

4. Though Seth's faithful line in the renewed creation continued with Shem (Genesis 9), the Hebrews writer moved beyond him and his immediate descendants to the man who was the climactic focus of Seth's lineage, namely *Abraham* (11:8-19; ref. Genesis 11:14-26). Abraham was the last in a long line of faithful men, but as the apex of that line. *Abraham was the climax of the salvation history to that point, and its foundation going forward.*

- He is the premise that informs and directs the balance of Israel's scriptures, and so the one through whom the Messiah Himself is interpreted (ref. Isaiah 51-55; etc.).
- Hence Abraham is also the foundation and a key premise of the New Testament writings, whose purpose is to disclose the meaning and import of Israel's scriptures in the light of Jesus' person and work (ref. Matthew 1:1, 3:1-11, 8:5-13; Luke 1:39-79; John 8:31-58; Acts 3:1-26, 6:8-7:56; Romans 4; Galatians 3; etc.).

Once he is introduced in the Genesis narrative, Abraham never disappears from it, even after his death. Indeed, he is ever-present throughout the scriptural record, living on in the perpetual covenant God made with him and his descendants after him. From the Scripture's vantage point, Abraham was the substance of Israel's identity, vocation and future hope as covenant son, all of which was to converge in the messianic "seed" (cf. Exodus 1-3; Leviticus 26; Deuteronomy 30; Psalm 47, 105; Isaiah 63; Jeremiah 30-33; Micah 7). Beyond that role, but consistent with it, Genesis treats Abraham as the focal point of Seth's faithful line and its post-flood continuation in Shem, such that he is the man of faith *par excellence*. And yet, this status is most unexpected: Abraham, the person the Scriptures most associate with faith in the true God, was an idol worshipper living in Ur in Nimrod's kingdom of ancient Chaldea (cf. Genesis 10:6-9, 11:1-28; Joshua 24:1-2).

- a. Though a descendent of Shem, Abram didn't know or worship Shem's God (Genesis 9:26), but followed the Mesopotamian gods of his relatives and countrymen in Ur. He was 75 years old when God called him, and there's no indication that he had any prior knowledge of Him, though he was descended from Shem. This raises the question of how he heard God's call and knew who was speaking to him, but the Genesis account isn't concerned with this. It simply remarks that Yahweh (God's covenant name by which He would be known to Abraham's descendants – Exodus 6:2-3) spoke to Abram and told him to leave his homeland and go to a place that He would show him (Genesis 12:1).

According to Stephen (Acts 7:1ff), God spoke to Abram while he was living in Ur, telling him to leave Chaldea and go to an undisclosed place. Abram left with his father, nephew and wife and traveled as far as Haran, where they settled, perhaps because Terah could travel no further (Genesis 11:30-31). When Terah died, God directed Abram to continue his journey, and He brought him and his family and household to Canaan. Genesis mentions only that Abram heeded God's instruction (12:4), but the Hebrews writer emphasized the immediacy of his obedience: He determined to depart Haran even as God was speaking to him. Without question or hesitation, Abram packed up his family and all that he had acquired in Haran and set out under the Lord's leading (Genesis 12:5).

Thus Genesis presents Abram as a man of faith from the very outset; the first thing it reveals about him is his unquestioning response to God's word. Again, the text gives no insight into the nature and form of the divine call, or how Abram discerned this call as the word of the living God – a God he didn't know – and processed it in his own mind. What matters is that he heard God speak and believed Him for what He promised. The significance of Abram's faith can be missed in a casual reading, but it becomes evident in a closer consideration:

