**The Promises and Places of Abraham**

Pastor Emeritus Joe Fuiten, The Ides of March, 2017

Father Abraham had many sons, many sons had Father Abraham. And I am one of them. As a believer in Jesus I qualify as one of the children of Abraham. Certainly the Jews qualify in a physical sense because they have descended through the children of promise, namely Isaac and Jacob.

Paul in Romans 4:18-25 shows us that Abraham was to be a model for how we do faith. “*Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be." 19 Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead — since he was about a hundred years old — and that Sarah's womb was also dead. 20 Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, 21 being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. 22 This is why "it was credited to him as righteousness." 23 The words "it was credited to him" were written not for him alone, 24 but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness — for us who believe in him who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead. 25 He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification.”*

The writer of Hebrews 11 followed the theme when describing people of faith from the Old Testament. The greatest amount of space is devoted to Abraham. Hebrews 11:8-19 “*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. 9 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. 10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. 11 By faith Abraham, even though he was past age — and Sarah herself was barren — was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. 12 And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore. 13 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. 14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 15 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. 16 Instead, they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. 17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, 18 even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." 19 Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.”*

Where Abraham came from and where he was headed were both part of the story. Josh 24:2-4 “*Joshua said to all the people, "This is what the Lord, the God of Israel, says: 'Long ago your forefathers, including Terah the father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the River and worshiped other gods. 3 But I took your father Abraham from the land beyond the River and led him throughout Canaan and gave him many descendants. I gave him Isaac, 4 and to Isaac I gave Jacob and Esau.*”

Genesis 11:31-32 has the start of his incredible journey which we are considering tonight. “*31 Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. 32 Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran.*

Haran is in southern Turkey right on the Syrian border. I had it on my schedule to visit there but it is so far east my time ran out and Palmyra and Haran got crossed off the list. Given the control of Isis in that part of the country, I doubt if I will make it there now. Haran is about 50 miles from Kobani, the scene of major ISIS fighting and about 100 miles north of Raqqa the ISIS capital.

Even though Abraham left Haran, some of his family members stayed behind including Abraham's brother Nahor. When Isaac was ready to be married, Abraham sent his servant to Haran to make arrangements for Isaac to marry Nahor's granddaughter, Rebekah. Isaac’s son, Jacob, must have known Haran because when Esau was after him Jacob fled to Haran. There is an irony that Jacob would flee to Haran, the ancestral home, after stealing the birthright from Esau. In Haran, Jacob found work with a relative, Laban who was the son of Nahor, Abraham's brother.

Here are some notes from a sermon I did in 2002. It emphasizes the very pagan nature of Haran and gives us an appreciation for why ISIS and its demonic style might flourish in that area. A pagan website offered the following explanation for why the Mood god cult enjoyed such success and power in this city. “Harran is in the middle of a flat, dry plain that was described as a "barren wasteland" even in antiquity, nourished only by its many wells (another possible meaning of "Harran-U" is "broiling heat"). In this baking, desolate landscape, the Sun was an enemy and the Night a comforter. The Moon, the ruler of the Night, must therefore be the supreme deity and therefore, to a patriarchal culture, male. Sin was the giver of fertility and of oracles. In this latter capacity, he also served as kingmaker. Many rulers sought his blessings and confirmation of their reign, endowing the city of Harran and its temples with riches in the process.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Whatever some might think of the power of the gods of Haran, Ezekiel and Isaiah were not impressed. Isaiah said, “Did the gods of the nations that were destroyed by my forefathers deliver them-- the gods of Gozan, Haran, Rezeph and the people of Eden who were in Tel Assar?”[[2]](#footnote-2)

The same author wanted to show the pagan orientation of the city even into the Christian era. He wrote about the city’s response to Julian the Apostate, who tried to turn the Roman Empire back to paganism after it had turned to Christianity:

“In the 4th century, the last Pagan Emperor Julian stopped at Harran at the beginning of his Persian campaign. He consulted the oracles at the Temple of the Moon (called either "Selene" or "Luna" by Roman historians, reflecting Roman ideas of the Moon's gender). The oracles warned of disaster. Julian ignored the warnings and was killed during the campaign; some say by a Christian in his own ranks (Smith 1976: 114). His body was brought back by way of Harran, and Harran was the only city in the Empire to declare citywide mourning after his death.”

