

Title: KYB Introduction Genesis 12–25 (Part 2) "The LORD said to Abraham..."

In the lead-up to our nation's bi-centennial celebrations in 1988 a lot of excitement was generated as many people began searching their ancestral background hoping to find evidence which would prove that they were descended from someone who had arrived on the First Fleet or, better still, that that someone had been a convict. Before this important event, any hint of the latter was usually mentioned in hushed tones or preferably not at all. Many still feel the same way when an ancestor with a chequered past appears in the family tree.

Some people feel a little the same about Abraham – the one whom Paul called our ancestor when he said in Galatians 3: 7 "those who have faith are children of Abraham." However, sometimes the response to learning his background is to try to do a make-over. It has been asserted by some that he was a Jew or at the very least a worshipper of the One true God which makes his sound more acceptable as our father in the faith. Neither is true.

The first mention of Abraham (then called 'Abram') is found in the genealogy of Noah's middle son Shem. His father's name was Terah and the family lived either in or around the city of Ur in the land of the Chaldeans. In Joshua 24:2 it is recorded that Joshua said, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says, 'Long ago your ancestors, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates River and worshipped other gods.'"

Stephen, in the speech he made before he was stoned to death said, "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia before he lived in Harran."

Putting all the known facts together it would appear that God spoke to Abram while the family were still in Ur (where his brother Haran died.) His father Terah then took Abram, his wife Sarai (of whom it is said 'she was childless because she was not able to conceive) and his nephew Lot and they set out on a journey towards Canaan. When they reached Harran it is reported that they stopped and settled. It was here that Terah died.

Abram then took his wife, their possessions and Lot (his nephew) and they set out in response to the call God had first made back in Ur. This call contained a command, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you; and four promises: I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you; I will make you into a great nation; I will make your name great; all people on earth will be blessed through you."

These promises proved to be greater than Abraham could ever have imagined. They are personal (a homeland); national (a great nation) and international (all peoples on earth) We are not told how God spoke to Abram but from his response we can see that God's revelation of Himself constitutes His call to Abram. In Psalm 119:130 the psalmist put it this way "The unfolding of your word gives light" –this is the light of revelation and the light which changes hearts. Here God is putting into practice the promise he would later make to Abram's descendants (which includes us) "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws." (Ezekiel 36:26).

From the time he took his first step of obedience Abram's journey was like a hike towards the highest peak in a mountain range. Just as one peak was climbed, there was another which could not be seen, but which would have to be negotiated before the end of the journey was reached. It's almost as though each peak was a test of his faith and each test involved one or all of the promises God had made to him.

The touring party (not small by any means as we shall discover later) entered Canaan and made their first semi-permanent camp at Shechem. For the second time God appeared to Abram and made the first promise of a child, albeit a little obliquely, "To your offspring I will give this land." Although this probably sounded a little far-fetched to him (he was 75 and his wife could not conceive) he built an altar as an act of worship to the Lord who had appeared to him.

They then moved east towards Bethel and on to the Negev where he faced his first test – famine. Having decided to set out for Egypt and as if expecting trouble, he asked Sarai to say, if she happened to be asked, that she was his sister. When the question was asked, the lie was told and for the first of two times this kind of thing would happen, Abram placed in jeopardy God's promise of offspring. Both times Sarai was handed over to idol worshipping rulers and had God himself not intervened on both occasions, the end results could have been disastrous. But God kept His promise; His sovereignty over-ruled and He poured grace out on Abram – twice. The second time was much later and was the subject of God's seventh appearance to Abram in his conflict with Abimelech, the King of Gerar.

His return to Bethel was as a very wealthy man. But wealth does not guarantee harmony – and especially not family harmony. His nephew, Lot, had also acquired possessions which included quite large herds of animals. It was not long before there was quarrelling over resources between both their herders. Abram stepped in to nip any further trouble in the bud and he made Lot quite an astonishing offer – you can have first choice of any part of the land you desire. Why astonishing? It seemed as though he was now putting the promise of the land for *his* offspring in jeopardy. However, this time Abram acted in faith. He knew that even if he gave the land away it would still go to his offspring according to God's promise. As might have been predicted, Lot took the best of the land and went down into the rich valley near the town of Sodom. He had lifted up his eyes to hold and to grasp at what would fulfil his physical needs.

