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CERTIFICATE COURSE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

UNIT 7: ABRAHAM

TEXTBOOK READINGS:

Read chapters 1 and 7 on Abraham in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*.

BIBLICAL TEXT:

Read Genesis chapters 11:27- 25:11 carefully before reading the following background information.

BACKGROUND AND PERSPECTIVES:

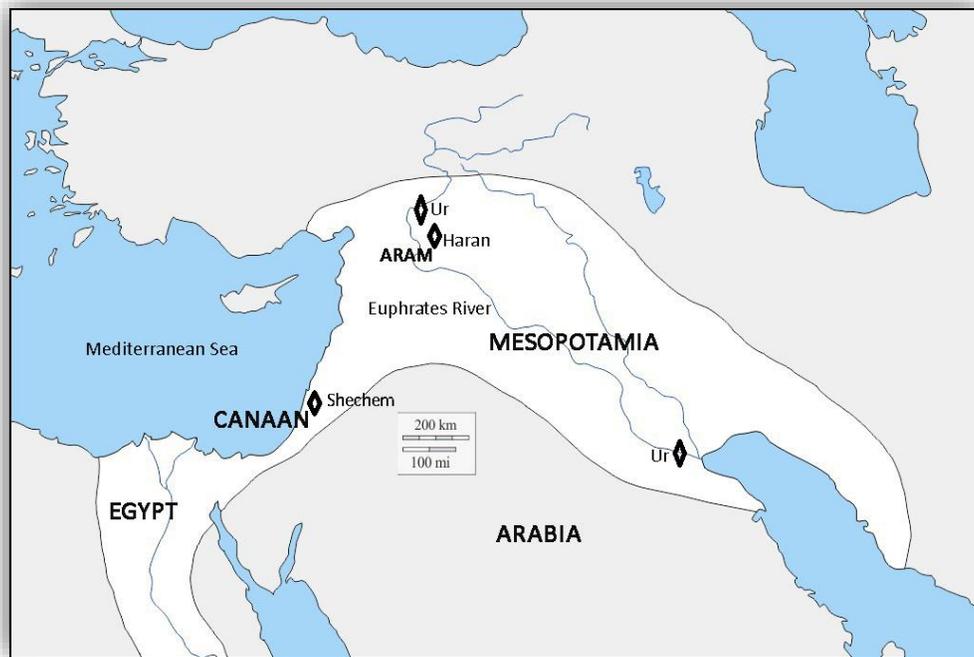
Beginning with the story of Abraham, the book of Genesis moves from a broad history of the world having many similarities to the origin stories of Mesopotamia to the specific and unique history of one man and his descendants. There is also an important change of setting for these stories of Abraham as he leaves Mesopotamia and travels to the land of Canaan.

The importance of Abraham is seen in the fact that he is featured in fourteen chapters of Genesis (more chapters than those describing the stories of creation, fall, and flood combined). The patriarch's story is also spread across a broad stage – the great geographic arc known as the “Fertile Crescent” (the white area in the map below) which stretched from Mesopotamia in the east to Egypt in the west, and which formed a broad highway for travel and migration across the ancient Near East.

We are told that Abram (as he was called at first) was from the city of Ur, and it has long been presumed that was the great Sumerian city in southern Mesopotamia. However, recent scholarship has shown that Abram was probably from another, smaller city of Ur in northern Mesopotamia – in the area known as Aram near the modern Syrian-Turkish border. This is because the Bible refers to Abram's family as being from “Aram Naharaim” or “Paddan Aram” (Genesis 24:10; 28:2; and see Deuteronomy 26:5: “my father was a wandering Aramean”). Also, the Bible speaks of Abram as coming from “beyond the river Euphrates” (Joshua 24:2-3), which was only true of the northern city of Ur.

The city of Haran to which Abram and his father Terah traveled was also in northern Mesopotamia (not far from the northern Ur) and was a major crossroads for travel between Mesopotamia and the area of Canaan where Terah and Abram planned to go.

After Terah's death in Haran, Abram took his wife Sarai and his nephew Lot and traveled down to Shechem in the land of Canaan, before going further to Egypt and then returning to Canaan. This was a major journey for that period in history – one of many hundreds of miles and one with many potential dangers. Travelers, trade caravans, and even cities along the route were often attacked and plundered (as we see in Genesis 14), and the fact that Abram did not experience more problems of this type throughout such a long journey indicates how large his entourage was, and that he had many trained armed servants (see chapter 7 in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*).



Simplified map showing the location of the two cities of Ur, Haran, and Shechem. Image base: d-maps.

