

The Second Call of Abram

A False Start to a Life of Faith in the One True God

¹ Now the LORD said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

² And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name [SHEM] great, so that you will be a blessing.

³ I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."

⁴ So Abram went, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he departed from Haran.

⁵ And Abram took Sarai his wife, and Lot his brother's son, and all their possessions that they had gathered, and the people that they had acquired in Haran, and they set out to go to the land of Canaan. When they came to the land of Canaan,

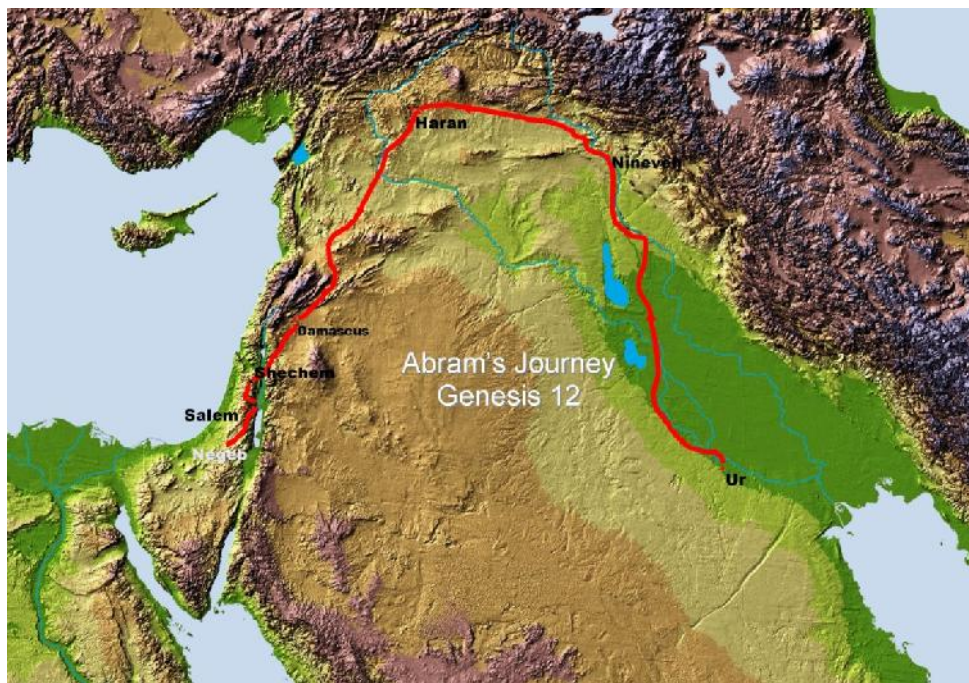
⁶ Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem, to the oak of Moreh. At that time the Canaanites were in the land.

⁷ Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him.

⁸ From there he moved to the hill country on the east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. And there he built an altar to the LORD and called upon the name of the LORD.

⁹ And Abram journeyed on, still going toward the Negeb.

Genesis 12:1-9



Gods and Ancient Peoples

Joshua says of Abram's father, "Long ago, your fathers lived beyond the Euphrates, Terah, the father of Abraham and of Nahor; and they served other gods" (Josh 24:2). I think you know that 2,000 years before Christ, in the times of Abraham, the whole world worshiped many gods. I think you also know that the world in which we live is still basking in what sometimes seems to be the last glimmering rays of twilight of a world once transformed by coming of the Sun of Righteousness with healing in his wings (Mal 4:2).

This causes me to ask a question. How did it happen that in a world filled to the brim with polytheism that there was a sudden and abrupt interruption of monotheism, a monotheism so powerful that it ended up transforming the entire world to our very day? This is a question that very much interests me as I think about the passage before us, and it is a very relevant question as well, especially as we now enter the darkness of post-Christianity in the West, where a return of the gods is making a new, albeit contemporary, return in our belief system, while the God of the Bible is being mocked and silenced as never before.

To answer the question, you first have to understand the problem. How did the world come to be almost universally polytheistic?¹ Scripture says that in the beginning, everyone worshiped just one God: the Creator of Heaven and Earth. It also says that when the one family that survived the Flood came off the ark, the patriarch Noah built an altar and offered a sacrifice to this same God, worshiping only him.

