

Looking for Abraham's City

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Hebrews 11:9-10 describes the life of Abraham in the following way: "By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise; for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God."

In alluding to the Old Testament portrayal of Abraham, these verses raise intriguing questions. On what textual basis is Abraham regarded as looking for the city of God? Does this concept find its roots in the biblical record, or has it been imported from some other source? How did the patriarch come to be viewed as a pilgrim?

Though the complete answer to these questions would require a comprehensive examination of all the relevant biblical and extra-biblical Jewish texts, this article is limited to a survey of several key passages in Genesis that may contain potential for significant metaphorical development into the pilgrim imagery of Hebrews 11. It is argued that the presentation of Abraham in Hebrews 11:9-10 may to a large degree be explained as an extrapolation from the language and ordering of the references to Abraham in Genesis.

The Language of the Genesis Texts

GENESIS 12:1-9

Though Abraham is first mentioned in Genesis 11:26-32, it is with Genesis 12 that a new section in the divine program of salvation begins. If Abraham lived in the late third millennium or early second millennium B.C.,¹ as the biblical record purports, his migration

¹ M. H. Segal notes, "Life in Mesopotamia in the second millennium must have been

would outwardly have been indistinguishable from that of many people who were migrating at that time.² The biblical story, however, begins with a directive from God, which differentiates Abraham's journey from that of his contemporaries.³ The selection of details included in the narrative manifests a clear theological interest. Thus, to seek to limit his travels to what can be geographically traced and sociologically explained fails to give full weight to the specific call by Yahweh that introduces the biblical portrayal of Abraham's trip to Canaan and his subsequent life there. As Speiser remarks, "Abraham's journey to the Promised Land was thus no routine expedition of several hundred miles. Instead, it was the start of an epic voyage in search of spiritual truths, a quest that was to constitute the central theme of all biblical history."⁴ The narrative manifests the unusual nature of Abraham's movement to Canaan.

The story of Abraham begins with a promise that introduces the patriarchal age. Abraham's journey begins simply as a response to the word of God. In fact the original command in 12:1 makes no mention of the identity of the land, nor even that the land was to be given to him.⁵ God's promises in verses 2-3, reiterated and enlarged to the patriarchs throughout the Genesis narratives, became the theological nexus for much of the Old Testament literature.⁶

intolerable to a believer in the One God. The whole life of society and of the individual was strictly regulated on the principles of a crass polytheism and demonology, governed by a multitude of priests, diviners and magicians under the rule of the great temples and their hierarchies. There was no room in that Mesopotamia for an individual who could not join in the worship and in the magical practices of his fellows. Abraham must have felt early the pressing need to remove himself from such a stifling environment" (*The Pentateuch: Its Composition and Its Authorship and Other Biblical Studies* [Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967], p. 128).

² H. Wansbrough, "Abraham Our Father," *Clergy Review* 52 (1967): 661; cf. H. Gunkel, *The Legends of Genesis: The Biblical Saga and History* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), p. 137, who argues that the patriarchal legends were originally composed by 1200 B.C. This provenance, however, is challenged by J. Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975) and T. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives* (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974).

³ M. Eliade notes, "But the religious conception implicit in the 'election' of Abraham continues beliefs and customs well known in the Near East of the second millennium. What distinguishes the biblical narrative is God's personal message and its consequences. Without being first invoked, God reveals himself to a human being and after laying a series of injunctions on him, makes him a series of prodigious promises" (*A History of Religious Ideas*, 3 vols. [London: Collins, 1979], 1:171).

⁴ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, The Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Co., 1964), p. 88.

⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken Books, 1970), pp. 101-2. The uncertainty is reflected by the Septuagint ἦν ἄν σοι δέιξω.

⁶ R. E. Clements, *Abraham and David: Genesis XV and Its Meaning for Israelite Tradition* (London: SCM Press, 1967), p. 57.

The divine word of command, קָלָה , calls Abram to an abrupt and cataclysmic change in location and pattern of life. The call was to go from (אֶרֶץ) his most fundamental loyalties to (לְאֵלֹהֵי) a destination that is indicated in the vaguest of terms. In essence, Yahweh was requiring Abram to obey, knowing the full price involved, but with only a hint as to the compensation. The divine demand was that Abram should forsake the familiar for the foreign.⁷

It is evident from Genesis 11 that Abram was a member of an intimate family structure. His homeland of Ur had a highly developed culture, far superior to that of Canaan.⁸ Thus Abram did not migrate to Canaan in search of a settled home, but he was called to leave his "secure home and to exchange it for a very unsettled existence in the far-away and strange land of Canaan."⁹

The form of the divine command did little to mitigate the personal anguish involved in such a relocation. In three parallel prepositional phrases introduced by מֵ , Abram's departure moves from the general (מֵאֶרֶץ "from your country") to the specific (מֵבֵית אָבִי "from your father's house") with ever-increasing personal identification.¹⁰ As Liebowitz points out, this sequence is contrary to what would be expected, for the logical sequence is that one first leaves his home, then his birthplace, and after that his country. She concurs with early Jewish commentators that what is being suggested by the passage is "a spiritual rather than physical withdrawal, beginning with the periphery and ending with the inner core."¹¹

God called Abram to go from Mesopotamia, and He also enjoined him to go "to the land which I will show you." Brueggemann maintains that "land is a central, if not the central theme of biblical faith. Biblical faith is a pursuit of historical belonging that includes a sense of destiny derived from such belonging."¹² Abram's re-

⁷ Cf. J. Muilenburg, "Abraham and the Nations," *Interpretation* 19 (1965): 391; James L. Mays, "God Has Spoken," *Interpretation* 14 (1960): 419.