Within a few miles of Urfa is a mosque that marks the cave where Job was held during some of his most intensive tribulations, and the town of Harran. Harran's homes are made of mud and are shaped like large haystacks. The town is the birthplace of the great Islamic general Saladin.

In 1994 one of the first dams opened near Urfa, creating a massive reservoir in a region that had previously been a desert. The river has functioned much like the Columbia River has to the Northwest USA. Today people windsurf on water from the Euphrates River over an area that had been a desert for eons.[[3]](#footnote-3) Indeed, the building of dams on the Euphrates has been so extensive that the Turks have the power to virtually shut off this great river. If they were to do so it would have incredible impacts upon both Syria and Iraq.

The role to be played by this great river is actually quite clear in the very end of time. It has at least one more dramatic role to play. **Revelation 16:12-17 says, “The sixth angel poured out his bowl on the great river Euphrates, and its water was dried up to prepare the way for the kings from the East. Then I saw three evil spirits that looked like frogs; they came out of the mouth of the dragon, out of the mouth of the beast and out of the mouth of the false prophet. They are spirits of demons performing miraculous signs, and they go out to the kings of the whole world, to gather them for the battle on the great day of God Almighty. "Behold, I come like a thief! Blessed is he who stays awake and keeps his clothes with him, so that he may not go naked and be shamefully exposed." Then they gathered the kings together to the place that in Hebrew is called Armageddon. The seventh angel poured out his bowl into the air, and out of the temple came a loud voice from the throne, saying, "It is done!"**

Under what circumstances might the river dry up? God could certainly engineer a catastrophic event that will either divert the water into the Mediterranean or else cause it to disappear into the desert sand. It might be as natural as Turkey deciding it needed to use the water for irrigation and simply close off its dams much like the Jordan River. In such a circumstance, no water would flow in the river and shortly it would dry up. We don’t really need to know the method. We just know that without this natural barrier Iraqi, Iranian, and other hostile forces can pour into northern Israel for the final battle of Armageddon.

Genesis 12 *“The Lord had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go 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." 4 So Abram left, as the Lord had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. 5 He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.*

The journey took Abram through Aleppo, Damascus and the other towns along the very ancient road of Syria. When traveling south through Syria on my trip there we took the exact same road as Abram some 3700 years ago.

The promises of God to Abram are ones which resonate to the present day. Israel is a great nation and a great people. The world has indeed been blessed through them primarily in the person of Jesus Christ but in other ways as well. When you consider all the advances in medicine, science, and technology that have come through Jews you have some sense of that blessing in a temporal sense.

*“6 Abram traveled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. 7 The Lord appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him.*

Shechem is modern Nablus and the site of Jacob’s well. I don’t believe any evidence of the altar of Abraham has ever been found but I would expect it to have been somewhere near Jacob’s well. Tourists don’t go there because of the Palestinians. I have only been there once and that was in 1985 in the company of a Muslim guide and riding in an Arab bus. Ironically, this hotbed of Muslim extremism and anti-Israel activism is the very place where God promised the land to Abram. Since God gave the land to the Jews in that very place, I support their continued right to the “West Bank” as their homeland. Shechem is also the place where the bones of Joseph were placed. The Palestinians have been very vigorous in their efforts against the memory of Joseph in the land.

*8 From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord. 9 Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.*

I am hoping my friend Elie Pieprz can get me to Bethel on this next trip to Israel. I have never been there and it is quite an important place because of Abraham and Jacob’s ladder to heaven. Abraham built an altar there and called on the Lord. On a previous visit I turned left near Bethel and went to Jifna where Musa Abed’s house is. This time I hope to turn right at that Y in the road and go to Bethel.

From Bethel and Ai one can look out over the plain of Jordan. When we come to the story of the separation of Lot from Abram this is an important clue and one which led to the discovery of a new location for Sodom by **Steven Collins, Director of the Tall el-Hammam excavation project. Some may have heard him speak at Cedar Park or have read his book and his discovery of Sodom. From Bethel and Ai you have a singular location from which to see Sodom some 3500 feet below Bethel down in the Jordan River valley or plain.**

The relationship between the devotion of Abram and the promises of God should not be overlooked. The places where Abram worshipped were the places where time and again God reaffirmed his promises to Abram.

