

The Gospel According To Paul: Romans

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An Excursus on Abraham

There are two essentials, in terminology and imagery that must be understood before the force of Paul's discussion in Rom 4 can be fully appreciated. The first is his concept of faith, which reflects both Hebrew and Greek influence; the second is a figure who stands as the greatest of the patriarchs of Hebrew Scripture and tradition – Abraham. We have presented an excursus on the biblical concept of faith; here we take up Paul's use of Abraham as the exemplification of his concept of biblical faith.

One of the most popular, and best selling books out today is Bruce Feiler's *Abraham, A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, HarperCollins Pub. It has been the editor's selection of the Book of the Month Club, and one of the major selections by History Book Club, Traditions Book Club, and Crossroads Book Club. It is very well written and gives a good presentation of this biblical and historical figure around whom the Israeli-Palestinian conflict rages over the land rights to that strip of land at the Eastern edge of the Mediterranean Sea, between Lebanon and Syria on the North, and the Negev Desert and Sinai Peninsula on the South, with Jordan bordering it on the East.

Abraham, a man born in Mesopotamia, traveled to this land, which he claimed was, "promised land," and staked a claim to it, believing that it was given to him by a God no one had heard of, no one had ever seen, and no one feared, served, or worshipped. No one recognized his claims and the ownership of the land is still in dispute. Feiler says of the area of Canaan Abraham considered promised to him:

The Mountain High Road that leads south, from Jerusalem toward Beersheba was once called the Patriarch's Road, because it's the route the biblical forefathers took from Galilee to the Negev. Abraham took this road on his first trek through the Promised Land, from Shechem to Bethel and down to Egypt. These days, the route is called the Blood Road, because it's the main target of Israeli and Palestinian snipers boring down from rival hills. Hebron is one of the deadliest cities on the planet, the epicenter of Muslim-Jewish warfare. All three faiths agree Abraham bought land here, buried Sarah here, and was buried here himself. (Bruce Fielier, *Abraham – A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, pp 189-90).

The greatest patriarch of the Hebrew Bible is, without doubt, Abraham. He is the shared ancestor of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It is because of the promise of God to Abraham that Israel claims the land on which they are now settled. Abraham is also a major figure in the New Testament Scriptures, as well as the Islamic Koran. He is called the father of twelve million Jews, two billion Christians, and one billion Muslims around the world. He is considered history's first monotheist by all three monotheistic faiths and the primary figure in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Hebrew Scriptures of the Jews claim that God promise this strip of land to Abraham and his seed, as traced through Isaac. The Koran, the Scriptures of the Islamic world, claims that the first born son of Abraham, Ishmael, was the legitimate heir of this land given to Abraham by God (*Allah*), (cf., Fielier, p. 9).

According to the chronology of the Old Testament, Abraham inaugurated the twentieth generation of humans. We have no record of his childhood, early life, or his family. Ancient Jewish storytellers attempted to fill in the gaps of his life and a number of apocalyptic writings appeared in the second century BC. The boyhood of Abraham is developed in *The Book of Jubilees* and the *Apocalypse of Abraham* in which he questions his father, an artist who carved "gods" out of stone.

In one of the legends, Abraham smashes an idol with a stick and tells his father one of the other gods in his shop did it. When his father tells him that this is impossible, Abraham suggests that his father to ask the idol who smashed him, and his father says, "You know that they cannot speak." Terah later moves his family, with Abraham and Sarah from Ur of the

Chaldees North to Haran in Syria. Later Abraham tells his father of an invisible God who can speak, who has instructed him to leave the land of Haran and go to a land this God will show him, even though he doesn't know where the land is.

The Biblical Story of Abraham

The biblical story of Abraham goes from event to event with each event calling upon Abraham to believe what God has told him. All of what we have in the biblical record was originally an oral tradition before it was written down by Moses some 500 to 700 years later. We know that the stories of Abraham were a part of the Israelite cultural tradition because when God identified himself to Moses at the burning bush, he called himself, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob (Exodus 3:15); Moses took the name of this God to the Israelites and they knew the God of whom he spoke. So the Israelites knew who Abraham was, as well as the God of Abraham, and the most ancient means of passing this kind of tradition along was by storytelling.

When Moses wrote down these oral traditions, he was, no doubt, assisted in his recording of the stories as Jesus told the twelve they would be assisted in John 14:26, the *Ruach Elohim* (Spirit of God) would teach them all things, and bring to their remembrance all things that he had said to them. In other words, the Holy Spirit would give them new insights (i.e., teach them all things) and give them accurate and faithful recall of what they already knew (i.e., will bring all things to your remembrance). The following is the result of this phenomena of the combination of “oral tradition” and “inspiration.”

The Early History of Abraham

After Terah had lived 70 years, he became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. This is the account of Terah. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot (Genesis 11:26-27).

Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram's wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor's wife was Milcah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milcah and Iscah. (Genesis 11:29)

Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur (in the Persian Gulf) of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, (in Syria) they settled there (Genesis 11:31).

The Call of Abraham and the Land Promise

The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you."² "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing."³ "I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."⁴ So Abram left, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran.⁵ He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.⁶ Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.⁷ The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring¹ I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him.⁸ From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord.⁹ Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev (Genesis 12:1-9).

