

Text: Genesis 11:27-12:20

Title: Abrahamic Covenant

Truth: A divine promise from 4,200 years ago is still being fulfilled.

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Introduction

At this point, we have reached the account of Abraham. He is the center of attention through chapter 25.

I. Terah's Family, 11:27-32

- A. Terah had three sons – Abram, Nahor, and Haran. We will focus on Abram later in these notes.
- B. Nahor married Milcah (v. 29). Genesis 22:20-23 tells us that they had eight children. One of these was Bethuel, a cousin to Abraham's son Isaac. Bethuel's daughter was Rebekah, who would eventually become the wife of Isaac (Gen. 24:15-67).

The Bible records this history and makes no comment here as to the advisability of cousin marriage. Earlier in human history, to marry a first cousin—or first cousin once removed as in this case—was not a problem legally nor genetically.

Today, cousin marriage is prohibited by Catholics (although a special dispensation allowing it is possible). About half of the United States also disallow cousin marriage as a legal protection for the general welfare of the society because of higher incidence of birth defects from such unions. 19 of the United States do not prohibit first cousin marriage. 44 states allow first-cousin-once-removed marriage such as in this case. Lev. 18:6-18 does not prohibit cousin marriage. According to one source, the US is the only nation with legal restrictions against first cousin marriages [1]. I am *not* advocating for it. I am simply reporting the facts that I found.

The one-generation gap between Isaac and Rebekah is not a problem when you remember that Abraham did not have Isaac until very late in life. This makes Isaac much closer to the age of his next generation cousin than to his first cousin.

- C. Haran had a son, Lot, but then died while still in Ur of the Chaldees with his father Terah. Stop and dwell on this for a moment—that Terah had the grief of losing one of his sons. What deep sadness this must have entailed for him. After that, Lot tagged along with his uncle Abram.
- D. Abram’s wife was Sarai. They were not able to have children for many years. Nahor appears to have married his niece from his brother Haran. That marriage has an even smaller degree of separation than a cousin marriage!
- E. Move to the City of Haran, 11:31-32. Terah moved his family from Ur of the Chaldees to Haran. Ur is on the Euphrates River, just northwest of the Arabian Sea. This is right along the border between modern-day Saudi Arabia and Iraq. Ur was a wealthy Sumerian city east (and south) of Babylon. Their destination, Haran, was basically northwest along the Euphrates about 600 miles. The city was probably named by Terah after his son who died as a young man in Ur.

Apparently, Terah intended to take his family to the land of Canaan but stopped short of that goal. From what we know so far, the call of God came to Abram in Ur, and that induced the whole clan to begin to move toward Canaan (Gen. 15:7). But they did not make it all the way to the promised land. They lived for a while at a stopover point in Haran.

Terah reached the old age of 205 years and died in Haran. There may be a perfectly logical and innocent reason why they stopped in Haran. Perhaps a health issue or something else.

- F. Genesis 12:4-5 says that Abram left Haran and departed to go to Canaan, a goal he thus finally achieved. One observation: It might take you a while to complete a “project of obedience” to God, but it is eminently worthwhile to do so.

II. God’s Call to Abram, 12:1-3

- A. The message that God gave to Abram is what is called a unilateral covenant or grant. He promised to give Abram certain things, without any conditions attached to the ultimate fulfillment of those promises. This is the commencement of what we call the

dispensation of promise. While God did not abandon his previous dispensational arrangement of human government [3], He made a new arrangement for the beginnings of the nation of Israel which will be the focus of God's work through the remainder of the OT.

The first part of what God said consists of a command for Abram to move to the land that God would show him. From 12:5, it is apparent that Abram knew the general area to which God was directing him, namely the land of Canaan, but he did not know some of the more specifics (Heb. 11:8). In fact, it was only later (12:7, 13:14-18, 15:18-21) that Abram was given more details on the exact dimensions of the property that God was deeding to him.

Note that Heb. 11:8 tells that Abram obediently left his home country in faith. Genesis 15:6 is the classic verse that points out that Abraham was justified, but he first exercised faith in God before Genesis 15.

B. Then God makes several "I will" promises. Depending on how you divide it up, you might see three parts to this promise, or up to seven parts. The following will break it down into seven parts to help explain it. Some are promises to Abram personally; others are to his descendants; others are for those who are outside of his physical family.

1. **I will make you a great nation.** This is a promise that, though Abram did not have children yet, he would have a huge number of descendants. Heb. 11:12 says that Abraham has many descendants. In addition to those from Isaac, there are those of Ishmael's line and from Keturah. "Great" means "large." Of course, the nation of Israel will also be "great" in the sense of "important" in the future of God's program with mankind.
2. **I will bless you.** Abraham would receive personal blessings, both spiritually and physically. He did receive personal blessings in his lifetime. He was very wealthy (13:2), for instance. He also had many servants (318, 14:14).
3. **And make your name great.** This speaks of fame. There is no doubt that Abraham is well known throughout the world to this very day. Jews, Muslims, and Christians respect this man.