“*10 Now there was a famine in the land, and Abram went down to Egypt to live there for a while because the famine was severe. 11 As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know what a beautiful woman you are. 12 When the Egyptians see you, they will say, 'This is his wife.' Then they will kill me but will let you live. 13 Say you are my sister, so that I will be treated well for your sake and my life will be spared because of you." 14 When Abram came to Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman. 15 And when Pharaoh's officials saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his palace. 16 He treated Abram well for her sake, and Abram acquired sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels. 17 But the Lord inflicted serious diseases on Pharaoh and his household because of Abram's wife Sarai. 18 So Pharaoh summoned Abram. "What have you done to me?" he said. "Why didn't you tell me she was your wife? 19 Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her to be my wife? Now then, here is your wife. Take her and go!" 20 Then Pharaoh gave orders about Abram to his men, and they sent him on his way, with his wife and everything he had.”*

This would be the first time that plagues from God were the instrument of deliverance of the Jews from Egypt even if this first “Exodus” only had two Jewish people involved.

Genesis 13 has Abram back in the land of Israel and in Bethel. He continued his life-long ways of calling on God. “*13 So Abram went up from Egypt to the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him. 2 Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold. 3 From the Negev he went from place to place until he came to Bethel, to the place between Bethel and Ai where his tent had been earlier 4 and where he had first built an altar. There Abram called on the name of the Lord.”*

The wealth of an individual in the centuries around Abram was measured in animals and people. Gold and silver were precious metals that were measured in weight. Coins or other forms of money would not be invented for another 1,000 years after Abram. Although Abram was blessed and called on the Lord, he was not immune to family difficulties and feuds. God did give him the grace to offer Lot the best choice of land.

*5 Now Lot, who was moving about with Abram, also had flocks and herds and tents. 6 But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together. 7 And quarreling arose between Abram's herdsmen and the herdsmen of Lot. The Canaanites and Perizzites were also living in the land at that time. 8 So Abram said to Lot, "Let's not have any quarreling between you and me, or between your herdsmen and mine, for we are brothers. 9 Is not the whole land before you? Let's part company. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right; if you go to the right, I'll go to the left." 10 Lot looked up and saw that the whole plain of the Jordan was well watered, like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt, toward Zoar. (This was before the Lord destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) 11 So Lot chose for himself the whole plain of the Jordan and set out toward the east. The two men parted company: 12 Abram lived in the land of Canaan, while Lot lived among the cities of the plain and pitched his tents near Sodom. 13 Now the men of Sodom were wicked and were sinning greatly against the Lord.*

As soon as Lot claimed his land and moved out God came to Abram yet again. In verse 7 of chapter 12 God promised to give Abram the land. Now in Gen 13:14-18 that promise is renewed just after Lot left Abram’s company to occupy the Jordan valley. God told Abram to look in all four directions. From the highlands of Israel about 12 miles north of Jerusalem he could see all the way to the Mediterranean to the west and into the hills of the East Bank of the Jordan in what is modern Jordan. Notably, he could also see into the Jordan valley from that place because he and Lot had just done so. The first five book of the Bible each affirm the promise of God to Israel regarding the land.

This statement by God to give Israel the land of Canaan is repeated multiple times. In Exodus 6:2-8 it figures prominently in the Exodus from Egypt. “*God also said to Moses, "I am the Lord. 3 I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob as God Almighty, but by my name the Lord I did not make myself known to them. 4 I also established my covenant with them to give them the land of Canaan, where they lived as aliens. 5 Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the Israelites, whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant. 6 "Therefore, say to the Israelites: 'I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. 7 I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. 8 And I will bring you to the land I swore with uplifted hand to give to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob. I will give it to you as a possession. I am the Lord.'"*

One should note verse 4 of Exodus 6 where God promised the land to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. “*I also established my covenant with THEM*.” That would exclude other children of Abraham such as Ishmael and Esau since they were not “children of promise.” Arab claims to the land based on Ishmael and Esau as sons of Abraham are thus not biblical.

The promises that God made to Abraham were consequential beyond the life of Abraham. 2 Kings 13:22-23 “*Hazael king of Aram oppressed Israel throughout the reign of Jehoahaz. 23 But the Lord was gracious to them and had compassion and showed concern for them because of his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. To this day he has been unwilling to destroy them or banish them from his presence.”* Notice that the promise of protection extended well beyond the lives of the principal recipients of the promise.

