

Abraham in Egypt

I. REVIEW OF WEEK #10

A. God Calls Abraham

God called Abram, a Shemite, to leave his homeland and his father's house for a new country. He promised to bless Abram by making of him a great nation, one with a dynasty of kings, and to extend His blessing to all families on earth through Abram.

B. Restoring Man’s Blessedness

In this, God promised to resolve the problem that drove Adam and Eve out of Eden. In some way as yet unclear, God is going to do a work on earth that will result in restoring man's blessedness.

He will once again be pleasing in God's sight. Details are few, but this promise is a beacon of bright hope for all human beings.

C. A Clean Break

Abram put his trust in God and left home. Turning his back on comfort, safety, familiarity, and perhaps the pleas of his family, he made a clean break with his past to follow the voice of God, Whom he did not really know. He went out to receive the astounding gift God offered to him.

D. Abraham Grew in Reverence of God

Abram grew in reverence of God. He built altars as a sign of this reverence, acknowledging that God is worthy of honour, praise, and sacrifice.

II. ABRAHAM IS TESTED

Abram will have to be tested again and again by God to see if he is faithful and capable of being the “father of a multitude.” One of his first tests occurs when there is a famine in Canaan

Read: Genesis 12:10-20

[10] Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there, for the famine was severe in the land.

[11] When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to Sarai his wife, "I know that you are a woman beautiful to behold;

[12] and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife'; then they will kill me, but they will let you live.

[13] Say you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account."

[14] When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful.

[15] And when the princes of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house.

[16] And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, he-asses, menservants, maidservants, she-asses, and camels.

[17] But the LORD afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife.

[18] So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?

[19] Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her, and be gone."

[20] And Pharaoh gave men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had.

A. Famine in Canaan

Abram was faced with a famine in the land that he had left everything for. What do you think this did to his faith? What was his response to the crisis?

Abram must have had wonderful expectations about what God was about to do for him. Although it must have been difficult to leave the known for the unknown, the promise of God to abundantly bless him surely gave Abram some confidence that it would all work out.

A famine would have put that confidence to the test. He may have experienced disturbing doubts: "What am I doing here? Why did I ever leave the security of my father's house? If I had stayed there, I probably wouldn't be facing starvation."

B. Abraham in Egypt

He responded by going down to Egypt, where he expected food to be more plentiful. This was not necessarily a bad thing in itself. In fact, the history of Israel would later be characterized by two other flights into Egypt for safety - one by the brothers of Joseph and their families when they were faced with famine.

The other was the flight of another Joseph, the husband of Mary, when he took his family there to escape Herod's murderous rage against the newborn King of Israel.

C. God Comes to Abraham’s Aid

It is important to note how God comes to Abram’s aid in Egypt, and how He defends his marriage with Sarai, despite the patriarch’s attitude. Abram was aware of what would happen before Pharaoh’s intervention regarding Sarai.

Abram feared for his life, so he urged his wife Sarai, a very beautiful woman, to pretend that she was his sister. In this way Pharaoh could take Sarai as his wife, and Abram’s life would be spared.

For Abram to tell the Pharaoh that Sarai was his sister was half-true: she was his half-sister [they shared the same father], but his intention was to deceive the Pharaoh and allow the Pharaoh to take Sarai as his wife, not knowing she was already the wife of Abram.

This was certainly wrong of him to do. Even the Pharaoh would come to recognize that. What was God's response to Abram's weakness?

God prevented further damage by afflicting Pharaoh's household with plagues (the judgment of God is always a sign of His mercy).

It seems that God did what was necessary to convince Abram to live righteously. He shows great patience with Abram's weakness. He understood the fear that prompted the sin and so sets Abram back on the path to restoration.

In addition, for Abram to see God at work in Egypt, following him wherever he went, would have taught him a profoundly new lesson. This God is not like pagan deities, who were associated with specific locations. This God is everywhere.

After Abram's appalling behaviour – he was on the point of giving up the wife whom God had chosen for him – why didn't God just start over again with someone who would be more reliable?

God did not want to start over with someone more reliable; He wanted to make Abram into a more reliable man. Will Abram cooperate with God? This is the question God had put to Cain: "If you do well, will you not be accepted?" (Gen. 4:7).