⁸ Bruce Vawter succinctly traces the history and describes the culture of Ur-III (*On Genesis: A Neap Reading* [London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1977], p. 171).

⁹ J. B. Soucek, "Pilgrims and Sojourners," *Convunio Viatorum* 1 (1958): 5.

¹⁰ A similar progression in intensity may be noted in the divine call in Genesis 22:2 for Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. It may be significant that the command for the Agedah is also phrased קָלָה לְאֵלֹהֵי . As in 12:4 the command was followed by explicit, unquestioning obedience.

¹¹ N. Liebowitz, *Studies in Bereshit (Genesis)*, 2d rev. ed. (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1974), p. 113.

¹² W. Brueggemann, *The Land, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (London: SPCK, 1978), p. 3. The magisterial study by W. D. Davies traces the theme of the land throughout the biblical corpus (*The Gospel and the Land* [Berkeley: University of California, 1974]). Other useful studies include W. D. Davies, *The Territorial Dimension of Judaism* (Berkeley: University of California, 1982); G. Strecker, ed., *Das Land*

sponse to Yahweh's call and the divine promise of land, name, and blessing (vv. 2-3) set the tone both for the patriarchal history and for the rest of biblical literature.¹³

God's command in verse 1 was matched by the record in verse 4 of Abram's obedience. No mention is made of any objection, question, or delay.¹⁴ As the narrative stands, Abram is portrayed as explicitly obeying the word of God.¹⁵ Three items are noted in verse 4, all of which prove crucial in the larger narrative. The action is defined as being in accord with (כְּאֵשֶׁר) the word of Yahweh.¹⁶ The mention of Lot anticipates the theme of the problem of an heir, which is prevalent throughout the Abrahamic narratives.¹⁷ Abram's advanced age (then 75), along with the statement of Sarai's barrenness in 11:30, serves to accentuate the magnitude of his obedience in the face of scant human prospects.

Verse 5 makes particular the general description in the previous verse. The destination of the trip is stated proleptically by the narrator as Canaan, though in the account it was not disclosed as such to Abram until verse 7. The enumeration of those whom Abram took with him, from Sarai his wife to the purchased slaves ("the persons which they had acquired in Haran"),¹⁸ serves to highlight the rad-

Israel in biblischer Zeit, Göttingen Theologische Arbeiten 25 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1983); Gerhard von Rad, "Verheissenes Land und Jahwes Land im Hexateuch," *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament* (München: Chr. Kaiser, 1958), pp. 87-100; and B. H. Amaru, "Land Theology in Josephus' *Jewish Antiquities*," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 71 (1981): 201-29.

¹³ The eschatological portions of both Testaments resonate with these themes introduced in Genesis 12, as noted by W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (London: SCM Press, 1961, 1967), 1:476.

¹⁴ G. von Rad comments: "Abraham obeys blindly and without objection. The one word *wayyelek* ('and he set out') is more effective than any psychological description could be, and in its majestic simplicity does greater justice to the importance of this event" (*Genesis: A Commentary*, 3d rev. ed. [London: SCM Press, 1972], p. 161).

¹⁵ This point must not be pressed, however, for Hebrew narrative is characteristically laconic. The lack of detail is a chief provocation for midrash, such as detailed by L. Ginzberg, *The Legends of the Jews*, 7 vols. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1913-67), 1:205. But as H. Gunkel notes, the details that are presented are of special significance: "He does not share the modern point of view, that the most interesting and worthy theme for art is the soul-life of man; his child-like taste is fondest of the outward, objective facts. And in this line his achievements are excellent. He has an extraordinary faculty for selecting just the action which is most characteristic for the state of feeling of his hero" (*The Legends of Genesis*, p. 61).

¹⁶ Cf. E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar*, trans. A. E. Cowley (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910), par. 161h, and καθάπερ in the Septuagint.

¹⁷ L. R. Helyer demonstrates well that "the overall concern of the cycle is, Who will be Abraham's heir?" ("The Separation of Abram and Lot: Its Significance in the Patriarchal Narratives," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 26 [1983]: 85).

¹⁸ Jewish midrash viewed these individuals as proselytes whom Abram and Sarai had converted in Haran (*Gen. Rab.* 39.14).

ical relocation involved in Abram's decision of obedience. Nothing was left behind should the venture fail, but Abram followed the word of Yahweh without reserve into the unknown.