*14 The Lord said to Abram after Lot had parted from him, "Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. 15 All the land that you see I will give to you and your offspring forever. 16 I will make your offspring like the dust of the earth, so that if anyone could count the dust, then your offspring could be counted. 17 Go, walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you." 18 So Abram moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the Lord.*

Hebron would be Abram’s home base in the land but it was only a small portion of what God gave to him and his descendants. When his wife died, he bought a cave in Hebron for her burial place. That cave would serve as his own burial place as well as that of Isaac and Jacob and their wives with the exception of Rachael who is buried between Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Being buried in a particular place is a sign that you have put down roots.

Today you can still visit Hebron. It is about 19 miles south of Jerusalem. So if Abram went from Bethel, 12 miles north to Hebron 19 miles south, he traveled 31 miles altogether. Today you see above the Cave of the Patriarchs a building built by Herod the Great. It remains in use today as both a mosque and a synagogue. The cave is closed. However, I interviewed for television a man who had been in the cave. There is a small Jewish community living in Hebron today surrounding by 215,000 Palestinians which makes it the largest city in the so-called “West Bank.”

In 1929 there was a massacre of the Jews living in Hebron at the time. Some years ago we visited the museum in Hebron that recalls that event. There I made a brief speech acknowledging the bad things that had been done to the Jews in that place and elsewhere and offered our apologies for their treatment. I made a presentation of about $2500 to the Jewish settlers there as a gesture of kindness and support from the members of Cedar Park. The Jewish spokesmen for Hebron was completely taken aback and was at a loss for words in how to respond. It was quite memorable.

Back to our story of Abram, life continued on until Lot was taken captive. There was a battle with five kings of cities such as Sodom and Gomorrah aligned against four other city kings who defeated them and robbed their cities. “*11 The four kings seized all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their food; then they went away. 12 They also carried off Abram's nephew Lot and his possessions, since he was living in Sodom*. *13 One who had escaped came and reported this to Abram the Hebrew. Now Abram was living near the great trees of Mamre the Amorite, a brother of Eshcol and Aner, all of whom were allied with Abram. 14 When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he called out the 318 trained men born in his household and went in pursuit as far as Dan. 15 During the night Abram divided his men to attack them and he routed them, pursuing them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus. 16 He recovered all the goods and brought back his relative Lot and his possessions, together with the women and the other people.*

The first mention of the city of Dan in the Bible is Gen 14:8-21 during the time of Abraham. Dan is an iconic Israeli city. In fact, in describing the full length of Israel one says “from Dan to Beersheba.”

*17 After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). 18 Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, 19 and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. 20 And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything. 21 The king of Sodom said to Abram, "Give me the people and keep the goods for yourself.”*

*Gen 14:22-15:6 “22 But Abram said to the king of Sodom, "I have raised my hand to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and have taken an oath 23 that I will accept nothing belonging to you, not even a thread or the thong of a sandal, so that you will never be able to say, 'I made Abram rich.' 24 I will accept nothing but what my men have eaten and the share that belongs to the men who went with me — to Aner, Eshcol and Mamre. Let them have their share."*

*15 After this, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision: "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your very great reward." 2 But Abram said, "O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?" 3 And Abram said, "You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir." 4 Then the word of the Lord came to him: "This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir." 5 He took him outside and said, "Look up at the heavens and count the stars — if indeed you can count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your offspring be." 6 Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”*

Paul returned to this idea in Romans 4:1-3 “*What then shall we say that Abraham, our forefather, discovered in this matter? 2 If, in fact, Abraham was justified by works, he had something to boast about — but not before God. 3 What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness*." Believing God is central and essential and a righteous act.

In our story of Abram both Bethel and Dan figure prominently. They are also the two places where Jeroboam built the golden calves and set up shines of worship in opposition to the true worship God had ordained at Jerusalem. Jeroboam I, King from 922 to 901 B.C., had his capital at Shechem and religious centers at Dan and Bethel. In the Southern Kingdom, known as Judah, Rehoboam, a son of Solomon, was King from 922 to 915 B.C. 2 Kings 10:28-29 “*So Jehu destroyed Baal worship in Israel. 29 However, he did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam son of Nebat, which he had caused Israel to commit — the worship of the golden calves at Bethel and Dan.* When Abraham went to rescue Lot he went well beyond Dan.

1. Harran: Last Refuge of Classical Paganism by Donald H. Frew, internet. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Isaiah 37:12 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.findarticles.com/cf_trvgnt/m0VOU/5_301/65863687/p2/article.jhtml?term>= Turkish Bizarre.(Brief Article) Author/s: James Ruggia Issue: Sept 18, 2000 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)