

OCTOBER 18, 2020

ABRAM AND SARAI FIND A NEW HOME

GENESIS 12 & 17

BEGINNING PRAYER REFLECTION

This story of a new beginning for Abram and Sarai is centered on a promise God makes to them. We call this promise between God and the couple a covenant. In it God promises to be their God and to be with them always; Abram and Sarai promise to remember that God is their God. As a result of this promise, or covenant, God told Abram that they would produce a new nation: a people more numerous than the stars in the sky.

This story is also the beginning of the story of migration, a tale of immigrants. This story of migration will be repeated in the exodus when God's people leave Egypt and slavery to return to the promised land. God will remind them over and over that they were once immigrants and should show hospitality to any immigrants or foreigners among them.

Many of us are prone to separate our faith from the rest of our lives. We assume that the biblical text is an ancient document with little relevance today. To consider the story of Abraham and Sarah in the context of current events, consider these questions.

- Who are the immigrants among your ancestors? What do you know about them?
- Read Psalm 137:1–4. Can you imagine yourself in a situation where these words would be yours?
- Take a look at how the PC(USA) engages ministry with refugees.
<https://pda.pcusa.org/situation/refugee-ministry/>

Faithful God, remind us daily that we are your people, wherever we are, and lead us to show your faithfulness to the immigrants in our midst. Amen.

ENGAGING THE TEXT

Skim through the story of Abram and Sarai's journeys in Genesis 12-25, focusing especially on chapters 12 and 17 (We'll come back and spend some time with some of the other chapters in the coming weeks). Pay close attention to the words of this text. What words or phrases do you notice? What questions arise? What parts of the story are familiar to you? What parts have you not heard before?

DIGGING DEEPER

(from "Genesis" by Dr. W. Eugene March, A. B. Rhodes Professor of Old Testament Emeritus at Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, published by www.thethoughtfulchristian.com)

The Abraham/Sarah stories in Genesis chapters 12–24 are part of a series of accounts dealing with the predecessors of the people Israel. The Abraham/Sarah story centers on a family that migrated from Ur, probably located in what we know as Iraq about two hundred miles southeast of modern Baghdad and about one hundred miles northwest of the border of Kuwait.

Abram and his wife Sarai (whose names are later changed to Abraham and Sarah; 17:5, 15) set out from Ur with Abram's father, Terah, and the extended family, to go to Canaan, more than one thousand miles away at the other end of what is sometimes called the Fertile Crescent. The Fertile Crescent extends from the mouth of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers over to what is now Turkey and down the coast of the Mediterranean Sea through modern Syria, Lebanon, Israel/Palestine to the border of Egypt. For unknown reasons, however, the clan stops at Haran, in what is now southeast Turkey.

God's Initial Promise

After an unspecified length of time in Haran, Abram and Sarai are told to leave Haran and travel toward a land that is initially unidentified (12:1). God promises them, "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing" (12:2). In other words, they are to become the parents of a populous people (see 15:1–6). They would be famous and through them all the nations of the world would receive blessing. Good things would happen to those who blessed them, but a curse would fall on those who cursed them (12:3). This was a powerful promise!

In response Abram and Sarai set out with their households and flocks, heading south toward Canaan. They take with them one of their nephews, Lot (12:4–5). For a time, they stop at Shechem (near the present city of Nablus) in the hill country of Canaan. While they are there, the Lord expands the promise, saying to Abram, "To your offspring I will give this land" (12:7).

Eventually Abram and Sarai with their entourage travel several hundred miles farther south to the Negeb (12:6–9), a vast semiarid area somewhat like southern New Mexico and Arizona. Because of his response to God's promise, Abram the Urite is remembered in the Bible as "the friend of God" (Isa. 41:8; 2 Chr. 20:7; Jas. 2:23).