Verses 6-9 trace the initial travels of Abram within the land of Canaan, which Yahweh then gave to his offspring (v. 7). Abram is portrayed as moving through the land from Shechem (v. 6) to Bethel (v. 8) and eventually toward the Negev (v. 9). This progression can be viewed from several perspectives. Yeivin relates it to the political and economic necessities of seminomadism in the patriarchal times.¹⁹ Cassuto views the journeys throughout Canaan in light of God's land gift stated in verse 7. Comparing Abram's movements to the inaugural tour of Jacob later in Genesis, Cassuto says, "In the same way, Abram's passage across the land of Canaan from north to south represents the ideal transfer of the country to his possession for the purpose of the Lord's service. He was like a man who has acquired a field and inspects it from end to end."²⁰

It is evident that the narrator was setting the action within a theological context. The site at which the land promise was given is specified in three ways in verse 6. The name of the place was Shechem, a city in the heart of the land that later became a place of assembly for Israel (cf. Josh. 24:1).²¹ At this location was also the oak of Moreh, a center of pagan worship. Moreover, the Canaanites were in the land Yahweh was giving to Abram's seed (not to Abram himself), thus shifting actual possession of the land into the future. This juxtaposition of divine utterance and incomplete human awareness or appropriation parallels the call of Abram in verse 1 and demands the same quality of unquestioning obedience and trusting anticipation. Von Rad notes that "Abraham is therefore brought by God into a completely unexplained relationship with the Canaanites, and Yahweh does not hurry about solving and explaining this opaque status of ownership as one expects the director of history to do."²²

Throughout the pericope the narrator was careful to focus only on Abram's activities without discussing the motivation that

¹⁹ S. Yeivin, "The Patriarchs in the Land of Canaan," in *The World History of the Jewish People*, ed. Benjamin Mazar, 6 vols. (Tel Aviv: Massada, 1964-72), 2:201. Cf. Vawter, *On Genesis: A New Reading*, p. 178.

²⁰ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 2 vols. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961-64), 2:323.

²¹ M. A. Fishbane cites Genesis 28:18 and Judges 9:37 to support his contention that the sites of Shechem and Bethel, and Canaan in general, are viewed as a sacred center in Israel's traditions ("The Sacred Center: The Symbolic Structure of the Bible," in *Texts and Responses*, ed. M. A. Fishbane and P. R. Flohr [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975], p. 14)

²² Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 166.

prompted them. However, the response of Abram to both God's call and His promise clearly indicates that his reason for migrating to Canaan was his dedication to Yahweh and His service.²³ This observation is supported by the structure of verses 7-8, in which Abram is described as building altars for Yahweh. In verse 7 the divine promise, "To your descendants I will give this land," is followed by the response, "So he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him." The physical activities in the first half of verse 8 are preparatory to the spiritual activities in the second half. Thus Abram manifested a spiritual motivation in settling at Bethel by building an altar to Yahweh and by calling on His name.²⁴

It may then be concluded that Genesis 12:1-9 contains substantial theological potential that could be developed into a pilgrim ideology.²⁵ Abram's unquestioning obedience to Yahweh's call and his response to the divine land grant to his offspring manifest a significant perspective dimension in the narrative. Though presented as sober history, transcending the literal level of the action is the presentation of a man who heeded the word of Yahweh to leave all that was familiar to venture out to an unspecified location, which later was given not to him but to his descendants. To this command Abram responded in obedience and worship.

GENESIS 17:1

The divine command, "Walk before Me, and be blameless" (וְהָיָה לְפָנַי וְהָיָה תָּמִים), bears unmistakable theological overtones. Von Rad notes that what is being commanded is Abram's complete, unqualified surrender of his life to God.²⁶ It may thus be said that

²³ Cassuto points out that "what the Bible does not say expressly it indicates by inference. It is a characteristic of these narratives ... not to describe the thoughts and feelings of the *dramatis personae*, but only to record their deeds, and to inform the reader through the narration of events of the ideas and sentiments that prompted their actions" (*A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, 2:303).

²⁴ This is reflected in Jewish tradition, as summarized by L. Ginzberg. "Each altar raised by him was a centre for his activities as a missionary. As soon as he came to a place in which he desired to sojourn, he would stretch a tent first for Sarah, and next for himself, and then he would proceed at once to make proselytes and bring them under the wings of the Shekinah. Thus he accomplished his purpose of inducing all men to proclaim the name of God" (*The Legends of the Jews*, 1:219).

²⁵ Interpretive development in a metaphorical direction is evident in Philo De Migr. Abr.

²⁶ Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, pp. 198-99, and supported by Aquila's τέλειος for תָּמִים. Thus Jubilees 23:10 reads, "For Abraham was perfect in all his actions with the Lord and was pleasing through righteousness all the days of his life." Cf. Zadokite Fragments 7.5 and Philo *Quaest. et Sol. in Gen.* III 40, who stated that "a character which pleases God does not incur blame, while one who is blameless and faultless in all things is altogether pleasing [to God]." This reading is also followed by Jerome *Against the Pelagians* 3.12.

וְהָיָה תְּמִים is the reality of which הַתְּמִלִּיךְ is the figure. It should be noted, however, that much Jewish translation and exegesis renders תְּמִים in relation to the subsequent circumcision of Abraham.²⁷

In the highly covenantal language of the passage,²⁸ God promised Abraham (his name was changed in 17:5), "And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your sojournings [אֶרֶץ מְגֻרֶיךָ], all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God" (v. 8). As in 12:7 the land would be possessed not by Abraham but only by his descendants. For Abraham, Canaan would be only a land of sojournings, not a possessed home. Thus as Klein points out, it is "recognized that the patriarchs never really occupied the land as owners."²⁹

Moreover, the evident allusion to Enoch (Gen. 5:22, 24) and Noah (6:9) must be accounted for. As Enoch had walked with God and had been translated from his society into the divine presence, and as Noah had walked with God and been delivered from divine judgment on his sinful culture, so Abraham was commanded to walk before God. It is recognizable then that Abraham was being called to a relationship with God that by its very orientation would cause him to be differentiated from his human society.

