The Call of Abraham – Session 5

After only the briefest of introductions at the end of Genesis 11, and with no hint of the role he would go on to play in the biblical narrative, suddenly at the beginning of Genesis 12 Abraham—still known at this point in the story as Abram—is thrust onto the scene as the first recipient of what we call the promise to the patriarchs. The words are famous and familiar: "Go from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And all the families of the earth shall bless themselves through you" (Gen 12:1–3).

This divine statement has often been taken as one of, if not the, primary examples of the principle of divine reward for righteous behavior. God tells Abraham to leave his native land in Mesopotamia and journey to Canaan; if Abraham does so, it is often thought, God will reward him by blessing him, by making him the founder of the Israelite people, the "great nation." And it is true, Abraham does have to leave Mesopotamia and go to Canaan as a necessary first step. (Though this is in large part because it is assumed throughout the patriarchal stories, and indeed in much of the Bible, that Yahweh, the God of Israel, is a potent deity only in Israel; Abraham has to go there because that is where God will be able to actually do the things he promises.) But the structure of these verses, which is difficult if not impossible to replicate in English translation, suggests that the departure from Mesopotamia to Canaan is indeed only the first step, rather than being the main step.

Virtually every main verb in the promise has the same grammatical form in the original Hebrew (with the necessary shifts from first to second person): they are all expressions of will,

what we call the imperative (for the second-person forms) and the cohortative (for the first-person forms). Abraham is instructed to leave his homeland; but God equally instructs himself to make Abraham into a great nation, and to bless him, and to curse his enemies, etc. And, importantly, God instructs Abraham, in the imperative, to "be a blessing." This is not, as so many translators and commentators have thought, the result of God's actions, that Abraham will be a blessing (at least not necessarily); it is something that Abraham must do. In other words, what God expresses in these verses is not a quid pro quo, but a partnership: God expects Abraham to do certain things, and God puts certain obligations on himself as well. All of these combined efforts are intended to lead to one outcome, marked by the only main verb in the promise that is not either imperative or cohortative: that the nations of the earth will bless themselves through Abraham.

The meaning of this last, crucial phrase is not necessarily clear. There have typically been two major readings. The first is "the nations of the earth shall be blessed through you"—which is to say, because of Abraham's faithfulness and righteousness there will be benefit for the entire world. Abraham's actions will have a global effect, and presumably a trans-historical one. For what may be obvious reasons, this is the reading most often preferred by Christian interpreters, as it provides a mechanism for reading the development and rise of Christianity back into the very first moments of Israel's existence.

The traditional Jewish reading, however, is the one suggested above: "the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by you." This interpretation is quite different: that the non-Israelite nations, upon seeing how blessed Abraham and his lineage are, will express blessing among themselves by invoking Abraham's success. "May you be as blessed as Abraham"—just as, later on, Jacob blesses Joseph's sons by saying, "By you shall Israel invoke blessings, saying, 'God

make you like Ephraim and Manasseh'" (Gen 48:20). If Abraham is a blessing, and if God makes Abraham a blessing, then the other nations of the world will look to Abraham as a model.

Despite its centrality in the narrative and its longevity in the history of interpretation, the divine words in Genesis 12:1–3 are not particularly clear. What does it mean that Abraham is "to be a blessing"? How will God bless Abraham? The crucial phrase in this speech is "I will make you a great nation," for this is the part of the divine promise that is shared by all the pentateuchal authors and that forms the backdrop for the entire pentateuchal narrative arc. The Hebrew word used by God here for "nation" is *goy*, which is a political term (rather than the ethnic term *'am*, "people"). At the end of the primeval history, God had scattered humanity across the face of the planet, and the nations of the world had all established themselves in their various places. What God tells Abraham here is that Abraham will come to be another such nation, carved out from the existing world order. In order to become such a nation, two elements are required: a population of a certain size, and land in which those people can live. In other words, the two central planks of the divine promise throughout Genesis: land and progeny, distinct but inseparable.

