to the seed, God had promised Eve that her seed would crush the head of the serpent (3:15). That seed will be located, now, in the family of Abram. Moses will trace the seed through Abram, Isaac, Jacob, and, eventually, Judah, and the king from Judah, David (2 Sam. 7:12). Once the Savior comes into the world (Gal. 4:4), the family will no longer serve a divine purpose. The "family" will become a spiritual family (Rom. 2:28-29).

Moses will also highlight through the book of Genesis, as will other OT writers, that God blesses those who bless Abram's family and God will curse (12:9-20) those who curse Abram's family. All the nations of the world, in fact, will be blessed in Abram. This, again, will come to fruition in the Savior of the world (Gal. 3:8).

In order for God to come into the world, His people (the "seed") will need a land. God chose the land of Palestine and this theme will run through the book of Genesis: 12:7; 13:15, 17; 15:7-8, 18; 17:8; 24:7; 26:3-5; 28:13-14; 35:12; 48:4; 50:24. It will also figure prominently in the books of Deuteronomy, Joshua, and eventually into the exile of the days of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Haggai, Zechariah, Ezra, and Nehemiah. Once the Savior comes into the world, the land will no longer serve a divine purpose.

As with Noah (6:18; 9:9) the commands to obey precede the mention of the covenant; with Abram, the covenant will not be mentioned until Genesis 15. If we did not know better, we would be confused that God could make Abram a great nation when Sarai is barren and has no children (11:30). God will later promise to bring "kings" through Abram (Gen. 17:6) and Sarai (Gen. 17:16). The Hittites will also later refer to Abram as a "prince" (23:6). It has been suggested that Abram took Lot, as a surrogate heir, with him, believing God would fulfill His promise to bless Abram with a family through Lot. There is no evidence in the text that this is so, although it could have been.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - God will reiterate the promise of land to Abram (12:7; 13:15, 17; 15:18-21; 17:8; 23:17-18; 25:9). This promise is repeated to Abram's son, Isaac (26:3-4), and his grandson, Jacob (Gen. 27:28-29). The promise to bless those who bless Abram is illustrated a few times in Genesis: 20:7; 39:5. God promises that the family of Abram will later become innumerable (Gen. 13:16; 15:5; 17:5-6; 22:16-17; 26:4; 28:14; 35:11).

Contemporaries of Moses' day - As another illustration of the promise to curse and bless those who curse or bless Israel, Balaam was not able to curse Israel at the request and instigation of Balak in Numbers 22:6. The land, as God's promise to Abram, will be prominent in the Law (Deut. 1:8; 5:33) and later writings.

Later Hebrew writers - God will also promise to make David's name great (2 Sam. 7:9). God will refer to the blessings of Abram when Isaiah speaks to his people during the Assyrian captivity (Isa. 51:2). This text in Isaiah is the only passage in the OT, outside of Genesis, which mentions Sarah. After Israel's later rebellion against God, it is because of God's covenant He made with Abraham that allows God to forgive and restore Israel (2 Kings 13:23; 2 Chronicles 20:7). For references to the land, see Psalms 37:22, 29; Prov. 2:21-22. Israel's expulsion from the land will result from their disobedience and idolatry (Isa. 13:9; Jer. 16:13).

NT writers - The beatitude of Jesus that the meek will "inherit the earth" (Matt. 5:5) uses "earth" as a metaphor for the blessings of God, reminiscent of Palestine as a blessing from God to Israel. Stephen will begin his defense before the Sanhedrin, his summary of the history of Israel, in Acts 7 by citing Genesis 12:1. Peter will cite the same promise, from Genesis 22:18, in Acts 3:25ff. Paul refers to this promise in Rom. 4:13. He will quote 12:3 in Gal. 3:8 (cf. 3:16), describing God's promise to Abram as the "gospel." It is especially in Galatians that the NT will

portray Christians as “sons of Abraham” (Gal. 3:14). Meditate on the significance of Jesus’ words about Abram from John 8:56.

TRANSLATION - 12:4-8:

4 So Abram left just as Jehovah spoke to him and Lot left with him and Abram [was] a son of seventy-five years when he went out from Haran. **5** And Abram took Sarai his wife and Lot, the son of his brother, and all their possessions which they possessed and the soul which they made in Haran and they went out to go to the land of Canaan and they came to the land of Canaan. **6** And Abram traveled in the land as far as the place of Shechem as far as the oak of Moreh and the Canaanite [was] then in the land. **7** And Jehovah appeared to Abram and said, “To your seed I will give this land.” And he built there an altar to Jehovah who appeared to him. **8** And he proceeded from there to the mountain toward the east, to Bethel, and pitched his tent at Bethel on the west and Ai on the east and he built there an altar to Jehovah and he called on the name of Jehovah.