GENESIS 23:4

Genesis 23³⁰ is crucial³¹ for understanding the socio-political concept of Abraham the sojourner and the background of the later metaphorical concept of spiritual pilgrimage. The occasion for the transaction here recorded is Sarah's death. Though God had promised Abraham the entire land of Canaan, the patriarch had not yet come into possession of even enough ground for a burial site for his wife.

The legal setting of the pericope in which "preoccupation with the problem of ownership determines every stage, every detail of

²⁷ Cf. *Gen. Rab.* 46.4; *Tg. Ps.-J.*; *Tg. Neof.*; b. Ned. 31b-32a; y. Ned. 3.11; t. Ned. 2.5.

²⁸ Cf. *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. C. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1974), s.v. אֶבְרָהָם, by Ronald E. Clements, 1:58.

²⁹ R. W. Klein, *Israel in Exile: A Theological Interpretation*, Overtures to Biblical Theology (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 137.

³⁰ H. Hahn gives a useful discussion of the interpretation of Genesis 23 in the later rabbinic literature (*Wallfahrt und Auferstehung zur inessianischen Zeit: Eine rabbinische Homilie zion Neumond-Shtabbat (Pes R 1)*, Frankfurter Judaistische Studien 5 [Frankfort am Main, 1979], pp. 156-70).

³¹ Thus J. G. Vink says of Genesis 23, "The text is important for ... because it tells about the *primitiae* of the possession of the land and the beginning of the fulfilment of the divine promise" ("The Date and Origin of the Priestly Code in the Old Testament," *Old Testament Studies* 15 [1969]: 91).

the negotiation,³² is determinative for Abraham's self-description, "I am a stranger and a sojourner among you" (23:4). The issue involved more than mere title to a plot of land. At stake is "whether Abraham was to gain a permanent foothold or not"³³ in Canaanite society.

When read in isolation, Genesis 23 fits comfortably in the legal or commercial domain. However, in its literary context in the Abrahamic narratives and in the biblical corpus, theological implications emerge. As Coats remarks, "the unit itself draws no theological consequence from the acquisition,"³⁴ but when seen in the light of the reiterated land promise to Abraham, the purchase of even a burial site becomes the earnest of the ultimate fulfillment.³⁵ The positioning of this transaction between the sacrifice of his heir in chapter 22 and the securing of a wife for Isaac (thus providing for the perpetuation of the covenant family) in chapter 24 hints at the prospective nature of Abraham's purchase. Nevertheless to posit an explicit metaphorical meaning to גַּר־וְתוֹשֵׁב exceeds the dimensions of this context.

The Ordering of the Genesis Texts

This section examines the relationship of Genesis 12-25, particularly 12:1-3, to the primeval narratives in Genesis 1-11. The literary arrangement will be analyzed to determine to what extent later Jewish and Christian writers may have derived the metaphorical concept of pilgrimage from the ordering of the narratives in Genesis.

³² J. Licht, *Storytelling in the Bible* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1978), p. 22. Cf. M. R. Lehmann, who relates the incident to Hittite laws regarding feudal obligation ("Abraham's Purchase of Machpelah and Hittite Law," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 129 [1953]: 15-18) and G. M. Tucker, who details the parallels between the transaction in Genesis 23 and a wide range of Near Eastern legal forms, in particular, the Neo-Babylonian dialogue documents ("The Legal Background of Genesis 23," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 85 [1966]: 77-84). Van Seters argues that the suggested parallels with Old Babylonian contracts point only to the continuity of legal procedures over a long time (*Abraham in History and Tradition*, pp. 99-100). He agrees with Tucker that Genesis 23 follows completely the model of the sale contracts of the Neo-Babylonian and Achaemenid periods.

³³ Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1967), p. 145.

³⁴ G. W. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, The Forms of the Old Testament Literature (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1983), p. 164.

³⁵ Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 250. Cf. R. Davidson, *Genesis 12-50*, Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), p. 101, and Brevard S. Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 219. M. R. Hauge seems to take the theological implication a step too far when he asserts that "corresponding to Canaan developed as the land of Estrangement, the Promised Land as the land of the Grave expresses a definite reinterpretation of the traditional land motif" ("The Struggles of the Blessed in Estrangement," *Studia Theologica* 29 [1975]: part 2, p. 140).