The fulfillment of these two promise elements, and the challenges that the patriarchs and their descendants face in achieving that fulfillment, is what drives the narrative from Genesis 12 onward. The promise of land will not be fulfilled until the end of the Pentateuch, and in fact not even then; Genesis, however, is in many ways the story of the fulfillment of the aspect of progeny: the movement from one man, Abraham, to the twelve tribes of Israel. But to get from one to many, a seemingly unceasing run of obstacles has to be overcome, beginning first and foremost with the barrenness of Sarah—and after her of Rebekah and Rachel. Yet a promise is a promise, especially when it comes from God, and since the audience of Genesis stands at the end

of the story, in full knowledge that Israel would become a full-fledged people, there is no doubt in the reader's mind about whether God's words will be fulfilled or not. It is the journey that is enriching, enlightening, and entertaining, not the journey's foregone conclusion.

The association of Abraham with the promise of land and progeny must have been an ancient one, for it appears in each of the three sources of Genesis, J, E, and P. The promise in Genesis 12 is from J; the next one we encounter is the promise from E in Genesis 15. There has been significant disagreement in scholarship as to the source assignment of Genesis 15, with many scholars of earlier generations giving the promise material in the first few verses to J. Many scholars, past and present, also suspect that the material about the Exodus at the end of the chapter is secondary. On the first point, much of the disagreement is due to the fact that in this chapter, almost (but not quite) uniquely among those assigned to E, the divine name Yahweh is used. When most people have been taught that the division between J and E is done on the basis of the use of the divine names, this can appear to be a serious difficulty. Yet most pentateuchal scholars now agree that the use of the divine names is not, for the most part, a valid basis for dividing the sources. J uses both Yahweh and Elohim regularly. E seems to use Yahweh on occasion, though very infrequently. And even P, which is the source that most explicitly limits the name Yahweh to the time of Moses and afterward (see Exodus 6), uses it in the first verse of Genesis 17. Even if use of Yahweh in Genesis 15 creates a momentary disconnect, there are many other elements in the chapter that are not only quite in line with the overall E account, but that mark it apart from the J and P promises.

We may note first that here the promise appears in a very different sort of setting. It comes here not out of the blue, as in Genesis 12, but in response to Abraham's apparent doubt: he has no heir. In response, God promises Abraham something that seems almost unbelievable:

that he will indeed have a child of his own, despite his advanced age. And because Abraham takes God's words on faith, God famously "reckoned it to him as righteousness" (Gen 15:6). This verse has a lengthy and important history of interpretation, most centrally in the writings of Paul. In its context in Genesis, however, it is not making any grand statement about faith versus works, and is not saying anything about "works of the law," since the law has not been given yet. The verse speaks only of this moment in the narrative: that God thought it was a credit to Abraham that he believed that God could do such an ostensibly impossible thing. (Later in the E story, Abraham's faith will be put to the test in the sacrifice of Isaac.)

In Genesis 15 we find two other interesting elements that do not appear in Genesis 12. One is the formal "cutting" of a covenant. Here we understand where that expression comes from, for there is a literal "cutting" that takes place here: Abraham takes his offerings and cuts them in half, after which God, appearing as fire, moves between the pieces. It has been conjectured that the meaning of this seemingly obscure ritual is symbolic: the one moving between the pieces takes on the obligation to fulfill his part of the deal, with the understanding that if he does not do so he should be cut in two like this animal. Whatever the original intent of the ceremony, the presence of a ceremony at all, the explicit mention of a covenant, is new to Genesis 15.