WORDS:

“Possessions” (28 times) and “possessed” (vers. 5; used only three other times, all in Gen.: 31:18; 36:6; 46:6) are related words. “Seed” (vers. 7; 229 times) is, again, an important word, especially in the book of Genesis (59 times) as man looks to the fulfillment of God’s promise to crush the head of the slanderer through the seed of woman (Gen. 3:15). “Altar” (403 times) was first used in the worship of Noah (8:20). “Proceeded” (vers. 8) is not often used of travels; it fundamentally means to “become old, or be removed.” “Pitched” is used 216 times. “West” is, literally, “from the sea,” the Mediterranean Sea.

GRAMMAR:

We, again, translate literally the Hebrew idiom “son of” which was a phrase to denote “having the quality or characteristic of” and here, it obviously refers to Abram’s age.

ARCHAEOLOGY:

Haran (cf. 11:31-32; ten times), the city, is spelled differently than the man’s name. Shechem (58 times) is the physical center of the land and will serve an important role in Israel’s history (see, for example, Gen. 35:4; Josh. 24:25; Judges 9:6, 34-39). Oaks (9 times) of Moreh (3 times) are also found referenced in Gen. 35:4; Deut. 11:30; Josh. 24:26; and Judges 9:37. Bethel (72 times) becomes a rich town in the early Bronze Age and has a long history in the OT. Only Jerusalem is mentioned more frequently. It lies ten miles (17 km) north of Jerusalem. It was originally called Luz (cf. 28:19).

Bethel and Ai (39 times) will be defeated by Joshua and the Israelites (Josh. 8). This whole itinerary illustrates the unsettled nature of Abram’s life and travels. Abram travels from the northern border to the southern border, traversing the land which his descendants will inherit. He traveled over 500 miles in this journey.

COMMENTS:

In words that are reminiscent of Noah, Abram obeyed God, putting God’s command above his family relationships. This is the first of a series of appearances (or “theophanies”) of God to the patriarchs. He will speak, of course, to Adam and Noah, but this is the first “appearance” of God to man. Those theophanies will culminate in the appearance, the theophany, of Jesus Christ (John 1:18; Hebrews 1:1-3).

Just like Noah built an altar as soon as he left the ark, as soon as Abram comes into the promised land, he builds an altar. This altar was the first built in the land of Palestine by a servant of Jehovah God. Abram builds an altar in Bethel, Hebron, and Mount Moriah (12:8; 13:18; 22:2, 9). Worship is important in a relationship with God. It is also significant to point out that the patriarchs, at least Abram, did not sacrifice on pre-existing altars. They built their own altars, which would not have been used prior, in worship to idols. For example, even though

Abram travels near the oaks of Moreh, there is no record of him performing any religious rites there. Trees were often associated with worship of the Ashtoreth (or “Astarte” or “Ishtar”). God will later forbid Israel from planting trees near His altar (Deut. 16:21).

To “call on the name of the Lord,” as we have seen (4:26), is more than simply prayer. It means to seek a relationship with God and to worship Him in a formal way (21:33; 26:25; Zeph. 3:9). Among the patriarchs, worship will be individual, not public. When God establishes the nation of Israel, worship will take on a corporate nature.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - Abram is following the voice of God, whom he cannot see. When he arrives in Palestine, God speaks to him and tells him that He will give Abram’s family the land on which he walked. That gift motivates Abram to worship God. Thanksgiving is the primary motivation for worship.

Contemporaries of Moses’ day - From the perspective of Moses’ audience, the Canaanites were “then” in the land. Israel had not conquered the land yet. It will be emphasized in Deuteronomy, especially, that this land was given by God to Israel.

Later Hebrew writers - Israel will later be exiled from the land of their forefathers, first under Assyrian domination, then under Babylonian domination. God will restore them to the land, once they repent, because He has a promise to fulfill (12:2-3). The Savior must come into the world.

NT writers - Once the Savior enters the world, the land, and the physical nation of Israel, will no longer serve a purpose in God’s plans (cf. Gal. 6:16).