It is the question He asks each one of us. He shows Himself willing to work with us in our weakness; it is rebellion and turning away from Him that will exclude Him from our lives.

D. A Nation for Himself

We have seen in Genesis that righteousness in man after the fall, where it can be found, is fragile. It is easily overwhelmed or diluted by weakness or by contact with men who have rebelled against authority and given themselves over to pride.

God's plan to restore blessedness on earth was to build a nation. Righteousness is difficult to live alone. Jesus, the descendant of Abram Who made all things new, built the Church as a nation of God's people, whose unity will serve to strengthen them in the covenant.

If God creates an entire nation for Himself, what will that mean? It means that it will be a nation with a religion that reflects the truth about how He wants men to know and worship Him. Its laws will reflect how He wants men to live with each other.

A nation like that could act as an example of righteousness to the others and thus become a deterrent to evil. If the people of this nation were strictly prohibited from intermarriage with other cultures (as they were in Israel), there is a hope of preserving the truth from corruption.

It appears from God's plan that a righteous life is difficult to live in isolation. A strong human community is necessary in order to preserve the life of God among men.

III. ABRAHAM RETURNS TO CANAAN

Abram prospers in the land God has promised will be his; this is an early confirmation of God’s blessing. But he still has to undergo another test – family fights over pastures – between Lot and Abram. But Abram settles it peacefully.

A. Abram in Bethel

Read: Genesis 13:1-7

[1] So Abram went up from Egypt, he and his wife, and all that he had, and Lot with him, into the Negeb.

[2] Now Abram was very rich in cattle, in silver, and in gold.

[3] And he journeyed on from the Negeb as far as Bethel, to the place where his tent had been at the beginning, between Bethel and Ai,

[4] to the place where he had made an altar at the first; and there Abram called on the name of the LORD.

[5] And Lot, who went with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents,

[6] so that the land could not support both of them dwelling together; for their possessions were so great that they could not dwell together,

[7] and there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram's cattle and the herdsmen of Lot's cattle. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites dwelt in the land.

Abram's return to the first altar he had built, at Bethel, and his calling on the name of the Lord suggest that he desires to make a fresh start in the life with God he had begun. Because of the plagues on Pharaoh's household, he must have

been aware that the Lord was displeased with his behaviour in Egypt. He knows that he has sinned through weakness, but he is still faithful to God and demonstrates that he wants to live in a way that brings honour to God's name.

It is a beautiful picture of the appropriate response of men when they stumble into sin. Unlike Cain, who let his sin turn into wholesale rebellion against God (Gen. 4:6-8), Abram returns and does what is right.

IV. ABRAM AND LOT SEPARATE

B. Wealth Doesn't Bring Happiness

Abram had become wealthy in Egypt. Abram's wealth meant that he and Lot could not dwell together on the land. This created strife in the family, which leads to a separation. It is worth taking note that this first mention of great wealth in the Scripture is associated with unhappiness and lack of peace. This will become a constant theme in the rest of Scripture.

Read: Genesis 13:8-13

[8] Then Abram said to Lot, "Let there be no strife between you and me, and between your herdsmen and my herdsmen; for we are kinsmen.

[9] Is not the whole land before you? Separate yourself from me. If you take the left hand, then I will go to the right; or if you take the right hand, then I will go to the left."

[10] And Lot lifted up his eyes, and saw that the Jordan valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the LORD, like the land of Egypt, in the direction of Zoar; this was before the LORD destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.

[11] So Lot chose for himself all the Jordan valley, and Lot journeyed east; thus they separated from each other.

[12] Abram dwelt in the land of Canaan, while Lot dwelt among the cities of the valley and moved his tent as far as Sodom.

[13] Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the LORD.

[It is no surprise, then, when Jesus tells His followers not to bother laying up treasures on earth. If the heart of man is so closely connected to his treasures, better that he should build treasures in heaven, where there can be no threat to happiness or peace (see Matt. 6:19-21)].

C. Abram’s Generosity

Abram seems to strongly desire peace in his family. He generously offered Lot the first choice of the land. Being the head of the family and Lot's elder, he could rightfully have laid claim to the first choice and best of the land. He seems to prize peace more than good land. He is not a selfish man.

