

December 4 - Gen. 12:1–9 - The Call of Abraham

Torah Reading: Gen. 12:1–9 - The Call of Abraham

Psalm 9

Haftorah - Joshua 24:3-10 + 14

Abraham, the Father of Faith

God had promised not to destroy the earth again by a flood, even though the “imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth.” (Genesis 8:21). Instead - with idolatry and moral corruption rampant - God decided to directly reveal himself to one family only, which would become a nation that would be the vehicle for the promised seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15), the One who would eventually bless all the earth's people, both Jew and Gentile, with salvation.

Abraham (who was first called Abram) was born in the year 1948 after Creation (1813 BCE). (According to one tradition he was born in the month of Nissan; according to another, in the month of Tishrei.) In the Torah, Abraham's birthplace is called Ever-haNahar ("Beyond the River").

Abraham was the tenth generation removed from Noah, being a direct descendant of Shem.

A compilation of the Talmud stories about Abraham's early life can be found here:
- http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/112063/jewish/Abrahams-Early-Life.htm
- <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abraham#Judaism>
- <http://www.panix.com/~jjbaker/MadaAkum.html>
(Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Idolatry, Ch. 1)

Why doesn't the Torah discuss these stories? The rabbis said that God “did not want to elaborate on the opinions of the idolators,” instead concentrating on God's testing of Abraham beginning with his call.

In these rabbinical stories, Abraham is placed in opposition to Nimrod and his lifetime is associated with the Tower of Babel.

“Nimrod” [who we previously have guessed was probably Sargon] could be a stand-in for whatever powerful ruthless ruler was in charge in Abram's day, following in Nimrod/Sargon's cruel and despotic tradition, since Abraham was probably born much later than the Tower incident. Ancient Jewish sources such as Seder Olam Rabbah date the birth of Abraham to 1813 B.C. The time period of the Patriarchs is generally placed by scholars anytime between ca. 2100 and 1500 B.C.

If Abraham did confront a powerful ruler, it would likely be the Amorite king of Babylon, Hammurabi (c. 1810 BC - 1750 BC), whose realm would have included Ur.

Where was “Ur of the Chaldees”?

Ur was a city founded in much earlier Sumerian times. The Chaldeans were Arameans who reached prominence at a far later time, around 1200-1000 B.C. Moses or a later editor probably associated Ur with the Chaldeans who were resident there at the time.

Why was Abram’s family there? Abraham is called both a Hebrew and an Aramean (Deuteronomy 26:5). There is evidence for a continuity between the 18th century B.C. Amorites and the 12th century B.C. Arameans. The Amorites (a Semitic people descended from Shem) had moved into the area after the Third Dynasty of Ur declined. Abram’s family probably arrived in Ur with that migration, which is historically verified.

The name Abram/Abraham

The original and proper form of this name seems to be either "Abram" or "Abiram" (1 Kings 16:34; Deut. 11:6), with the meaning, "my Father [or my God] is exalted." The form "Abraham" yields no sense in Hebrew, and is probably only a graphic variation of "Abram," the h being simply a letter, indicating a preceding vowel, a; but popular tradition explains it "father of a multitude" (ab hamon), given as a new name on the occasion of a turning-point in the patriarch's career (Gen. 17:5).

Phonetically “Abraham” puts an indication of breath/spirit - “ha” - in the midst of Abram’s name.

"Until Abraham's time the Lord was known only as the God of heaven. When He appeared to Abraham, He became the God of the earth as well as of heaven, for He brought Him nigh to man" (Midr. R. to Gen. 24, 3). Abraham, called "the One" (Isa. 2, 2, Heb., and Ezek. 33), rendered the whole human family one (Gen. Rabba xxxix). "Whosoever has a benign eye, a simple heart, and a humble spirit, or who is humble and pious, is a disciple of Abraham" (Ab. v. 29, and Ber. 6b), and he who lacks kindness of heart is no true son of Abraham (Beṣah, 32a).