- First of all, Abram had no idea where he was going and what awaited him and his family going forward. More than that, this word of promise came to him from a heavenly voice, not a person standing before him. It seems that the Lord identified Himself to Abram, but, even so, He was unknown to this pagan man who had spent his life following the gods of Chaldea. Who was this being whose voice he heard, and how could he trust this voice? Was he being deceived, perhaps by his own imagination?
- Second, this voice promised to make him a great nation (Genesis 12:2), which was the pledge of descendants. But Abram was 75 years old, with a declining body (ref. Hebrews 11:12). More importantly, his wife Sarai was barren. She'd never been able to conceive a child, and now she was well past child-bearing age. Nonetheless, the text indicates that Abram believed God for His promise of descendants, but as the years went by without any offspring, he and Sarai both concluded that God was going to fulfill His pledge through a different mother (cf. Genesis 15:1-6, 16:1-3).
- God did lead Abram and his family to Canaan, and He identified it as the land that He was giving him as his inheritance (Genesis 13:12-15), but Abram never possessed Canaan in that way. So far from receiving it as an inheritance, he lived in the land as a transient sojourner, and never owned any part of it until he purchased a field at Machpelah to have a burial site for Sarah (Genesis 23). Indeed, God made known to Abram when He ratified His covenant with him that he would never *personally* obtain the inheritance of Canaan. He would inherit the land through his descendants; for his part, Abram would die in faith, trusting the faithfulness of his God.

All of these things underscore that the focal testimony to Abram's faith was his *enduring confidence* in God's promises, though virtually everything in his experience seemed to argue against them. Speaking about the structure of the Genesis narrative, Bruce Waltke observes: "*The plot is driven by Abraham's struggle to trust God in the face of a series of conflicts testing his faith. His faith develops as he trusts God in spite of a childless wife, famine in the Promised Land, exile in a hostile land, the kidnapping of his wife in pagan kings' harems, an ungrateful nephew who seizes land for himself, war against mighty kings, family strife between rival wives and their children, his withering body, and death itself with the promise unfulfilled. In addition, Abraham's God is mysterious, asking Abraham to sacrifice the child in whom his offspring will be reckoned.*"

- b. The Hebrews writer treated Abraham's faith in terms of its three primary dimensions: God's call and the promised inheritance of Canaan (11:8-10); the core promise of a covenant seed (11:11-12); God's command to sacrifice Isaac (11:17-19). He summarized each one briefly, and added his own commentary to highlight the emphases he intended for the sake of his readers' faith (11:13-16).

Continuing to follow the Genesis narrative, the writer began at the beginning with God's call to Abram, and highlighted his faith in terms of his unquestioning obedience (v. 8). Abram responded out of trust in the God who had spoken, without any information or knowledge beyond His bare promise. He had no basis for his action other than his confidence in God; he acted by faith and not by sight.

Abram followed God's call and leading, which eventually led him and his family to Canaan. Famine later drove them to Egypt, but when they returned and Lot separated from him, God expressly promised all of Canaan to Abram as his inheritance. The Lord then had him walk through its expanse to symbolize his sure possession of it (Genesis 12:4-13:18). Abram continued to dwell in Canaan, but God later revealed to him that his descendants would be the ones to inherit the land; Abram would continue to live there as a transient sojourner, even as would his covenant son and grandson, who were the immediate heirs of the promise. Indeed, Jacob would spend many years outside of the promised land, eventually dying in Egypt and only returning to Canaan to be buried in the piece of land that Abraham purchased at Machpelah (11:9; cf. Genesis 15, 21-50).

The Hebrews writer summarized the Genesis account of Abraham's history in the land of Canaan, but he also provided insight that Genesis only hints at: Abraham embraced his sojourner status in Canaan, not with a confident eye to its eventual possession by his descendants (Genesis 15:13-21), *but with the understanding that Canaan only symbolized the actual inheritance God promised to him* (11:10). The Genesis narrative nowhere ascribes to Abraham this larger vision of a "better" inheritance, but the nature and scope of God's covenant with him suggested that his destiny in God's designs involved far more than possession of a piece of land. For that covenant – as the covenants with Noah and the creation following the flood – reflected the Edenic promise to resolve the curse through Eve's "seed," which the subsequent flood episode showed would involve the earth's purging and renewal. Even more, God's covenant with Abraham indicated that this restoring "seed" would be one of his descendants, so that the man who would liberate the creation from the curse would also be the instrument of the Lord's blessing going out to all the earth's families. Hence Paul spoke of the *earth* being Abraham's inheritance (Romans 4:13), as also the covenant promises being ultimately bound up in one particular son (Galatians 3:16; cf. Psalm 72).

The children of Israel, as the Abrahamic "seed," inherited the land God pledged to their forefather, and yet they, too, died without receiving the promise. They, too, died in hope of the coming One in whom their own destiny and inheritance would be realized – the One in whom all of Abraham's children would be perfected.