The other new element in Genesis 15 is the anticipation of the Exodus event. Abraham is told that he will indeed be given this land of Canaan, but he is also told that his descendants will have to abandon it, to return only after four generations. There are in fact very few explicit references anywhere in Genesis forward to the exodus, so this one stands out, especially given its prominent placement in the midst of the divine promise. It is mostly for this reason that people have thought that the entire passage from 15:13–16 is a later insertion. But there are no grounds

for prohibiting a pentateuchal author from anticipating the Exodus in the patriarchal story, just as there are no grounds for saying that there cannot be remembrances of the patriarchal period in the narratives of the Exodus. That said, there is good reason to think that at least some of this material is secondary—in particular, the four-hundred-year enslavement and oppression mentioned in 15:13, which does not comport well at all with the four generations mentioned in 15:16. It is, as always, internal inconsistencies that drive us to see separate authors. If the reference to the Exodus event as a whole is not secondary, then, what purpose does it serve here? It may well be seen as a response on the part of the author to the obvious question that might arise, at least on the part of a reader familiar with the overarching narrative: why does God keep telling the patriarchs that they and their descendants will be given this land, when we know that the Israelites will have to take it back by force after the exodus?

Different still is the promise narrative of Genesis 17, from the priestly source. Here the most prominent novelty is the inclusion of circumcision as part of the covenant. The origins of circumcision as a practice are unknown, though it is known that circumcision was not an exclusively Israelite custom. It was known certainly in Egypt, and most likely also among the Canaanites. It was evidently not part of Mesopotamian culture, which has led some scholars to suggest that the emphasis on circumcision in Genesis 17 should lead us to date the text to the period of the exile, when the Israelites would have wanted to define themselves against their Babylonian context. Yet there is another culture that also did not practice circumcision, and that the Israelites had every reason to define themselves against: the Philistines (whose foreskins David is famously sent by Saul to collect).

Whatever the original purpose of circumcision, its use in the context of the patriarchal promise in Genesis 17 is distinctly theological. Although most have read this as something that

Abraham and his family must do in order to receive the benefits promised by God—as if it is part of a quid pro quo—in fact there is something quite different going on here. The promise to make Abraham and his family into a great nation is, in Genesis 17 at least, a unilateral one on the part of God. It does not require circumcision in a transactional sense. God explicitly says that circumcision is the "sign of the covenant" (Gen 17:11). It is not part of the covenant itself. It is, rather, like many "signs" in the priestly source (including the rainbow at the end of the Flood), a reminder to God of an obligation that God has taken on. In the case of the Flood, the obligation is never again to destroy the world: when God sees the rainbow, the rains are supposed to stop before another catastrophe ensues. In the case of circumcision, the obligation is to make Abraham and his offspring fruitful and to multiply them (Gen 17:6). This, then, is how the sign of circumcision works: not as an identifying marker for Israelites to recognize each other (which would require a certain level of intimacy that was lost back in the Garden of Eden), but as a marker for God to recognize the Israelites from among the other nations of the world—such that when two Israelites engage in sexual intercourse, God should remember his obligation to make that coupling a fruitful one. Circumcision functions here much like the blood on the doorposts of the Israelite homes functions in the Passover story: as a means for God to distinguish between Israelite and non-Israelite.

The patriarchal promise is the most often-repeated narrative element in Genesis, and indeed in the entire Pentateuch. It is the central theme and plot device for all three of the sources in Genesis. Though it appears relatively infrequently outside of Genesis, the places that it is mentioned are always prominent ones: when God commits to rescue the Israelites from Egyptian oppression; at the episode of the golden calf; at the episode of the spies. In part because of its regular appearances, particularly in Genesis but elsewhere too, some scholars have suggested

that the promise is a later element of the biblical story, one that was inserted by a redactor (or a series of redactors) in order to bind earlier independent pieces together under an overarching theological rubric. While it is certainly possible that some promise texts in the Pentateuch are of later origin—such as the one in Genesis 22, as we will see—the vast majority of the mentions of the patriarchal promise are firmly embedded in the separate sources. The fact that all the pentateuchal sources know of the promise, and the fact that they all construe it in slightly different ways, strongly suggests that instead of being a late theological addition the promise is in fact quite an early element in the tradition.

The call of Abraham, and the patriarchal promise, inaugurates a new era in the biblical historical scheme. From an entire world, one person was chosen; from that one person, an entire nation will grow, and that nation will, at least in the hopes of Genesis 12, have a world-wide impact.

Reading:

Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, 81–136.

Further Reading:

Joel S. Baden, *The Promise to the Patriarchs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).