But then it teaches that at the time of Babel, men began to go astray, seeking to reach up to the heavens. For their brazen religious arrogance, God dispersed them over the face of the earth and assigned to each new tongue a boundary of land and a heavenly being to watch over them. These beings are called "sons of God" (Deut 32:8), the "host of heaven" (sun, moon, and stars; Deut 4:19); Watchers (Dan 4:13; cf. Jer 2:28 where "city" can be translated "watcher"; also 1 En 12:4 and Jub 4:22 with Gen 6:2); and gods (Deut 29:26). In these passages, these lands and gods were "distributed" and "allotted" to the nations by the One True God as a kind of punishment as if God were saying, "Fine, you want their guidance and help? I'll give them to you and you to them. A marriage made in hell. Enjoy one another. I'm through with you all." And this is what the NT refers to as the darkness of the Gentiles (Matt 4:15-16; Acts 17:26-27; Eph 5:8).

¹ Polytheism is the worship of many gods, but it may not be the most accurate word in all instances for the ancient view. Henotheism may be better. Henotheism believes in many gods, but worships only one god. However, this god can be, and often was, deposed (such as when Zeus deposes Kronos to become god of the pantheon).

What this tells us, then, is that the polytheism of the world was actually the punishment of God who gave them over to whatever they wanted. For sin is just that: it is God giving us over to do exactly what we want to do, to worship what or who we want to worship, and having to suffer the repercussions of it apart from grace or mercy. If you understand this history, then—and only then in my opinion—are you going to be capable of fully appreciating the answer to the question of how things came to be so radically different in the world. And the Seed of this answer is planted in our passage today.

The Second Call of Abram

I've titled the sermon, "**The Second Call of Abram.**" This title might surprise many people, because it is almost universally believed that this is the *first* call by God to Abram. But as we saw at the end of Genesis 11, this is not true. Stephen said, "**Brothers and fathers, hear me. The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran, and said to him, 'Go out from your land and from your kindred and go into the land that I will show you.'** Then he went out from the land of the Chaldeans and lived in Haran. And after his father died, God removed him from there into this land in which you are now living" (**Acts 7:2-4**). Our passage today is **Genesis 12:1-9**. If you read closely, you will see that the LORD comes to Abram here when he is in Haran (**vs. 5**), rather than land of the Chaldeans in the city of Ur (**11:31**). Thus, what takes place in our chapter is at least the second time that God appeared to Abram. But it gives us the very first answer in the Bible of how the worship of the true God began to penetrate the darkness of the ancient world.

A Test of Faith: A Command to Obey

This call begins with a command. "**Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go...'**" "Go" is an **imperative** verb, the verb of **command**. This is the command of the **LORD**: the God who created heaven and earth; the God who destroyed the world in the Flood; the God who dispersed the nations at the Tower of Babel. It does not say "God" (*elohim*), but LORD (*Yahweh*). This is **the covenant name of God**: the God who covenanted with creation, the God who covenanted with Adam and Eve, the God who covenanted with Noah, and the God who is about to covenant with Abram. The name means "I AM WHO I AM." Yahweh is basically the Self-Existent One, the First and the Last, the One who Was, Is, and always Will Be.

The command **demands something very difficult**. For this is no wanderer, no shepherd, no journeyman. This is a man who has spent the first 75 years of his life in cities (**vs. 5**).² Abram is a settled man, like you and I. He had a house, a vocation,

² There is an interesting symmetry to Abram's life. It is divided into 75 years, 25 years, and 75 years.

many friends, relatives, possessions, and so on. He probably enjoyed his life very much, and picking up and going somewhere would have been difficult.

This command also demanded something profound. As Wenham says, “Most commentators have regarded this divine imperative as a test of faith.”³ He is right. But why? I’ll give you two reasons from the first verse. First, he had something more. He was told to leave his country, his kindred, and his father’s house. You may say, “Well, plenty of people have had to do that over the centuries. What’s the big deal?” Here is something of which you may not be aware, however. The *Bible Backgrounds Commentary* asks, “Why does God ask Abram to leave these behind?” It answers in a way that it probably very unexpected for modern people. “One reason may be that it is by these three connections that one related to deity. The gods one worshiped tended to be national or city gods (country), the clan god (family), or ancestral gods ... (father’s household).”⁴