Several factors justify the examination of the traditional text as a legitimate focus in biblical study: (1) It is the only objectively available text, in contrast with the speculative reconstructions of source criticism.³⁶ (2) The accepted text is the corpus which shaped later tradition in Judaism and Christianity.³⁷ (3) The juxtaposition of accounts can produce "unexpected narrative connections and theological insights" so that the literary whole is a sum greater than its parts.³⁸ Indeed, these collocations bear evidence of logical³⁹ or theological⁴⁰ intention. (4) The relevance of the synthetic approach is confirmed by Jewish midrashic exegesis, which seeks to explain the juxtaposition of texts.⁴¹ Thus the conclusion by Sawyer is apposite:

The original meaning of the final form of the text is a concept which not only permits fruitful study of a clearly defined corpus of lexical data, but also provides an obvious starting-point for theological discussion, since it was the final form of the text, not its separate component parts,

³⁶ James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM Press, 1973), pp. 163-64. R. Smend, in assessing the work of Childs, states, "Generations of scholars have seen their primary task as the reconstruction of the oldest written texts and, as far as possible, the oral forms that preceded them. The further such work continues, the greater the danger of its becoming speculation. So it is not only understandable, but also appropriate, if the focus of analysis is now, by way of reaction, the end of the process of tradition, i.e., the final written form of the material. This is not only a neglected and hence a fertile field, but also a more certain one, since the finalised texts are not imaginary entities. Here we are less under the influence of speculations, but can make observations on material that clearly lies before us, and are often also in a position to prove and disprove" ("Questions about the Importance of the Canon in an Old Testament Introduction," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 16 [1980]: 45-46).

³⁷ Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM Press, 1979), pp. 76-77.

³⁸ M. Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1948), pp. 269-70; cf. B. W. Anderson, "The New Frontier of Rhetorical Criticism," in *Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. J. J. Jackson and M. Kessler, Pittsburgh Theological Monograph Series I (Pittsburgh: Pickwick Press, 1974), p. xvii.

³⁹ M. H. Segal, "The Composition of the Pentateuch: A Fresh Examination," *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 8 (1961): 95. However, R. N. Whybray issues a salutary caution: "While there is undoubtedly a continuous narrative thread, this is often extremely thin, and the various incidents described are frequently joined together only very loosely" (*The Making of the Pentateuch* [Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1987], p. 14). One then must be cautious in interpreting the juxtapositions of the extant text as deliberate collocations intended to teach explicit principles.

⁴⁰ G. M. Landes, "The Canonical Approach to Introducing the Old Testament: Prodigy and Problems," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 16 (1980): 33; and R. Rendtorff, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 290.

⁴¹ M. Wadsworth, "Making and Interpreting Scripture," in *Ways of Reading the Bible*, ed. M. Wadsworth (Sussex: Harvester, 1981), p. 10. He goes on to state concerning Genesis: "There are narrative connections in the story from chapter 10 through 12 which an inordinate reliance on the J or P writers as self-contained, autonomous chroniclers has tended to obscure" (*ibid.*, p. 11). Cf. R. Rendtorff, "Rabbinic Exegesis and the Modern Christian Bible Scholar," *Proceedings of the Eighth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1983), pp. 35-36.

that was canonized in all the religious communities for which it is an authoritative religious text.⁴²

LITERARY INTEGRATION IN GENESIS 11-12

Though a division between the primeval history (Gen. 1-11) and the patriarchal history (Gen. 12-50) has often been made, a careful reading of Genesis 11-12 reveals a significant degree of continuity between the two sections. To be sure, Abram was called to a new phase of life in 12:1, but he and his family are introduced in chapter 11. The elaborate transitional passage in 11:10-32 compels the reader of the canonical text⁴³ to view the patriarchal history in some relationship with the primeval history.⁴⁴ Von Rad explains this conjunction in terms of aetiology, in that the meaning of the call of Abram is expounded in the primeval history. He concludes, "Indeed, because of this welding of primeval history and saving history, the whole of Israel's saving history is properly to be understood with reference to the unsolved problem of Jahweh's relationship to the nations."⁴⁵

In the interpretive process the combination of Genesis 1-11 and Genesis 12 has a sum greater than the constitutive parts.⁴⁶ Certain motifs present in both literary blocks are thus brought to the fore as key themes in the extant form.⁴⁷ By this juxtaposition, potential for interpretive correlations is created that might not have occurred to the reader had the individual passages remained as discrete units.

⁴² J. F. A. Sawyer, "The Meaning of *בְּצֶלְם אֱלֹהִים* ('In the Image of God') in Genesis I-XI," *Journal of Theological Studies* 25 (1974): 419. Though Sawyer's argument from canonical status is open to question (cf. L. G. Perdue, "Review of Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*," *Restoration Quarterly* 23 [1980]: 243-49, and J. Barton, *Reading the Old Testament* [London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1984], pp. 91, 96), his emphasis on the usefulness of studying the traditionally accepted text is salutary.

⁴³ The juxtaposition of Genesis 11 and 12 finds unanimous attestation in all the ancient sources, including the Masoretic Text, SP, Targums, and the Septuagint, and it can justifiably be maintained that the early Jewish and Christian writers would have had before them this arrangement of texts. Thus at least in this specific case, a canonical approach is warranted. J. M. Sasson argues well for the validity of both analytic and synthetic study of the biblical texts ("The 'Tower of Babel' as a Clue to the Redactional Structuring of the Primeval History [Gen. 1-11:9]," in *The Bible World*, ed. G. Rendsburg et al. [New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1980], p. 213).

⁴⁴ D. J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch* (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1978), pp. 77-78.