After Lot departed God spoke to Abram for the third time. He was told to lift his eyes and look at all the land God would give to him and his offspring forever. Moreover those offspring would be more numerous than the dust of the earth. As if to underscore this point God told him to walk through the dust – walk the promise – walk the length and breadth of the land and as his feet scuffed through the dust he would be reminded of what God had said.

Trouble came for Lot sooner than expected. He and his family were taken as booty in a battle between rival kingdoms and Abram was called on for help. Abram took 318 of his own men able to go into battle, and set out to rescue his nephew. Not only did he accomplish that, but he rescued all the others taken captive plus all the treasures that were taken. On his way home Abram had an encounter with one of the most enigmatic characters in Scripture –

Melchizedek, the King of Salem. His place in redemption history would not be made clear until the letter to the Hebrews was written some thousands of years later.

Sometime after this God again spoke to Abram in a vision (and if you've been keeping count this is the 4th encounter.) His opening words must have thrilled Abram's heart "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." But Abram was puzzled. He was still childless. His heir was one of his servants. Where was the promised offspring? Gently God drew him out of his tent and told him to look at the sky. He told him that if he could count the stars he would be able to count the descendants God would give him. Our hearts should sing at the sentence which follows. Moses wrote "Abram believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness." And the same is true of us – as children of Abram we do what our father in the faith did. We believe what God declares about Jesus, and he declares us righteous.

Then one of the strangest events in Abram's life was acted out. It will seem strange to our ears when we read it for it describes a covenant of fire. God was assuring Abram that what He had promised, He would do. And as a sign and seal, when the animals and birds were laid out as a sacrifice and night had fallen, a smoking fire-pot and flaming torch passed between the pieces. In a covenant it is usually the weaker party who agrees to the conditions and who will bear the punishment if it is broken. But here God is saying that the promise depends on him and he will keep it. He is also agreeing to take on himself the punishment if the covenant is broken. And it was. And he did.

The next episode in Abram's life might well be called "Taking Things Into Your Own Hands," or "Waiting for the Promises....but not....." The promised son had not arrived so Sarai talked Abram into falling back onto the cultural answer to their problem. The answer's name was Hagar. She was Sarai's Egyptian slave. The plan was for Hagar to have a child by him. This child would then be given over to Sarai and become the heir of the promises. The first part worked quite well but the end result was a mess. Hagar was filled with false pride; Sarai resorted to false blame (it was Abram's fault); and Abram retreated into false neutrality (she's your slave. Do with her what you want.) Sarai got her wish – Hagar, heavily pregnant ran away, sick of the mistreatment and abuse.

Thus far we have noticed that the hero all the way through this story is God. And nothing changes. It's interesting to note that neither Abram nor Sarai ever used Hagar's name – but the angel of the Lord did when he met her. What is even more interesting is that the Egyptian slave girl is the only person in Scripture who actually gives God a name. Encouraged by God's kindness and the promises He made regarding her as yet unborn son, Hagar's heart welled up and she declared "You are (El Roi) the God who sees me. I have now seen (El Roi) the one who sees me." Hagar returned as God had commanded her – but that was not the end of her story for actions cannot be undone and there are always consequences.

When Abram was 99 years old two quite different but equally significant events happened. In his fifth encounter with him God changed Abram's name and instituted the covenant of circumcision. In part, God said "As for me, this is my covenant with you: You will be the father of many nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I have made you a father of many nations." The high point of the covenant was "The whole land of

Canaan, where you now reside as a foreigner, I will give to you and your descendants after you and I will be their God.” The sign of the covenant was thus “Every male among you will be circumcised... For the generations to come every male among you who is 8 days old must be circumcised.” Then as if to complement Abram’s changed name God declared that Sarai would now be called ‘Sarah’ and for the first time it was openly declared that Sarah would be the one to bear the promised son.

Abraham had some concern about this and he bowed before God and laughed – it seemed so unreal. He reasoned – I’m 100. Sarah is 90. He even suggested that perhaps Ishmael, his son by Hagar, could be his heir. But no. No human scheme can ever replace the plans of God and God was about to reveal yet another one to his friend Abraham. This sixth encounter began with what looked like the unexpected visit of three strangers to Abraham’s tent. There was a flurry of activity as food was prepared and feet washed. As they waited, one of the visitors asked after Sarah and announced that he would return at the same time next year and Sarah would have son. Poor Sarah – she looked down at her old body and laughed at the thought of becoming a mother at 90. However it would not be long before the question “Is anything too hard for the Lord?” would be answered with a resounding “NO!”