This is a fascinating observation, and one that strikes at the heart of this test of faith and my question posed at the beginning. You see, the Bible actually speaks of the gods in these same terms as the commentary, and it absolutely forbids the worship of any of them (Ex 20:3; Deut 18:9-12; etc). Typically, the national/city gods were the gods of the pantheon. These are the big gods, the ones everyone has heard of: Zeus, Athena, Osiris, Marduk, Baal, Chemosh, etc. It is fascinating that one of the biblical terms, “Watcher” is actually the exact same word in Hebrew for a “city.” It is also fascinating that Yahweh is called by the Psalms (121:4), Jeremiah (44:27), and others, the Watcher of Israel. Clan gods were lesser deities that were usually identified as spirits or demons. Then there were household gods. These were believed to be “ancestors who have taken a place in the divine world,” as the commentary puts it. Since the occult explosion (Transcendental Meditation, New Thought, Theosophy, etc), of the late 19th century, and especially since the drug infusion of the 1960s, these very kinds of worship have been increasing exponentially in the West, and thus our passage takes on new relevance in the modern post-Christian world. So this test of faith has an object of its worship. Who will Abram follow? Who will he trust? Who will he worship? It was a much more difficult decision given what we have just learned that you may initially think.

The same commentary also notices that around 2,000 B.C., there was an interesting development taking place in Mesopotamia—the rise of the concept of a personal God. “People began to see themselves in a personal relationship with a family god who undertook the divine sponsorship of the family ... In Mesopotamia

³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 274.

⁴ John H Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 68–69.

this god came to be known as the ‘god of the father(s)’ ... Devotion to this deity was extended in the family from generation to generation, and as such was inherited rather than chosen.”⁵ So Abram would have been tested very strongly on his allegiance to the gods of his father(s), the gods of his nations, or this strange God Yahweh.

The second test of faith has to do with where Abram was told to go. “Go ... to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1). Many read this as, “I’m not going to tell you where just yet. I will lead you there. Your job is to do what I say even though you have no idea where you are going.”⁶ We may call this the will of God for Abram.

Oh, the will of God. How many people today want to know the will of God in very similar kinds of instances? Some are even paralyzed by this question: Does God want me to take this job or that job? Does he want me to move to this place or that place? Many scores of books have been written trying to help people discover the secret will of God for their lives. Many of these, strangely enough, involve almost mystical or even magical solutions to help people discover God’s will.

For example, in the book *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God*, Henry Blackaby seems almost obsessed with talk about God’s calling or leading in a person’s life. But how does God give such calls? He does so subjectively. “God communicates directly to the mind of the Christian and tells him, almost audibly it seems, what should be done. ‘When God speaks to you in your quiet time, immediately write down what He said.’”⁷ God’s leading is always right, he teaches. But this can lead to deep confusion between the voice of God and my own voice. Jonathan Edwards had to deal with kind of thing during the Great Awakening when, for example, one John Davenport claimed that God told him to lead the people of his church in a riot in his city and burn thousands of books in the town square. How many things have been claimed as “God’s will” from just this kind of subjective following of some voice inside a person’s head? This kind of search for a secret will is truly a leap in the dark—the dark world of my inner sinful heart.

Shortly, we will see that this is exactly *not* what Abram was doing when he heard and understood the call of God. Though God did not tell Abram where to go *in this verse*, his decision to follow was not based on a leap into a subjective void, but to the most objective, secure object possible.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁶ We will see shortly why this *may* not be a correct reading. It has to do with something said at the end of the previous chapter.

⁷ Greg Gilbert, “Book Review: Experiencing God, by Henry Blackaby,” <http://www.9marks.org/books/book-review-experiencing-god-henry-blackaby>, last accessed 4-20-2014.