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT:

The story of Abraham is a many-faceted one from which we can learn much (see, for example, chapter 1 in *Lessons from Old Testament Leaders*), but in this unit we will concentrate on a series of connected events that represent the most significant aspect of Abraham's life: the covenant God made with him.

According to Joshua 24:2 Abraham's family worshiped pagan gods in Mesopotamia, and we do not know when or how Abraham came to the knowledge of the true God – or why God chose Abraham as the founder of the nation he would work with so closely. But the Bible does provide a great amount of information on how God worked with Abraham and established him as the "father of the faithful."

It was doubtless a considerable test of Abraham's faith when God called him to leave Mesopotamia. God told him "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you" (Genesis 12:1), and we should notice the triple stress God placed on the fact that Abraham would have to leave his homeland, his own people, and his own family. God gave Abraham further difficult commands as the patriarch's story unfolds, but none as difficult as the final test we are told of – in which God instructed Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac.

Once again, we see the triple stress God places on the difficulty of the task he was commanding Abraham: “Take your son, your only son, [the son] whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you” (Genesis 22:2).

Reading the story at face value we might ask ourselves how a good and just God could do such a cruel thing – how God could make Abraham suffer in thinking that he would have to sacrifice his own son, even if God intended to halt the sacrifice. To answer that question, we must keep three things in mind.

First, we must remember that God’s command to sacrifice Isaac did not occur without a context. God had already commanded Abraham to do a number of difficult things, beginning with his calling to leave Mesopotamia and go to the land of Canaan. Abraham had seen how God had made every one of those situations work out and had grown to trust God. Abraham himself had said, “Will not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Genesis 18:25), and clearly this was a rhetorical question. Abraham knew that even if he did not understand God’s reasons, whatever God commanded would be right and that he could trust God. This was Abraham’s faith in action.

Second, it seems clear that Abraham was confident that God would work out the situation, even if God had to bring Isaac back from the dead. Hebrews 11:19 tells us specifically that “Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead.” So when they reached the area of Mount Moriah Abraham told his servants, “Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then *we will come back to you*” (Genesis 22:5, emphasis added). Soon after, when Isaac asked his father where the lamb for the sacrifice would come from Abraham replied, “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.” Again, we see Abraham’s faith in action.

Third, we must remember that God knew Abraham’s mind, knew his level of faith, and knew his level of trust. Tests are the same whether they are given in an academic setting or a moral one. The more advanced the person being tested, the harder the test is. But God knew that Abraham’s faith was great and that he would come through the situation (Romans 4:20–21). The New Testament tells us that: “God is faithful: He will not let you be tried beyond what you are able to bear, but with the trial will also provide a way out so that you are able to endure it” (1 Corinthians 10:13 NET). We see that this principle applied in Abraham’s situation. God knew Abraham’s strength, just as Abraham knew God’s goodness.

But if God is all knowing, as we know he is (Psalm 147:5; etc.), why would God have to perform such a test? Did he not know if Abraham would obey him or not? The answer is that God surely did know, and so the test was not for God’s benefit, but for the benefit of Abraham and for us. God was doubtless teaching Abraham in this great test, but he was also providing a lesson in faith for all of Abraham’s descendants – both physical and spiritual (Galatians 3:29) – the people through whom God planned to work throughout history. Christians also believe Abraham’s test profoundly foreshadowed the sacrifice of Jesus Christ in the following parallels:

- * In both stories a loving father is willing to sacrifice his own son (Genesis 22:10; John 3:16).
- * Both Isaac and Jesus were “beloved” and “only” sons who were born miraculously (Genesis 22:2; Hebrews 11:11).
- * The hill of Moriah on which Isaac was to be sacrificed was the area where the city of Jerusalem would later stand (Genesis 22:2; 2 Chronicles 3:1) and where Jesus was crucified.
- * Both sons carried the wood on which they would be sacrificed (Genesis 22:6; John 19:17).
- * Both sons went obediently toward their deaths (Genesis 22:3; Philippians 2:8).

Although Abraham was spared the actual sacrifice of his son, the strain of the situation must have been great on him as well as on Isaac and Sarah, and it may have been more than Abraham's marriage could bear. Perhaps significantly, after this event Abraham is not said to have returned to Hebron where Sarah was, but to have gone and settled in Beer Sheba (Genesis 22:19). Genesis does not mention the couple together again, and when Sarah died it appears that Abraham traveled to where Sarah had been living to mourn her (Genesis 23:2, and see note 1 below). Yet we can only believe that the difficulty of this situation was offset by the incredible promises given to Abraham, Sarah, and their descendants.