TRANSLATION - 12:9-20:

9 Then Abram set out to go and he journeyed to the Negev. **10** And a famine happened in the land and Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there because heavy [was] the famine in the land. **11** Then it happened just as he drew near to come to Egypt that he said to Sarai, his wife, “Behold, please, I know that a woman beautiful in appearance you [are], **12** and it will happen that they will see you, the Egyptians, and they will say, ‘His wife, this one [is] and they will kill me but you they will keep alive. **13** Say, please, my sister you [are] so that he will do good to me for your sake and my soul will be [saved] on your account.”

14 Then it happened as Abram came to Egypt that the Egyptians saw his wife that beautiful she [was] extremely. **15** And they saw her, the princes of Pharaoh, and praised her to Pharaoh and the woman was taken to the house of Pharaoh.

16 And to Abram he did good on her account and there was to him a flock and cattle and donkeys and servants and maids and female donkeys and camels. **17** Then Jehovah plagued Pharaoh [with] great plagues and his house for the sake of Sarai, the wife of Abram. **18** So Pharaoh called to Abram and said, “What [is] this you did to me? Why did you not inform me that your wife she [was]? **19** Why did you say, ‘My sister she [is] so that I took her to me for a wife? But now, behold, your wife. Take and leave!’ **20** So Pharaoh commanded his men and they sent him away and his wife and all which [belonged] to him.

WORDS:

“Set out” (vers. 9; 146 times) is the verb “to journey,” so translated in the second half of the verse. The word originally meant to “pull out” tent pegs; from there, it came to refer to packing up and moving. “Sojourn” is a key term for the patriarchs, used fifteen times in their history. They were not a settled nation in the book of Genesis. “Famine” (vers. 10) is found 101 times in the OT with “to be hungry” occurring 13 times and “hungry” another 20 times. The densest concentration is in Genesis, chapters 41-47.

“Heavy” (ver. 10) is the literal meaning of the word often translated “glory.” The verb, which can mean “to be heavy,” “be honored,” or “be insensitive,” is used 114 times. The adjective is 41 times and the abstract noun, 200 times! Again, it is the word often translated

“glory,” “honor,” or “abundance.” It is especially prominent in Psalms (64 times), Isaiah (63 times), Exodus (33 times), Ezekiel (25 times), and Proverbs (24 times). You might say those are the most “glorious” books of the Bible!

“Draw near” (vers. 11; 280 times) is a typical verb used to refer to worship, coming close to God in worship. The related noun could be translated “neighbor.” “Please” (405 times) is a word used for emphasis or urgency, translated as “please,” “now,” or “surely.”

“Beautiful” (42 times) can also describe a man, who is “handsome” (Gen. 39:6). It can be translated generally as “good.” “Appearance” (12 times) is a related noun with the verb “to see” used several times in this text.

“Kill” (vers. 12; 167 times) means to “kill” or “slay.” It was used first of Cain’s treatment of Abel in Genesis 4:8. “Do good” (vers. 13) is the related verb for the adjective “good.”

“Extremely” (vers. 14) is used 300 times! It is used to intensify verbs, meaning “very” or “exceedingly.” (It is used twice, back-to-back in some passages such as Gen. 7:19; 17:2, 6; and Exo. 1:7). “Princes” (vers. 15) is actually a very similar word to “Sarai,” which means “princess.” “Praised” (146 times) means to “praise or to boast” about some superior quality. A related noun is the Hebrew word for the book of Psalms, songs of “praise.”

“Plagued” (vers. 17; 150 times) is, of course, a related verb for the noun “plague” (78 times), used frequently in reference to God’s punishments. It literally means to “touch” but can be something more serious. The verb “sent away” (vers. 20; 847 times), used of Pharaoh here, is also used in the exodus from Egypt in Exodus 3-11. See its use in Genesis: 3:23; 8:7-9, 12.

ARCHAEOLOGY:

“Negev” designates the South of Palestine, between the hills of Judah and Kadesh-Barnea. The rainfall was too low (1” or less per month) for normal agricultural work, so the area was generally not heavily inhabited except for a brief period in the Middle Bronze Age (2000 B. C.).

COMMENTS:

The land was not particularly suitable for Abram, at least not at that time. There was a famine. We could imagine Abram thinking, “God wants me to settle *here*?” Egypt, however, being irrigated by the Nile River, was often a refuge in times of drought and famine (cf. Deut. 11:10). Each of the patriarchs will experience a famine in Canaan (Gen. 26:1; 41:57; 42:1; 43:1). The land was not flowing “with milk and honey” during the days of the patriarchs!