Before I tell you about that, it is enough here simply to say that the call Abram received in this verse was not specific. God didn't tell him he needed to move to Denver to start a soup kitchen. He didn't even tell him where to go. Calvin says that it is an extremely severe trial "to give up what we have in hand in order to seek what is afar off and unknown to us."⁸ It is as if God were saying, "I command you to go forth with closed eyes, and forbid you to inquire to which place I am about to lead you, until, having renounced you country, you shall have given thyself wholly to me.' And this is the true proof of our obedience, when we are not wise in our own eyes, but commit ourselves entirely unto the Lord" [spelling modernized].⁹ Will Abram go? Will he leave his other gods behind? Would he follow where he knew not? Would God fill "the resulting void as the only God Abram would need?"¹⁰

A Promise and a Covenant

So why isn't this a blind leap of faith, as so many think faith is? Why isn't this a subjective heart thing? We begin to see the answer in the next two verses (**Gen 12:2-3**). In these verses we find some of the most important words in the Bible. These words do not come in the form of a command, but rather, a **promise**. Calvin again explains why. "It is certain that faith cannot stand, unless it be founded on the promises of God ... in order that our minds may be disposed to follow God, it is not sufficient for him simply to command what he pleases, unless he also promises his blessing."¹¹ Is your faith founded upon commands, subjective feelings, or certain and real promises outside of yourself? This is part of what you must ask yourself as you read this passage.

This is a truth that has been almost completely lost in the church in our day. So many of our sermons are filled up with **command after command**. To be sure, it isn't the kind of commands your grandfather heard in church, where a preacher would yell and holler and damn to hell, especially if people went our afterward and played cards or drank alcohol. No, these are nicer, gentler, softer commands. Moses-lite. "Your Best Life Now." Smile more. Think happy thoughts. Be positive. Name it and claim it. But make no mistake, these are all still commands, even if they go down more smoothly than the fundamentalism of America's past.

Of course, many of these are not even biblical. But even biblical commands such as the Ten Commandments do **not contain the power to make you obey them**.

⁸ Cited in John D. Currid, *Genesis Volume 1* (Webster, NY: Evangelical Press, 2003), 257.

⁹ John Calvin and John King, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 344.

¹⁰ As Wenham puts it.

¹¹ John Calvin and John King, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 346.

Even the threat of hell itself is not enough to turn a sinner from his sin. And this is what people do not understand about law. Rather, what laws do (as the Apostle tells the church at Rome) is **incite sin** and rebellion. Have you ever met a person who knows he is going to hell and rather actually enjoys the thought? Sometimes the law incites rebellion by causing a person to react in the opposite way (I'll never do that because my daddy told me to do it). Other times, they create pride (look, I've really been able to keep all that law, like the Rich Young Ruler). Both are sin. But Calvin knew long ago that **only the promises of God**, the real promises I mean, rather than those of charlatans and hucksters, could give the power to obey God's command.

For Abram (and us), these promises come in the form of a **covenant**. Even though the term "covenant" is not found in Genesis 12, from at least Calvin all the way down to today, scholars have understood that this is exactly what is taking place. Yahweh, the covenant name for God, is making a covenant with Abram.

Specifically, this is what is known as a **covenant grant**. Grants are rewards from a **high king** (suzerain) to the **low king** (vassal) for loyal service with a sworn grant of privilege such as land, priesthood, or dynasty. The grant is not only a reward, but also an inducement for his future loyalty,¹² or as the Bible would put it: Faith. This is what Calvin is driving at. The covenant actually creates the power to obey the command, for it is the gospel, and the gospel is the power of God to salvation to everyone who believes (**Rom 1:17**). We saw a covenant grant with Adam and Eve, when God swore that her seed would destroy the seed of the serpent. We saw a covenant grant with Noah, when God promised him and his seed to never destroy the earth again. Now we see another covenant grant with Abram.

All of the elements of ancient grants are here. There is a **divine oath**. "I will" show you land. "I will" make you a great nation." "I will" bless you and make you name great." "I will" bless those who bless you." "I will" curse any who dishonors you. Five "I wills," the same number that we saw crop up throughout the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11. Five: The number of the people of the Torah.

In these five oaths, we see the **blessing and curses**. The blessing is not merely the things promised, though those are great. Yet, many who "name it and claim it" today think that is exactly what it is about. Rather, **blessing has to do with being in favor with God and under his protection and care**.¹³ Cursing would then have to do with the removal from his protection and favor. Listen to how the LORD put it to King David when he made a covenant with him, "I have been with you wherever you went and have cut off all your enemies from before you. And I will make for

¹² Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: a Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009), 93.

¹³ John H. Walton, *Genesis*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 392.

you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth” (2 Sam 7:9). Or listen to how God puts it to Israel, “For the LORD your God has blessed you in all the work of your hands. He knows your going through this great wilderness. These forty years the LORD your God has been with you. You have lacked nothing” (Deut 2:7). Was it easy for David? Did Israel have their best life now? No, but God was with them and they had proofs of it. His being with them in protection and care in the midst of difficulty and trouble was the blessing.