Sojourn in the Land of Canaan

According to Genesis 13:2, "Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold." Genesis 13:18 tells us, "So Abram moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron (*West of the Dead Sea*), where he built an altar to the Lord." During this time Abraham becomes involved in a territorial conflict (a land war), and is successful in the conflict and the rescue of the family of his nephew, Lot. In addition to getting his family back, he also gained possession of the booty of his victory over his enemies. To show his appreciation to God for the victory, he gave half of the booty to a priest of the Most High God by the name of Melchizedek, an event of great significance in the Christian

interpretation of the role of Jesus as a High Priest. The issue of the land promise and the promise of an heir to inherit the land after Abraham's death appears again.

The Promise of an Heir

After this, (the rescue of Lot and the visit of Melchizedek) the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward. your reward will be very great" ² But Abram said, "O Sovereign Lord , what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" ³ And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." ⁴ Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." ⁵ He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars-if indeed you can count them," (Genesis 15:1-5).

Abraham's Faith Makes Him Righteous in the Eyes of God

*Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." ⁶**Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.** ⁷He also said to him, "I am the Lord , who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it" ¹² As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. ¹³ Then the Lord said to him, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years. ¹⁴ But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. ¹⁵ You, however, will go to your fathers in peace and be buried at a good old age. ¹⁶ In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." ¹⁷ When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. ¹⁸ On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram and said, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates- " (Genesis 15:6-18).*

The Story of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael

In Genesis 16, we have the story of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael. Sarah knew that Abraham believed he would have a son. Since he had not impregnated her, perhaps he could impregnate her handmaiden, Hagar. This type of surrogate motherhood was practiced among the people of this culture. One wonders if Sarah's motivation was to see if the problem was her inability to become pregnant or Abraham's inability to get her pregnant. This would explain why Sarah became so outraged with Hagar after she realized she was pregnant, forcing Hagar to run away. Whatever her motives, Hagar conceives and gives Abraham a son, Ishmael. This seems to satisfy Abraham until Sarah conceives and gives him a son of his legitimate wife. Ishmael is 14 years old and is soon perceived as unnecessary, as well as unwanted, by Sarah. Hagar and Ishmael are soon driven from the camp of Abraham and Isaac is left as the only heir to Abraham.

Sojourn of Abraham in Canaan

In Genesis 17, we have the account of God reinforcing his promise of an Heir to Abraham, after which he Issues the rite of circumcision. In chapter 18, we are told of a theophany of God in the form of three visitors to Abraham, in which God tells Abraham that his son would be born in a year's time, after which he informs Abraham of his intention to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah. Chapters 19-20 tell of the barter between Abraham and God concerning the salvation of the righteous in Sodom. There are no righteous people in Sodom but God does promises to deliver Lot and his family.

In Genesis 21 we are told of the birth of Isaac, and, in chapter 22, of the test of Abraham faith in God's command for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. From what may be learned from Hebrews 11, Abraham believed that since God had told him that the land promise would be fulfilled through the seed of Isaac, God would bring Isaac back to life if Abraham killed him. Abraham's belief in God's good will toward him and his faithfulness to his word resulted in his obedience to God. According to Genesis 25, Abraham died at the age of 175 and leaves everything he owned to Isaac.

Abraham and the Biblical Concept of Faith

As presented in the previous lesson on the biblical concept of faith, faith or belief consist of content or knowledge or content, persuasion or

conviction that the knowledge was true, and commitment to what was believed in behavior consistent with what was believed. Abraham always **knew** what God wanted him to do, he was **persuaded** that what he was hearing and the one from whom he was hearing it were true, and his **commitment** (giving himself) to what he believed was always reflected in his behavior.

In his every encounter with God he was always persuaded or convinced of the truth of what God had said to him, and he always acted in consistency with what he knew and was convinced of. He committed himself to what he believed. This is reflected in his belief in monotheism, his call to go out from his father's house, the promise of the land of Canaan, the promise that his heir would inherit the land promised to him, the rite of circumcision for all males of his household, the word of the three visitors who were a theophany of God, that Isaac would be the father of a great nation and inherit the land of Canaan, and because of this was convinced that God would provide a sacrifice in the place of Isaac or would raise him back to life, that God would preserve the seed of Abraham and keep his promise to him to make of him a great nation or people.

Abraham heard the voice of a God he had never seen, went looking for a place he had never seen, **believed** he would have descendants he would never see, **believed** that they would become a nation he would never see, **believed** he would have a male offspring to carry on his lineage that was not yet seen, **believed** that even if he sacrificed Isaac, God would yet keep his promise to bring forth a nation from Isaac's seed, and that these heirs would inherit the land on which he dwelt, but he, himself, would never see the ownership of that land.

With Abraham, there was always, "*something to believe in.*" His story is a story of going from belief to belief, believing in one promise after another, accepting one thing on the basis of faith after another, and believing only in one God. This is why he is called, the man of faith, the believer, and the father of monotheistic faith. When Paul needed an example of how faith in God can empower the life of the believer, and how such belief can be the most endearing characteristic of man in the eyes of God - so much so that it can make him righteous in the eyes of God - where else would he go but to Abraham, the father of faith?