⁴⁵ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2 vols. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962-1965), 1:164.

⁴⁶ The interpretive potential latent in the literary arrangement of Pentateuchal texts is frequently exploited by the Targums, as *Targum du Pentateuque* notes with numerous examples (ed. R. le Deaut, SC 240 [Paris: Cerf, 1978], pp. 54-55).

⁴⁷ Brevard S. Childs, "The Exegetical Significance of Canon for the Study of the Old Testament," *Congress Volume: Göttingen, 1977*, *Vetus Testamentum Supplements*, vol. 29 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978), p. 69.

GENESIS 12:1-3 AS A RESPONSE TO GENESIS 1-11

It is evident from the divine call to Abram in Genesis 12:1 that the focus has narrowed from the more universal scope of chapters 1-11. The primeval narratives trace the spiritual degeneration of the human race as a whole by means of the recurrent pattern of human sin and divine punishment.⁴⁸ But the story of Abraham also has a universal dimension, for the ultimate result of the blessing on the patriarch is that all families of the earth will be blessed (12:3),⁴⁹ in essence a reformation of creation.⁵⁰ The positioning of Genesis 12 immediately after the primeval narratives suggests that "the election of Israel in some way must be the answer to the plight of man."⁵¹

The land promise in 12:7 is a reversal of the pattern of expulsion that dominates Genesis 3-11.⁵² Dispersion or homelessness is manifested in Adam and Eve's removal from Eden (3:23-24), the curse on Cain (4:16), and the scattering of Babel (11:8), but it is strikingly reversed in the divine call of Abram. As Fishbane suggests, Abram is in a sense a new Adam, in whom is hope for the renewal of human life in history.⁵³ Though Eden could not be regained by human means, divine grace to Abram gives the prospect of the restoration of the land, fertility, and blessing lost by the human parents.⁵⁴

The primeval narratives relate the tragic story of nearly unmit-

⁴⁸ R. L. Cohn, "Narrative Structure and Canonical Perspective in Genesis," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 25 (1983): 4.

⁴⁹ R. Martin-Achard states, "Gen. XII.3 has universalistic implications. The Patriarch is the instrument by which Yahweh is seeking to save all mankind. His promise to Abraham is the answer to the curse of the dispersion of the human race (Gen. XI.7ff.) and determines the whole destiny of Israel and the world; henceforth history is going to unfold under the sign of that blessing which is offered to all peoples through Abraham and his descendants" (*A Light to the Nations* [London: Oliver and Boyd, 1962], p. 36).

⁵⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1982), pp. 105-6. O. H. Steck sees Genesis 12:1-3 as a renewal of God's blessing to mankind as in Genesis 2:18-24 ("Die Paradieserzählung: Eine Auslegung von Genesis 2,4b-3,24," *Wahrnehmungen Gottes im Alten Testament* [Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1982], pp. 112-14). B. Albrektson argues unconvincingly against the universal dimension of the blessing (*History and the Gods* [Lund: CWK Gleerup, 1967], pp. 80-81).

⁵¹ G. E. Wright, *The Old Testament against Its Environment* (London: SCM Press, 1950), p. 53.

⁵² W. Brueggemann, *The Land, Overtures to Biblical Theology* (London: SPCK, 1978), pp. 15-16.

⁵³ M. Fishbane, *Text and Texture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1979), p. 39.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 112. The biblical solution to the problem in Genesis 1-11 is in sharp contrast with that given in the Old Babylonian Atrahasis epic, which finds an urban solution to the threat of extinction. Despite formal similarities between the two accounts the ideologies are different from one another. Cf. I. M. Kidawada, "Literary Convention of the Primaeval History," *Annals of the Japanese Biblical Institute* 1 (1975): 7-13.

igated human disobedience and failure. Though there are exceptions like Abel, Enoch, and Noah, more characteristic is the observation in 6:5 that man's thoughts were "only evil continually." Instead of submitting to God, man in his hubris⁵⁵ refused to obey the divine standards, and consequently he brought on himself repeated judgment.

Throughout the first 11 chapters of Genesis the motif of cursing, or crime and punishment,⁵⁶ is dominant. From the fall onward, sinful humanity is justly under the curse of God. Five times in the primeval history the divine curse is pronounced on the sin-tainted creation (3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25).⁵⁷ This repeated theme sets the stage for the call of Abram to be the mediator of God's blessing to the world⁵⁸ Thus Genesis 1-11 and Genesis 12:1-3 are structured as problem and solution.⁵⁹ Wolff notes, "The so-called primal history explains in advance why all the families of the earth need blessing. This is disclosed in retrospect by 12:3b as its hidden, leading question (Leitfrage)."⁶⁰ In the patriarchal narratives blessing becomes the recurrent chord⁶¹ as the divine answer to the human dilemma caused by sin. The motive for this blessing is the grace of God. In the primeval narratives after each occasion of judgment there is a gracious opportunity.⁶² The grace extended after the dispersion of the nations (11:1-9) is the blessing mediated through Abram and his seed.⁶³

⁵⁵ Cf. G. W. Coats, "The God of Death: Power and Obedience in the Primeval History," *Interpretation* 29 (1975): 234.

⁵⁶ C. Westermann, *Die Verheissungen an die Väter* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1976), p. 47.