Lot's eyes told him to choose the land that looked like Paradise (vs. 10). He wanted for himself the land that appeared to be the absolute best. The text tells us that the valley that looked so beautiful to Lot was the home of Sodom, a city of great wickedness. The language here is reminiscent of the scene in Eden, when Eve sized up the forbidden fruit. Looks can be deceiving.

D. Relationship between Abram and Lot

If we knew nothing about the relationship between Abram and Lot other than the description in Genesis 13:8, we would think that they were both sons of Terah and therefore brothers. Here, Abram uses the term “brother” to refer to his nephew Lot. However, in Genesis 11:28 we learned that Lot was actually the son of Abram’s brother, Haran.

Abram describes himself and Lot, who are actually uncle and nephew, by the Hebrew term “brothers” here in Genesis 13:8.

Note this point carefully in studying Sacred Scripture. We learn from this how broadly the term “brother” can be used in the Bible.

E. Did Jesus Have Brothers?

In the New Testament, several individuals are called “brothers of the Lord.” Catholic tradition has always considered these as cousins of Jesus. The Orthodox tradition considers them as sons of Joseph by a former wife.

Recent Protestant teaching suggests that they might have been sons of the Virgin Mary, *although Martin Luther, John Calvin and Ulrich Zwingli all affirmed the perpetual virginity of Mary* [Come and see – Genesis – p82].

V. GOD RENEWS HIS PROMISE TO ABRAHAM

Read: Genesis 13:14-18

[14] The LORD said to Abram, after Lot had separated from him, "Lift up your eyes, and look from the place where you are, northward and southward and eastward and westward;

[15] for all the land which you see I will give to you and to your descendants forever.

[16] I will make your descendants as the dust of the earth; so that if one can count the dust of the earth, your descendants also can be counted.

[17] Arise, walk through the length and the breadth of the land, for I will give it to you."

[18] So Abram moved his tent, and came and dwelt by the oaks of Mamre, which are at Hebron; and there he built an altar to the LORD.

A. The Importance of the Land

If Abram's descendants were ever to become a "great nation," as God had promised, the first thing they would need was land. Tribes of people without land of their own remain just that - tribes of people.

God renews the promise He made to Abram to make a great nation of him by telling him to take a good look at the land itself. He urges Abram to look with his eyes and to walk through it, examining it carefully.

Why is this land so important for Abram to see? What might have been in his mind as he was looking at it?

God told Abram to take a good look at the land itself. This was the concrete reality that lay before his eyes. The land was real to him; the promise of descendants to fill it was still a hope, which depended entirely on God's trustworthiness.

This is reminiscent of God's use of the rainbow with Noah. He uses here a concrete reality within nature as a sign of His promise to act. In the Church, God continues to do this in the sacraments.

B. Importance of Faith

Abram may have been thinking the same kind of thoughts we think when we approach a sacrament. "All I see here is land - dirt, rocks, bushes. God says this will be the home of my great nation. I don't have any kids, and my wife is barren. Can I really believe this?"

In the sacraments, we are always faced with these very human questions. "This is just water on a baby's head. Is this child really being washed from original sin and given the Holy Spirit?" "This looks and tastes like bread and wine. Can I really believe that I am eating the Body and Blood of the Lord and that it will give me eternal life?"

When we think those thoughts, we are much like Abram, walking through that desert land, pondering the promises of God. That is why his response will be of interest to us.

C. Reverence, Worship, Faith

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen [Hebrews 11:1]

Abram builds an altar to the Lord at Hebron. It is an act of reverence, worship, and faith. He must have mulled it all over and come to the conclusion that God was worthy to be adored this way. Building an altar was his acknowledgment of trust in the promises of God.

The verses in Hebrews tell us that faith is *"the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."*

Picture Abram walking through the land of Canaan, observing all its physical characteristics and trying to imagine his descendants living there as a great nation. When he builds an altar to the Lord, he is giving evidence of a trust in unseen realities. He performs an act of confidence in God, believing that He will do what He has promised.

This is the essence of faith. It is like what Noah did when he built an ark on dry ground. It acknowledges that God, Who cannot be seen, can nevertheless be trusted completely. The sacraments call forth just such faith.

When we exercise that faith, we are standing with Abram, the father of faith, allowing what we can see to confirm what we can't.