— <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/360-abraham>

Abraham in the New Testament

Matthew traces Jesus’ genealogy back to Abraham (Matt 1:17). Faithful Jews are called “sons” or “daughters” of Abraham (Luke 13:16, Luke 19:9) and are given the promise that he will be there to meet them when they depart this life (Luke 16:22). A summary of his accomplishments occurs in Acts 7 and Heb 11. Christian believers can rightly be called children of Abraham because they share the faith of Abraham (Gal 3:6-9).

John 8:56 - “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad.”

Acts 7:1-3 - “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran...”

Romans 4:11 - Abraham is referred to as “... the father of all who believe.”

The call of Abram

Genesis 12:1 - "Now the LORD had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred (birthplace), and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee."

From country, birthplace, father's house - each one harder than the previous one, because the attachment is stronger.

Compare Jesus' words:

Luke 14:26 - "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple ..."

"Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple" (**Luke 14:33**)

Hebrews 11:9–12 - "By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

Initially Abram was "going without knowing." Leaving behind all past connections, and with no hope of future progeny since Sarai was barren (but still with responsibility for the "substance that they had gathered," and for his nephew Lot and "the souls that they had gotten in Haran") his response to God's call was a picture of an obedient leap of faith and living in the moment.

Onkelos and the other Jewish interpreters explain "the souls that they had gotten in Haran" were proselytes and persons whom they had converted to the faith in one true God. But for the most part they were his dependents and slaves, to whom he gave careful spiritual training (see Genesis 18:19).

Abraham's blessing

Genesis 12:2-3 - "And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse (*arar* - 'bitterly curse') him that curseth thee (*qalal* - 'treats you lightly'): and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed."

The blessing expanded and repeated elsewhere:
(Genesis 12:7; 22:17; 49:24-26)

Galatians 3:6-9 - "Even as Abraham believed God, and it was accounted to him for righteousness. Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed. So then they which be of faith are blessed with faithful Abraham."

Galatians 3:16 - "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ."

The word "blessing" is used five times in this passage, corresponding to the fivefold abundance of light created on the first day of creation (where the word "light" also occurs five times). To the ancient rabbis, this suggested a "second world" had been created with the advent of Abraham.

"and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed." - A midrash connects this with a time when the people which "do not now understand one another's speech" because of the Tower of Babel will become once again one family.

To Haran and then Canaan

Genesis 12:5 - "And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their substance that they had gathered, and the souls that they had gotten in Haran; and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan they came."

Josephus (Antiq., i. 7) has preserved the legend that "Abram came with an army from the country beyond Babylon, and conquered Damascus, and reigned there for a short time, after which he migrated into the land of Canaan." In his servant Eliezer of Damascus we have a reminder of Abram's halt there.

God appears

Genesis 12:7 - "And the LORD appeared unto Abram, and said, Unto thy seed will I give this land: and there builded he an altar unto the LORD, who appeared unto him."

Once Abram had obeyed and arrived in Canaan, God "appeared" to him. Many times God appeared to Abram/Abraham and others as the Angel of the Lord.

The Angel of Yahweh or the Angel of Elohim was regarded by ancient Jewish commentators as the Shechinah, the indwelling of God in the world, i.e., the only Mediator between God and the world, who bears in Jewish mysticism the name Metatron. The early Church regarded Him as the Logos, the second person of the Deity; and only a few of the fathers, such as Augustine and Jerome, thought of a created angel. But God also appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and to Israel as the pillar of fire. Finally God appeared the world most clearly in his incarnation as Jesus Christ.

John 1:18 - “No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.”

Genesis 12:8 - “and there he built an altar to the LORD, and called on the name of the LORD.”

Like Noah’s altar after the flood commemorated a new beginning for the world, Abram’s altar also commemorated a new world opening up, one centered on the Promised Land and limited to a new family of faith who would become Israel.