As the men got up to leave, two went on ahead, but the third (who was indeed the Lord) walked along for a while with Abraham. This encounter was to have a profound effect on him as he grappled with the question he asked the Lord when he announced that he was about to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah because of the wickedness of their inhabitants: “Will you sweep away the righteous with the wicked? Surely not. Will not the judge of all the earth do right?” And so begins an almost delightful conversation as Abraham presses God about the number of righteous people the cities would need to have before God acted in judgement. When the number reached 10 he stopped. In his heart he knew that whatever happened, the judge of all the earth would indeed do what is right.

The rest of this part of the story does not make pretty reading. The two angels went to Sodom and met with open hostility from the townsfolk and a decided reluctance on the part of Abraham’s nephew Lot to leave with his family. However, the angels persisted and once again Lot owed his life to his relationship to Abraham. However, his time in Sodom had had a disastrous effect on his family as the actions of his daughters would soon prove.

A new family member usually brings unreserved joy, but the birth of Isaac whose promised coming had brought laughter to both his parents before he was born, also caused conflict. For thirteen years following Ishmael’s birth all had been quiet but now trouble loomed. Sarah saw Ismael mocking Isaac at the weaning feast and demanded that he and Hagar be sent away. Abraham grieved. He loved his first-born son but in God’s eighth conversation with him, God softened the blow by promising to bless Ishmael with many offspring. The desert into which Hagar and Ishmael fled almost claimed their lives but yet again the God of mercy and grace was there fulfilling His promises.

Sometime later, possibly when Isaac was a teenager, God spoke to Abraham for the ninth and final time – and Abraham faced the greatest test of his long life. We can but imagine how he felt when God asked him to sacrifice as a burnt offering his now only son, Isaac, whom he loved. Perhaps you might recall how you felt the first time you read these words. They sound

so unlike God. However, Abraham was quick to obey and from beginning to end of the three day journey, there was no hesitation. Even as he raised the knife over Isaac's body tied to the wood he had carried on his own back, Abraham was willing to give back to God what God had freely given him. As you read the story for yourself and find out, if you don't already know, how God remained faithful to His promise, remember that this is not just any story but a glimpse of what God had, from before creation, planned to do to save us from the consequences of sin.

Isaac was 37 years old when his mother died and Abraham and Sarah had been in the land of promise for about 60 years. And yet Abraham, who had wandered the length and breadth of it didn't own any of it – not even a patch big enough to bury his wife. So, in faith that it would one day all belong to his offspring, he entered into negotiations with Ephron the Hittite and brought a field in which there was a cave which could be used as a burial place for Sarah (and later, himself.)

The next matter he had to deal with was that of a wife for Isaac – and not just any wife. She had to be a woman from among his own people – from back across the great Euphrates River. Why? Because if Isaac married a Canaanite his descendants would simply be another tribe in the land of promise, always facing the possibility of being swallowed up by a larger one. So Abraham commissioned his most trusted servant, Eliezer of Damascus, to take the long journey and bring back a suitable bride. There was one stipulation – Isaac was not to leave the land. Eliezer proved more than worthy of Abraham's faith in him. He was supremely loyal, he trusted God's promises, he was wise, worshipful, and gave witness to God's leading. Enjoy his story – and witness how God worked to give Isaac a wife who was hospitable, industrious, kind, thoughtful and willing to go the extra mile.

Abraham lived another 40 years and, in that time, married again. Her name was Keturah and they had 6 sons. But Abraham was ever mindful that Isaac was the son of the promise and the inheritor of all he possessed. However, he provided well for Keturah's sons but sent them away to the land east of Canaan so that there would be no doubt in the future as to who constituted the 'great nation' that God had promised him when he first called him to get up and leave his homeland.

Abraham's death at a good old age and full of years is reported simply and without fuss. He was buried beside Sarah in the cave he had brought from the Hittites and Isaac and Ishmael, the sons he had loved, stood together in peace.

The history of Abraham was not written just to make good copy for Sunday School stories nor to provide examples for us of how to live. The church began with Abraham. In Gal 3:7 Paul says those who have faith are children of Abraham and in vs 14 that Christ redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus. Abraham lived in the light he was given – the light of God's promises believed by faith. The final Biblical word on Abraham is found in Hebrews 11:8-10 "By faith Abraham when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going. By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob who were heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and

builder is God." Abraham's faith was the absolute conviction that there are realities we have never seen. May it be for us as it was for Abraham – the sure knowledge that the best is yet to come.