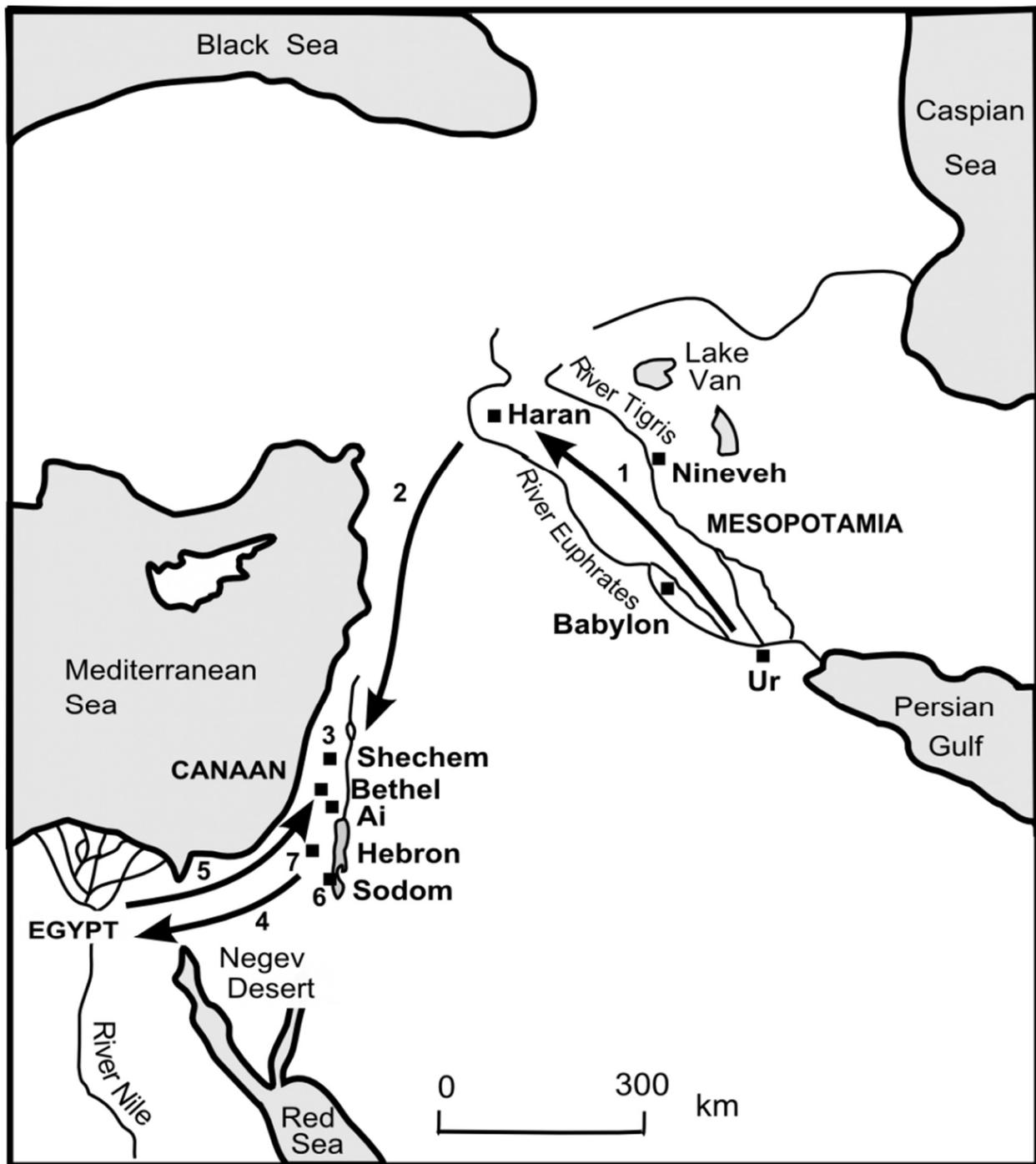
Testing the Promise

The theme of divine promise is found throughout the stories about Abram and Sarai. The initial promise account is followed by a story about Abram and Sarai in Egypt and their failure to trust in God. They had traveled there to escape a drought-caused famine in Canaan (12:10). Fearing that the Egyptians might kill him to take his beautiful wife Sarai, Abram instructs her to say she is his unmarried sister (12:11–13). Here the drama begins. Though God had made a commitment to Abram and Sarai, is it trustworthy? Abram is not sure, so he decides to depend on human deception to secure his safety.

The story unfolds quickly. The Egyptians do find Sarai dazzlingly beautiful and she is taken into Pharaoh's harem. Abram is given large herds and numerous servants from Pharaoh in return for Sarai. But this is an unacceptable situation because God's promise is in danger of radical compromise (12:14–16). How can Sarai be the mother of Abram's promised offspring if she is one of Pharaoh's wives? God intervenes by sending plagues against Pharaoh and his household (12:17). Pharaoh recognizes what has happened (12:18–19). He has, because of Abram and Sarai's deception, inadvertently taken another man's wife into his harem! Pharaoh immediately releases Sarai and sends Abram on his way (12:20; see 20:17–18).

Abram's fragile trust in God's promise of offspring and land is a theme found in the main characters in this part of Genesis. Repeatedly lack of trust in God to deliver on the divine promise of a child is encountered. Both Abram and Sarai try on their own to provide the longed-for child. Abram chooses Eliezer, a slave in his household, to be his designated heir (15:1–3). Sarai gives Hagar, her maidservant, to Abram and directs him to have sexual intercourse with her so that she might provide the desired heir (16:1–4). Later in the city of Gerar ruled by Abimelech, Abraham again doesn't trust God to protect him and his wife so he tries the same basic trick he had attempted with Pharaoh, with much the same consequence (20:1–18).

These stories are entertaining and instructive. The major characters are not presented as paragons of virtue. They are not particularly brave or consistently faithful. Rather, they seem to be average people who sometimes respond as God hopes and sometimes do not. The point is that God set out directing humankind toward God's purpose through ordinary folk with whom we can all identify. Through one particular family God began a journey that yet continues, aimed at establishing a lasting relationship with all humankind.



RESPONDING TO THE WORD

Abram and Sarai left what was comfortable and familiar to follow God's call. The text is silent about their mental and emotional response at this point. What does that tell us? What mental and emotional responses might someone have at this point in the text? When have you been in a situation when you had to leave what was comfortable and step out into the unknown? How was God at work in that situation?