There are **four things promised** to Abram in this covenant. At first, there is little hint that these promises are anything but physical. First, he is promised **a land** (Gen 12:1). This land was occupied by the Canaanites at the time (6). Whether true or not, we learn something interesting about this from the book of Jubilees. It tells us that this particular parcel of land was originally granted to Shem. However, “Canaan saw that the land of Lebanon as far as the river of Egypt was very good. And he did not go into the land of his inheritance toward the west, that is the sea, but he dwelt in the land of Lebanon, eastward and westward, from the bank of the Jordan and from the shore of the sea. And Ham, his father, and Cush and Mizraim, his brothers, said to him, ‘You have dwelt in a land which is not yours nor did it come forth for us by lot. Do not do this, because if you do this, you and your children will fall in the land and be cursed with sedition because by sedition you have dwelt and by sedition your children will fall and you will be uprooted forever. Do not dwell in the dwelling of Shem because it came to Shem and his sons by lot” (Jub 10:29-31).

Second, he is promised to become a great **nation** (2). This nation becomes Israel, and it did not exist at all in Abram’s day. But God would create it out of nothing, swearing to become their God, all after having abandoned the nations to their fate with the dark lords of the heavens.

Third, he is promised a **name**. “I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing” (2). A blessing to whom? This is a hint that something more is in God’s mind. This comes to the fore in the next verse, “I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (3). Now, if the blessing of God entails the presence, protection, and care of God, then God is promising even as early as **Genesis 12:3** to somehow use Abram to bless not only Israel, but **the whole world**. This is a hint that the NT is correct to see the land and the nation as extending beyond the physical to the invisible, to the kingdom of Jesus Christ and his church.

The fourth promise is to Abram’s **seed**. “To your seed I will give this land.” Back in **11:30** we learned that Sarai had no children, thus neither did Abram. So this

promise is that Abram would have an heir and that these promises would continue through his line. This becomes a major thread of the Abram story.

In these last two promises (name and seed), we begin to see something marvelous. There has been a [wordplay going on with the word *shem*](#) ever since Noah got off the ark. Noah has a son named Shem and God blessed Shem, saying that through him, people would bless and worship God. But at the Tower of Babel, the people want to make a *shem* for themselves. God destroys this plan. But it is not until many centuries later that God begins to fulfill his promise to Shem, so that not only will Abram have a great name, God will have a great Name too.

Thus, in the promise of this seed we learn from [Galatians 3:16](#) that the LORD is actually speaking a promise to Abram's seed. Paul puts it in the singular, since the form of the word is singular. And he sees this seed as Jesus Christ himself, the Name of God, the Name above all names. Well, all of this will take many books and centuries to be seen in their fullness, but the seeds of these ideas are already here in this second call of Abram.

The LORD Appeared to Abram

[So these promises are objective to Abram.](#) But there is something else objective here as well. There is another reason why God was not asking Abram to jump into the void of faith. A covenant demands a Covenant Giver, a real living person on the other end. A King. Notice what it says in [vs. 7](#), "[Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'To your seed I will give this land.'](#)" "Appear" is the word *ra'ah* and it means "to see." Stephen uses the exact same Greek word as the LXX here to say that God also appeared to him in Mesopotamia.

Let me put this another way. [This was no inner voice](#), no wandering thought of sugar plums dancing through Abram's head. He wasn't having his quiet time when suddenly he had an insight and decided to follow it west to God knows where. This is no subjective feeling, no intuition, no hunch that Abram is hoping he can know the will of God. This is God himself coming in visible, audible form. But for some reason, this seems to go past almost all of us.

Theologians often use the fancy words "[theophany](#)" or sometimes "[Christophany](#)" here. The word is fine for what it means (an appearance of God/Christ), but I don't particularly like them, because they make too abstract and difficult, they put too far out of reach into the ivory towers of the theologians, a very simple concept that a peasant could otherwise grasp. It is simple. Really. [The Second Person of the Trinity is appearing to Abram in physical form.](#) I would say it is Jesus, but he wasn't given this name until he came in human flesh. Nevertheless, that is who Abram is talking to now. This is the God who is calling Abram. Abram

met him. Abram knew him, personally, but not just in his head and heart. The call was objective.