4. **And you shall be a blessing.** Some of the blessings that Abraham receives will be transmitted to others around him. The “and” indicates that this is a consequence of God’s promise to multiply his descendants, bless him personally, and make him famous. And how this works out practically is shown in the next three statements. **This is like a hinge:** the previous verses build up to this, and the following verses come out of it. Interestingly, this is not a future tense verb. It is an imperative. Because of God’s promise, Abraham must be a blessing. He cannot avoid it!
 5. **I will bless those who bless you.** Those who treat Abraham well will be blessed. Note that this and the following promise primarily refer to Abraham personally. Corporate solidarity is an important concept, and we will see in Genesis how this principle trickled down to following generations.
 6. **I will curse those who curse you.** Those who treat Abraham “lightly” (disrespect him, etc.) will not receive blessings from God; in fact, they will be cursed. This has a similar trickle-down effect to later generations.
 7. **And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.** The spiritual aspect of the blessing upon Abraham comes here. See Acts 3:25, Galatians 3:8. It is obvious that the later Scriptures show this promise to be a reference to the Messiah and His making salvation available to Gentiles as well as Jews.
- C. Note that Heb. 11:13 tells us that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob did not receive the promises, but saw them afar off and were assured of their fulfillment. These promises still await final fulfillment. Our view of eschatology must be formed in large part around these promises, and those associated with them throughout the OT.
- D. However, disobedience can delay (from the human perspective) the fulfillment of a unilateral covenant; it can certainly put its provisions out of reach at some specific time or another, according to the pleasure of God. In this sense, there are *conditions* but not in the sense that the covenant will ever be thrown out. This is the situation that Israel finds itself in today. Many of the people are in a hardened state of unbelief. They cannot expect that God will bless them in their unbelief. God blessed Abraham with temporal

blessings in part because he was a believer. When Abraham stepped out of bounds (i.e., with Hagar), problems ensued.

We must not take the blessings promised to Israel and think of them now as given to the church, for they were and are not the church's property. We must also not forget the curses that God gave to Israel for unbelief. Both blessings and curses stay with the Jewish nation.

- E. A note about this calling: This is special, direct revelation from God to Abram. Abram was privileged to receive this kind of revelation many times in his life. No one is "called" this way today. The Holy Spirit does not "speak" to anyone. He will use the Word of God to convince a person of their need to do this or that, but He does not convey this in an audible voice.

III. Abram's Travels to Canaan (Palestine) and Egypt, 12:4-20

- A. **To Canaan.** Abraham obeyed God's command and took his family, with nephew Lot, to Canaan. He stopped on the journey at some notable locations, namely Shechem and Bethel. God promised the land again (v. 7). This time, Abram could see the land before his very eyes.
- B. **To Egypt.** Abram's Travel to Egypt, 12:10-20

A famine induced Abram to go to Egypt to find food. This may have been necessary for a short time to find nourishment, but what was clearly not right was for him to lie about his wife and ask her to lie for him (12:10-13). His excuse: If she was his sister, then they would treat him well, trying to curry favor so that he would allow one of the Egyptians to marry her. But as her husband, he was a "rival" to anyone who wanted her.

Pharaoh took Sarai into his house and by so doing treated Abram "lightly" (even though he was deceived) by treating his wife this way. God plagued Pharaoh as a result. Abraham went away dishonored because of his lie in the sight of the Egyptians. He did not trust God enough to tell the truth. You can—no, *must*—trust God enough to not deceive others. Come clean, deal with the consequences, and watch how God helps you.

C. A note about chronology. Genesis 11:26 says that Terah was 70 years and he had three sons. We would expect at first reading that Abram was born when Terah was about 70 years old. When Terah died at 205, then it appears that Abram would be 135 years old. However, 12:4 tells us that Abram was 75 years old when he departed from Haran (and 100 years old when Isaac was born, 21:5). Assuming Abram was there until the death of his father (an assumption that seems valid given that Abram took along Lot, who otherwise may have stayed in Haran), Abram must have been born when Terah was 130 years old. Remember that the genealogies may not be arranged according to strict chronology; further, the “notable” son may not have been the eldest—Abram could have been younger than both his brothers Nahor and Haran.

We can figure from this that Abraham was born about 2165 B.C. and left Haran in 2090 B.C.

If Abram was born when Terah was around 70 years old, Abram would have left Haran behind before Terah died. 12:5 says he was 75 when he departed Haran. This would make Terah about 145 years old in Haran when Abram left, with 70 more years to live before he died.

I am not presently aware of (or remembering) any major problem with either approach, although having Abram born when his dad is 130 seems a bit of a stretch, given what 11:26 says.

Conclusion

This is quite a history lesson which sets the stage for the rest of the Old Testament. It helps us understand where the Jewish people came from and gives us an early promise of the gospel. It reminds us to obey what God tells us to do, and to trust Him enough to persevere in obedience even if it seems somewhat dangerous.

MAP

End Notes

[1] <https://www.focusonthefamily.com/family-qa/cousin-marriage/>

[2] en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cousin_marriage_law_in_the_United_States

[3] This is why it is incorrect to define a dispensation as a period of time. It is not. Rather, it is a stewardship arrangement that God assigns man. The human government dispensation never really ended. It has continued in the world down to this day. The era of innocence did indeed end, and the era of conscience seems to have ended with the addition of human governmental arrangements. The dispensation of promise, as the arrangement with Abram is called, did not abrogate the prior arrangement. The dispensation of Law ended at the Cross, although certain principles of God's holiness revealed therein continue as they never become obsolete. Neither Law nor the church age ended the governmental or promise arrangements.