VI. ABRAHAM GOES TO BATTLE

This battle appears to have taken place a number of years after Lot had separated from Abram. There was an uprising of four kings against five, but they were defeated. In the course of that defeat, the king of Sodom and his people were captured and taken away, including Lot, Abram's nephew. Abram got word of this situation and went to Lot's rescue.

Read: Genesis 14:1-16

Abram had earlier showed himself to be a man dedicated to his family. He shows, by his rescue of Lot, that this love has not diminished and that it is a fearless love. He demonstrates courage and ingenuity in defeating the enemy.

Because of the intensity of the battles that had raged, he might easily have talked himself out of such a risky operation. In addition, he could have justifiably left Lot to live with the consequences of choosing to live in Sodom, a wicked city.

His decision to go immediately to Lot's rescue, whatever the cost, reveals his love for his nephew. He is willing and able to do what is right.

VII. MELCHIZEDEK BLESSES ABRAHAM

After Abram had defeated the five kings and rescued Lot, he had a meeting with the king of Sodom and "Melchizedek, king of Salem."

Melchizedek raises a number of questions for us. He could be just another difficult name attached to an obscure place except that the New Testament tells us that Jesus is a high priest "after the order of Melchizedek" (see Heb. 6:20). For this reason, Melchizedek is of great interest to us.

Read: Genesis 14:17-24

[17] After his return from the defeat of Ched-or-lao'mer and the kings who were with him, the king of Sodom went out to meet him at the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley).

[18] And Mel-chiz'edek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High.

[19] And he blessed him and said, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, maker of heaven and earth;

[20] and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!" And Abraham gave him a tenth of everything.

[21] And the king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the persons, but take the goods for yourself."

[22] But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have sworn to the LORD God Most High, maker of heaven and earth,

[23] that I would not take a thread or a sandal-thong or anything that is yours, lest you should say, 'I have made Abram rich.'

[24] I will take nothing but what the young men have eaten, and the share of the men who went with me; let Aner, Eshcol, and Mamre take their share.

A. Who was Melchizedek?

Most modern biblical scholarship sees in Melchizedek a pre-figuring of Christ; some scholars suggest that it was actually an appearance of Christ to Abram. He is a mysterious figure. The early tradition of the Church, which continued well up to the time of the Reformation, was influenced by the Jewish rabbinic teaching that Melchizedek was actually Shem, the firstborn son of Noah who lived a very long time. This is a compelling idea.

Shem was the one on whom Noah's blessing had rested. He was destined to be a master over the Canaanites. His priesthood was domestic; that is, the one who conducted the worship of God and through whom the blessing of God was received was the head of the family. We have seen this in Noah and Abram. This role was passed from father to firstborn son.

If, in fact, Shem is Melchizedek (this name is more of a title than a name), as the Fathers taught, what can we make of the description of him in Hebrews 7:1-10 (please read)!

In Heb. 7:3, he is described as "without father or mother or genealogy, and has neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever."

B. The Levitical Priesthood

In order to understand this statement, we need to know something about the Levitical priesthood in Israel, with which Melchizedek's priesthood is contrasted in the verses that follow.

The Levitical priesthood was instituted in Israel at the time of a great apostasy, a grave turning away from the covenant God had made with His people (see Exodus 32:25-29).

Before that time, the priesthood had been a domestic one, as we have seen in Genesis thus far, passed from father to firstborn son. Due to the circumstances of its institution, the Levitical priesthood must be seen as inferior to the earlier one. The writer of Hebrews makes this clear.

Additionally, by the time of the writing of Hebrews, the Levitical priesthood featured certain restrictions. A man could not become a priest until he was 30 and had to retire when he was 50. He also had to prove his Levitical (of the tribe of Levi) genealogy through both his father and his mother (this had become important when Israel returned to its land after foreign exile, in about 500 B.C.; there was careful attention to lineage in order to prevent any foreign corruption in the priesthood).

C. Priesthood of Melchizedek

The priesthood of Melchizedek was not that way. There was no need for the Levitical attention to parental lineage ("He is without father or mother or genealogy..."). There was no start and end of his service ("neither beginning of days nor end of life"). It would be this kind of royal priesthood that Jesus would have (prophesied of the Messiah long before by King David in Psalm 110:4).

His was the superior priesthood of the firstborn son, not the Levitical one. God's own Son became High Priest. Melchizedek was a type of the One Who was to come.]