⁵⁷ Cf. J. L. Vesco, "Abraham: Actualisation et Relectures," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 55 (1971): 43-44.

⁵⁸ W. Zimmerli reasons: "The Yahwist wants to make clear by the shape of his narrative that here a turning point is reached. The persistence with which the key-word 'blessing-to bless' occurs no less than five times in both of the quoted verses [Gen 12:2-3] is intended to ensure that we realize that here the shift from the curse upon the world to blessing upon it is taking place" (*Man and His Hope in the Old Testament* [London: SCM Press, 1971], p. 50).

⁵⁹ Cf. O. H. Steck, "Genesis 12.1-3 and die Urgeschichte des Jahwisten," (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1982), pp. 117-48; and R. Rendtorff, *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (London: SCM Press, 1985), p. 134.

⁶⁰ H. W. Wolff, "The Kerygma of the Yahwist," *Interpretation* 20 (1964): 145.

⁶¹ Walter C. Kaiser, Jr. notes that "blessing" appears 82 times in the patriarchal narratives (*Toward an Old Testament Theology* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978], p. 57). Cf. W. Zimmerli, "Abraham," *Journal of Northwest Semitic Languages* 6 (1978): 52-53.

⁶² Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, p. 65.

⁶³ G. von Rad, *Theologie des Alten Testaments*, 2 vols. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1958, 1961), 1:167-68.

RECURRENT MOTIFS IN GENESIS 11 AND 12

It has been demonstrated that the call of Abram stands in organic connection with the primeval narratives. This significant canonical arrangement is even more apparent when Genesis 12 is viewed in relationship with the preceding chapter. Several factors emerge that bear on the use of Abraham as a pilgrim figure, in particular as he is depicted in Hebrews 11:8-16.

The call of Abram is set firmly in conjunction with the *תולדות* in Genesis 11:10-32. The narrator in tracing the line of Shem arrives at Abram and his wife Sarai and then adds cryptically in 11:30, "And Sarai was barren; she had no child." Sarna points out that this detail along with several other notices in the passage serves to introduce information in the subsequent Abrahamic narratives.⁶⁴ If chapters 11 and 12-50 were not intended to be read together, the details in the *תולדות* would be superfluous. Their inclusion, however, is intended to inform the reader of a crucial theme. Though the point must not be pressed too far, the fact stands that the biblical texts often present barrenness as preparatory to divine intervention in blessing.⁶⁵ In the narrative of Genesis, if Abram and Sarai are to have any future, the problem of barrenness will have to be overcome. This then sets the stage for the divine promise of a seed.⁶⁶

Because the *תולדות* introducing the genealogy culminating in Abram follows immediately after the incident of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9, it is not surprising that common strands may be detected between the call of Abram and the corporate building and consequent dispersion.⁶⁷ The stated motivation for the construction of

⁶⁴ N. H. Sarna, "The Anticipatory Use of Information as a Literary Feature of the Genesis Narratives," in *The Creation of Sacred Literature*, ed. R. E. Friedman (Berkeley: University of California, 1982), pp. 78-79. Cf. Hauge, "The Struggles of the Blessed in Estrangement," part 1, p. 7, and R. Kilian, *Die vorpriesterlichen Abraham-süberlieferungen* (Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1966), pp. 279-80.

⁶⁵ Cf. the examples of Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), Rachel (Gen. 30:1), Samson's mother (Judg. 13:2), Hannah (1 Sam. 1:2), and Elizabeth (Luke 1:7).

⁶⁶ Genesis 12:2; 13:15-16; 15:4-5; 17:4-8, 19; fulfilled in 21:1-3. M. Sternberg points out that the dual references to Sarai's barrenness (11:30) and the divine promise of a seed (12:2) at the beginning of the Abrahamic narratives set the stage for the subsequent stories. Thus "each new development ... sharpens the non sequitur between God's promise and Abraham's plight" (*The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, Indiana Literary Biblical Series [Bloomington, IN: University of Indiana, 1985], p. 148).

⁶⁷ J. R. Lundbom relates Genesis 11:1-9 and 12:1-3 to 2 Samuel 7 ("Abraham and David in the Theology of the Yahwist," *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth*, ed. C. L. Meyers and M. O'Conner [Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1983], p. 204). He speculates, "2 Samuel 7-with its message about what kind of house Yahweh really wants provides the Yahwist with, just the inspiration he needs to complete the transition from primeval to patriarchal history. It leads him to juxtapose the Tower of Babel story and the Call of Abraham, and in doing so he is able to render a theolog-

Babel was the desire for social unity and greatness (11:4),⁶⁸ but its frustration led to social fragmentation.⁶⁹ The divine plan was that in Abraham all the families of the earth should be blessed (12:3).