KEY THEOLOGICAL CONCEPTS:

The Abrahamic Covenant affected all subsequent biblical history and is summarized in God's words to Abram when he called him in Mesopotamia (Genesis 12:1-3):

- 1 "Go from your country, your people and your father's household to the land I will show you.
- 2 I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing.
- 3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

Note that there are three distinct aspects or parts to this covenant with each part corresponding to one of the first three verses of Genesis 12:

1. The Promise of Land: The first aspect of the Abrahamic covenant can be found in Genesis 12:1 and relates to the physical area that God promised Abraham – the promised land – which in Abraham's time was the land of Canaan (Genesis 12:6-7). This part of the covenant was clarified by God on several occasions (Genesis 13:15; 15:18). Although he never received it in his lifetime, eventually the promised land was settled by his descendants (Joshua 22:1-7) and known as Israel, as it was named after Abraham's grandson Jacob whose name was changed to Israel.

2. The Promise of Descendants: The second aspect of the covenant is the promise of descendants for Abraham that is spelled out in Genesis 12:2, and in Genesis 22:17-18, where God promised that they would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore and the stars in the sky. This promise was made when Abraham was already 75 years old and still childless. It would be many more years before the promise began to be fulfilled in the birth of his son Isaac, and centuries before the promise that God would make a "great nation" of him (Genesis 17:6) also came to pass. It was because of this promise that God changed Abram's name to Abraham, meaning "father of many [nations]."

3. The Promise of Blessing: The third and final part of the Abrahamic covenant is found in Genesis 12:3 where God promises great blessings not to Abraham and his descendants, but to other nations – that "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." This part of the covenant clearly was not fulfilled in Abraham's time, or even in the following centuries; it is a promise that would only find ultimate fulfillment in Abraham's distant descendant – Jesus Christ (John 3:16-17).

This great threefold covenant was made unilaterally – God made the agreement with Abraham without setting conditions, just as he did with his covenant with Noah. God did command Abraham to do certain things – such as telling him to leave his homeland, telling him to circumcise himself and his male descendants, and eventually telling him to sacrifice his son Isaac. But none of these commands – other than the initial command to leave Ur and travel to Canaan – was tied directly to the fulfillment of the covenant to which God then bound himself.

We also see the unilateral aspect of the covenant in Genesis 15:9-21 where God seals it with Abraham (still Abram at the time) by means of animal sacrifices. After killing the sacrificial animals, Abram divided them into halves, placing them on the ground in such a way that a person could walk between the pieces. We are told that God then caused Abram to fall into a deep sleep and that: “When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces. On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram” (Genesis 15:17-18).

This seemingly strange event was the enactment of an ancient Near Eastern legal ceremony in which an agreement was made between two unequal parties – one of higher status and one of lower status – and in which land was granted to the ruler of lower status. In this ritual, animals were sacrificed and divided and one or both participants to the covenant walked between the halves of the animals as a way to seal the agreement (Jeremiah 34:18). Genesis specifically tells us that Abram was placed in a deep sleep so that the covenant was clearly sealed by God alone – God not only used the legal procedures of Abram’s time to make a binding covenant with him, but also to show that the covenant was not dependent upon Abram’s actions. It was, in a very real sense, a covenant based on faith in God’s promises rather than Abraham’s works. That the covenant was made unilaterally can be seen in Hosea 1:9-10.

Nevertheless, the obedience that came from Abraham’s faith was involved in the covenant in the sense that it enabled the promises to be fulfilled, and was the outcome of Abraham’s faith that God expected and desired (Genesis 18:19; 22:16–18). In the New Testament, both Paul and James quote the same verse that Abraham “believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (Genesis 15:6). But James stresses Abraham’s obedience (James 2:21-23) while Paul stresses the patriarch’s faith (Romans 4:1-5).

Above all, we see that the story of God’s working with Abraham applies directly to us – as the apostle Paul powerfully tells us in the book of Galatians: “If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise” (Galatians 3:29)!

* Note 1. Abraham’s continued love for Sarah is also seen in the fact that he willingly paid the exorbitant amount of 400 shekels of silver – for the land to bury Sarah – at a time when a laborer would not make more than ten shekels in a year’s work and probably not make 400 shekels in a lifetime. It is often noted that despite the promises made to him, this was the only land within the promised land that Abraham actually owned in his own lifetime.

REVIEW AND REFLECTION: (complete in your notebook)

Basics:

In what ways is the story of Abraham different from the stories before it in Genesis?

Why was God’s request that Abraham sacrifice his son not as cruel as it might seem?

What are the three aspects of God’s covenant promise made to Abraham?

Looking Below the Surface:

What is the significance of Abraham sleeping while God completed a ritual confirming his covenant?

Everyday Applications: Think about the limits we put on what we are willing to “sacrifice.”

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