D. Priest of God Most High

And Mel-chiz'edek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was priest of God Most High.

This is the first mention of the word "priest" in Scripture.

- What is the offering this priest makes?
- What significance does that have for the moment at the Last Supper when Jesus takes up bread and wine, giving thanks to God?
- When He commissions the apostles to continue this action in remembrance of Him, what is He conferring on them?

E. An Offering of Bread and Wine

Melchizedek brings out with him an offering of bread and wine. When Jesus takes up the bread and wine at the Last Supper, He is fulfilling His priestly service. These elements represent a priestly sacrifice.

When He tells the apostles to repeat this ritual of the bread and wine, He is commissioning them as priests as well. They will represent Him in this liturgical act, making the same offering as Melchizedek. (This is why priests in the Catholic Church become "fathers"- it is a domestic priesthood.)

F. The Kings of Salem and Sodom

What significance do you think there is in the fact that both Melchizedek, priest of God, and the king of Sodom, a very wicked city, come out to meet Abram after his successful battle?

Abram has good reasons to be proud and triumphant after his victory. These two kings represent two possible reactions to this kind of human accomplishment. The king of Sodom offers Abram material gain; the king of Salem offers him a blessing, with bread and wine. Abram responds in humility, making an offering of

his own. It is a picture of what all of us face as we make our way through this world on our journey home to God. Do we grasp at what we can see and touch, or do we swear allegiance to God Most High, and let go of perhaps the little that we have? Abram shows us the way.

G. Abraham Gives Melchizedek a Tithe

And Abraham gave him a tenth of everything.

During the Mass, after the Liturgy of the Word and before the Liturgy of the Eucharist, our tithes and offerings are collected and then presented to the priest, before the altar.

The priest is the presence of Jesus, High Priest after the order of Melchizedek. Our presentation of these tithes is a fulfillment of what Abram offered to Melchizedek.

It is our heartfelt thanks to God for His abundant and merciful blessings on us. We, like Abram, are on a journey to receive a great gift. Our lives are constantly touched by God's deliverance, and we, like him, respond with thanksgiving and offerings of a tenth of all we own. He is worthy of such.

In his dealings with God, Abram is a man who has humility. He is one who turns toward God, not away, when he stumbles. As he contemplates the almost unthinkable promise that God has made to him, he performs an act of reverence and faith.

When Abram is met by Melchizedek, the priest of God Most High, he receives a blessing from him, a sign of finding favour in God's sight. Abram's response of giving the priest a tenth of everything shows him to be someone who is beginning to deeply comprehend that if God is "maker of heaven and earth," as Melchizedek calls Him (14:19), then He is worthy of generous offerings.

Perhaps this is why he is able to be detached from the temptation to become indebted to the king of a wicked city, declaring a vow of allegiance to God.

Summary

1. Abram and his family returned from Egypt and headed for the first altar he had built to the Lord at Bethel. He made a fresh start with God after displeasing him with duplicitous behaviour.
2. To settle a family dispute, Abram unselfishly allowed his nephew, Lot, to select the best land he could see for himself. Unfortunately, the choice he made, based on appearances, included a city of great wickedness, Sodom.
3. God confirmed His promise of making Abram into a great nation by having him walk through the land of Canaan, taking a good look at it. Although his wife was barren and he had not even a single heir, Abram built an altar to God at Hebron, a gesture of faith, hope, and love.
4. When Abram's nephew got entangled in a regional feud, Abram went to his rescue. This battle was perhaps an occasion of intense prayer on Abram's part. When it was over, and he had rescued Lot, he was met by Melchizedek, priest of God Most High (possibly it was Shem, the venerable firstborn son of Noah). He received God's blessing through Melchizedek, a priest who offered bread and wine. This is the kingly priesthood that would someday belong to Jesus, God's firstborn Son. Abram responded by giving a tithe, the outpouring of a grateful heart.
5. The king of Sodom offered the spoils of battle to Abram, but he wisely refused, confirming his desire to be only God's man.
6. In another wise decision, he suggested that his allies be rewarded for their participation in the battle, thus strengthening his relationship with them, in case of future need.
7. Abram was becoming a man of faith and virtue, which was evidence of a growing intimacy with God.