Abram's Response: Weak but Certain Faith

Weak but True Faith

We are now left with asking, how did Abram respond to all of this? It is tempting to read our story as a pure commendation of Abram. One commentary describes Abram's "unwavering obedience to the divine will."¹⁴ Another says, "There is no sense of hesitation or lingering—he does as God bids."¹⁵ Another applauds him as "a paragon of faith and obedience."¹⁶ But we need to be careful here not to make Abram something that he is not. In fact, it is actually more beneficial to us to read his faith and obedience in the total light of the full story.

Bob Gonzales rightly calls this section of Genesis: *Abram's False Start*.¹⁷ Why? Notice back in **Gen 11:31**, "Terah took Abram his son ... and they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan, but when they came to Haran, they settled there."¹⁸ They initially set off to go to Canaan, but they ended up staying in Haran. Then notice that Stephen says, "God removed him from there into this land in which you are not living" (**Acts 7:4**). Both of these things sound more like something I would do than some perfect man with utter trust and pure faith. As we will see throughout the coming stories, Abram is far from a perfect man. He is weak and sinful and often does things his way.

Nevertheless, Abram eventually went. "So Abram went, as the LORD had told him" (**Gen 12:4**). Are not both of these things together a good reason why the Bible is a book a can be trusted? He was weak, sinful. It doesn't skim over that fact. Yet, simultaneously, he was a man of faith. He believed God and the promises. However the LORD got him to leave, Abram left. This is presented to us as faith, since **12:1** tells us that Abram did not know why or where he was going. Yet, it was also the obedience that comes from faith, since he did as the LORD told him.

Traveling to Check Out the Land

What we find Abram doing in the rest of our verses is checking out the land of Canaan. He departs from Haran (4), takes Sarai, Lot, and all their possessions, as well as the people they acquired in Haran (meaning that Abram was no common peasant, he was in his own right a lord and master of others), and leaves for Canaan

¹⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, The JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 90.

¹⁵ Currid, *Genesis*, 1:254.

¹⁶ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis, Chapters 18–50*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1995), 367.

¹⁷ Robert R. Gonzales Jr., *Where Sin Abounds* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 109.

¹⁸ It is this verse that makes me wonder why Terah was headed to Canaan. Did God tell them earlier to go there? Why then the lack of this detail in **Gen 12:1**? We are left to wonder why this Canaan detail is put like this.

(5). When he comes to Canaan, he passes through **Shechem**. This is about half way between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea on the western side, 30 miles north of (Jeru)Salem, where it sits between Mt. Gerizim and Mt. Ebal.



Curiously, he comes to “**the oak of Moreh**” (12:6), an oak that may have been standing still in the days of Deborah. This is a curious verse, especially as it relates to the practices of ancient peoples and their gods. The *TDOT* (De Moor, 1:443) says, “**Trees and stones were specifically connected with the oracle at Ugarit.**” “**And similar associations are found in Gen 28:18–22; 35:8; Josh 24:26; Judg 6:11, 19–20. Sacred trees are still known today in the Near East.**”¹⁹

The word for “oak” is the word *'elon*. Some words for God include *'elyon*, *'el*, and *'elohim*, while other trees are called *'eyl*, and *'eleyhem*. In other words, there are strange etymological similarities between trees and gods.²⁰ At any rate, the word “Moreh” literally means “**teacher.**” **God, teacher, trees.** Hence, the Targums all call this the “**Plain of the Vision.**” Commentators conclude that this place anticipates by its very name that the Lord will appear there.²¹ Thus, the very next thing the passage says is, “**Then the LORD appeared to Abram.**” Somehow, this was a conduit, a link between heaven and earth, even as the Tower of Babel was meant to be and the trees of Eden were meant to be.

Worship

So what does Abram do now? He stops and **worships**. The God of creation has now appeared to Abram three times (11:31; 12:1; 12:7). He has promised Abram many things, especially his personal blessing. He has taken Abram out of his procrastination (at best) at Haran, brought him to Canaan, and shown him the goodly land. And Abram worships. He worships God. He is no longer worshipping the gods of his fathers.²² He worships Yahweh alone. He trusts this God. And this

¹⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 279.