This general correspondence between Abram and Babel is specified in the motifs of name and city.⁷⁰ As Kaiser notes, the driving ambition of the builders was the quest for a name, or renown.⁷¹ But to Abram (12:2), "God now grants that which men had tried to gain by their own resources, but to the man of His choice and on His terms."⁷² Yahweh's gracious blessing on Abram answers the self-seeking ambitions of Babel.⁷³

The exposition of Abraham's pilgrimage of faith in Hebrews 11:8-16 highlights the notion that he was seeking "the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (v. 10). The narratives of Abraham in Genesis give no hint to this. However, the juxtaposition of the call of Abram with the building of a city in Genesis 11:1-9 provides a plausible biblical matrix for the assertion in Hebrews. The builders of Babel sought to build for themselves a city⁷⁴ and a tower whose top would reach into heaven.⁷⁵ Their aspi-

ical judgment about 'hoar antiquity' that comes very close to being the same as one already contained in the Court History."

⁶⁸ Josephus forges a connection between Nimrod, the Flood, and Babel (*Antiquities of the Jews* 1.113-15).

⁶⁹ Cf. R. B. Laurin, "The Tower of Babel Revisited," in *Biblical and Near Eastern Studies*, ed. G. A. Tuttle (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), pp. 144-45. Augustine commented, "And that celebrated tower which was built to reach to heaven was an indication of this arrogance of spirit; and the ungodly men concerned in it justly earned the punishment of having not their minds only, but their tongues besides, thrown into confusion and discordance" (*On Christian Doctrine* 2.4).

⁷⁰ Cf. W. Zimmerli, *Man and His Hope in the Old Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1971), p. 50.

⁷¹ Kaiser, *Toward an Old Testament Theology*, p. 86.

⁷² J. J. M. Navone, "The Patriarchs of Faith, Hope and Love," *Revue de l'université d'Ottawa* 34 (1964): 340. Lundbom writes, "'Making a name' means one thing in 11:4 but quite another in 12:2. In the Babel story men seek a name by erecting a city within which there is a religious temple.... Abraham, however, will achieve his name by having a myriad of descendants. These will become a great nation which no doubt is what the men of Babel are also striving for as they set out to build their city" ("Abraham and David in the Theology of the Yahwist," p. 205).

⁷³ Vesco, "Abraham: Actualisation et Relectures," pp. 42-43.

⁷⁴ In both the primeval and the patriarchal narratives, city building and city dwelling are viewed in a somewhat ominous light, as for example in Genesis 4:17, 18-19, 34. Cf. G. Wallis, "Die Stadt in den Überlieferungen der Genesis," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 78 (1966): 133-48, and E. Starobinski-Safrai, "Aspects de Jerusalem dans les Écrits Rabbiniques," *Revue de théologie et de philosophie* 112 (1980): 153.

⁷⁵ מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם can be used both for the visible sky and for the abode of God (Francis Brown,

rations were dashed, however, when Yahweh confused their language, so that "they stopped building the city" (v. 8). But from that very geographical area,⁷⁶ from Ur of the Chaldeans,⁷⁷ Yahweh called Abram to begin the quest for a different kind of city, not a city to reach up to God, but a city which has been constructed by God.⁷⁸

Conclusion

Several conclusions may be drawn from the analysis of the texts in Genesis referring to Abraham. First, the specific texts that speak of Abraham's movements are presented as historical narratives,⁷⁹ but emerging from the stories are frequent theological overtones. Second, the ordering of the Abrahamic narratives in the biblical corpus serves the theological function of providing the divine solution to the problem of sin in Genesis 1-11. Third, the motif of the city of God for which Abraham sought as expressed in Hebrews 11:9-10 can plausibly be taken to have a possible derivation from the collocation of the narratives of the Tower of Babel and the call of Abram in Genesis 11 and 12.

It would be claiming more than the evidence will sustain to insist that the Christian metaphor of spiritual pilgrimage is derived solely from the Genesis narratives of Abraham. Nevertheless the presence of metaphorical implications in the language and ordering of the narratives is at times already confirmed by the early Jewish writings and by the ancient versions. Therefore the early Christian concept of spiritual pilgrimage evidenced in Hebrews 11:9-10 can be explained reasonably as in part an extrapolation from the metaphorical intimations in the Genesis texts.

S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1907], pp. 1029-30. Note the audacious assertion by the king of Babylon: "I will ascend to אֶל־מִצְרַיִם" (Isa. 14:13).

⁷⁶ J. Guillet, *Thèmes Bibliques, Théologie* 18 (Paris: Aubier, 1951), p. 104.

⁷⁷ The debated question of the location of Abram when he received the call in Genesis 12:1-3 (cf. Acts 7:2-4) is of little consequence on this point. What is of paramount significance is that his original domicile was regarded as Ur of the Chaldeans (Gen. 11:28, 31; 15:7; Neh. 9:7). Fishbane notes with reference to Genesis 11:1-9: "This final episode of the Primeval Cycle is thus a bathetic re-expression of the alienation of man from order and harmony when his orientation is not God-centered.... But the ironic mask of tragedy also smiles: the episode is double-edged, and unfolds its own reversal. For it is from this Babylon, from Ur, that Abraham separates for a new land" ("The Sacred Center: The Symbolic Structure of the Bible," p. 13).

⁷⁸ G. A. F. Knight, *Theology in Pictures* (Edinburgh: Handsel, 1981), pp. 122-23.

⁷⁹ The controversial question as to the historicity of the patriarchal narratives is not the issue here. The presentation of Abraham is effected by means of the genre of historical narrative. The veracity of the narrative presentation is a question separate from the description of the literary phenomena.

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