This is the first occasion of the designation “pharaoh” as the leader of the Egyptian nation. The connection between Israel and Egypt is seen in the use of “pharaoh” 279 times in the Bible. It comes from the Egyptian *per-o*, which means “the great house,” used as early as 2,500 B. C. Few pharaohs are mentioned by name in the Bible; the Bible is not about them. But that does make it challenging to date some events, such as the life of Joseph and the exodus.

Abram’s story was a half-truth as he later acknowledges that he and Sarai are half-siblings (20:12-13), but Abram’s purpose was to deceive, and therein lay the moral problem. Isaac will follow in the same footsteps with Rebekah (Gen. 26:7-11). While it is easy to criticize the lack of faith in Abram and Isaac, we should keep in mind: the pagan environment from which Abram came and the lack of clear revelation from God relative to moral expectations.

In that culture, brothers had a strong say in who their sisters married (Gen. 24:55; 34:13-17). Perhaps Abram was hoping Pharaoh would seek his *permission* to marry his *sister* rather than seeking his *life* to marry his *wife*. If that was the case, perhaps Abram was hoping to deny any suitors for Sarai, his “sister,” and find escape through that. We do not know. Sarai was at least 65 years old, about mid-life (23:1) and Pharaoh’s princes agree with the husband: she is beautiful! Sarah’s beauty becomes the subject of fascination for later non-biblical Jewish writers. In support of the ancient dating of these events and their record, no later Jewish writer would have invented a story of “Father” Abraham marrying a sister as it was against the later Law of Moses (Lev. 18:9, 11; 20:17; Deut. 27:22)!

Pharaoh is angry with Abram, for good reason. It is remarkable for more than one reason that Pharaoh does not kill Abram. Yet, God was behind the scenes, working to save Abram's life and impress on Pharaoh and his court that Abram's God was looking over him.

We could imagine Pharaoh thinking that if these plagues happened when Pharaoh took Abram's life, what would happen if he took Abram's wife? *This* Pharaoh, in contrast with the pharaoh of the exodus, does fear God! Yet, despite Egypt's later treatment of Israel, there still is no hatred for Egypt expressed in the OT. On the contrary, consider what God says later about Egypt: Deut. 23:7; Isa. 19:24-25. It is ironic that, in an effort to save his own life, Abram almost lost it! There is a price to pay for a lack of faith.

Abram becomes even more wealthy in the land of Egypt! Female donkeys were particularly indications of wealth (Job 1:3; 42:12), as were camels. For years, scholars thought the mention of "camels" was anachronistic, being used in the wrong time frame, which indicated Genesis was written later than the time of Moses. But evidence eventually surfaced to collaborate the Bible's history, that wealthy men did own camels. They frequently were symbols of prestige rather than used as work animals, as early as the third millennia. They would be used in battle by 1,000 B. C.

APPLICATION:

Contemporaries in the text - Again, we should hesitate to criticize Abram for his dishonesty since God was only gradually revealing Himself to mankind and God's expectations were still rather generic. Abram will learn over time that he can trust God to fulfill His promises. The blessings Abram receives in Egypt have their own disadvantages. The livestock causes problems later between Abram and Lot's herdsmen (Gen. 13:7) and one of those female servants will cause problems, inadvertently on her part, between Abram and Sarai (Gen. 16:1).

Contemporaries of Moses' day - Just as Abram will become wealthy in Egypt, so Israel will become wealthy in Egypt (cf. Exo. 12:35). God is sovereign over hunger (Deut. 8:3). His people must trust God to provide. The word for "plagues" is used of the final plague on Egypt in Exodus 11:1. What God was about to do to Egypt in Moses' day is what God had already done, to a mild degree, in Abram's day. If *that pharaoh* had left a written record: "Don't mess with the God of the Israelites," he could have spared his future people some heartache!

Later Hebrew writers - Echoing the thoughts of Deut. 8:3, Proverbs 10:3 also states that God is Lord over the hungry. He will provide. The most famous famine to hit Palestine was in the days of Elijah, after three years of drought (1 Kings 17). Drought can only be interpreted as punishment from God if and when God sends a prophet to identify a drought as His punishment. Man would not know what sin has brought the drought, if God does not send a prophet. Otherwise, it is simply the weather. Drawing near to God is synonymous with trusting God (Zeph. 3:2).

NT writers - We marvel at Abram's faith and often forget the examples of his lack of faith. Of course, the NT writers praise Abram for his faith and Sarai for hers (cf. Heb. 11:8-16) and do not dwell on his weaknesses. Perhaps we, too, should focus on our strengths and not dwell so much on our weaknesses.