²⁰ Perhaps the most obvious place this occurs is Ex 15:27 where there are seventy palm trees in a place called Elim (“gods”).

²¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 279.

²² **Going Deeper:** I am currently doing some research into exactly who it may have been that Abram was worshipping. My tentative conclusion is that he and his family were previously serving the moon god Sin, for Sin’s capital was in Ur and the famous ziggurat at Ur

God comes through for Abram in a host of ways throughout his life. This is the beginning of how the world has been so radically changed through this man.²³ It isn't because of this man, but because of God. It is because of what God does for Abram.

Abram's only response is to build an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From here, Abram goes south to Bethel and pitches his tent (Gen 12:8). Bethel means "House of God [El]." He lives in a tent, and no longer a permanent house, because as Hebrews says, "By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise" (Heb 11:9). He moves a little farther east to Ai (Gen 12:8). And there it says he builds another altar. Ai means, "Heap of ruins."

Why an altar? It doesn't say also a sacrifice (like Noah and presumably Cain and Abel)? It is possible that Abram sacrificed, but the altar is the point of attention here. I like Calvin's answer, "Inward worship of the heart is not sufficient, unless external profession before men be added." You need to understand that this is a very public place. It is in the midst of hostile territory, or as John Currid says, "God has decided to bring the seed of the woman right into the midst of the seed of the serpent, and to preserve his people."²⁴ This altar would have been huge. It was like putting down an American flag on the moon. "I claim this territory for Yahweh." It also suggests that Abram worshiped in a regular, formal way.²⁵

But now he does one more thing. He "calls upon the Name of the LORD." He does not call upon his previous gods, but upon the Name of God. Who gets the name here? Not Abram, but the LORD. In fact, not merely Yahweh, but the Name of Yahweh. As we will see in coming weeks, the Name of Yahweh is most properly speaking the Second Person of the Trinity, the Mediator between Yahweh and man, the mediator who bears the very name Yahweh and so becomes the Name of Yahweh. The targums call him the Memra here, the Aramaic word for "logos" or "word." "And the Memra of the Lord was revealed to Abram and said to him: 'To

was dedicated to him (also named Nanna). The other major place of Sin's worship was Haran. These are the two cities Abram travels to outside of Canaan in Gen 11-12. Sin is also the root of Sinai and the wilderness of Sin, meaning that this moon god's worship spanned the entire region of the fertile crescent, which is even more interesting in light of the fact that his symbol was a *crescent* moon. The crescent moon also happens to be the symbol of Islam, and in particular of Allah, who was the moon god worshipped by Muhammad and his family long before he ever had visions from Allah. In fact, Allah is short for *al-ilah* ("the god") and *il* or *ilab* was originally a phase of the moon-god. Allah was just another name for Sin and it originally referred to the high god of the pantheon, which is how the moon god Sin was viewed, for he was the "God of gods." For more on this fascinating and important history see: <http://www.investigatislam.com/moonGod.htm> and DDD's entry on Sin.

²³ If my previous note is correct, there may very well be some truth to the fact that Abram worshiped Allah, though he called him Sin, but it is twisted truth from what a Muslim will tell you. For, this worship would go back prior to his days in Canaan, when he was in Haran and Ur. Thus, Islam conveniently forgets the last 100 years of Abram's worship, where Abram came to worship a very, very different god from the moon god and his brother (Ninurta/Nimrod[?], god of war) and his daughter Ishtar (goddess of war).

²⁴ Currid, 254.

²⁵ Wenham, 281.

your sons I will give this land.’ And he built there an altar to the name of the Memra of the Lord, who was revealed to him” (Targ. Neofiti Gen 12:7).

Finally, Abram goes down south of Jerusalem to the Negeb, thus completing a cycle of the entire land of Canaan. He walks through it. He lives in it, though as an alien rather than a permanent resident. He worships in it. He claims it for his God. Symbolically, Abram is taking possession of the land. But going down south also acts as a link to the next story, where Abram goes all the way into Egypt, which we will look at next time.

Your Response?

So the covenant promises are objective and certain, and Abram trusted in his God by faith alone, for certainly he could not rely on his works to get him these things. All that is left is your response.

In light of what I have said earlier about trying to understand the will of God, it is important to notice one more time that these promises are of a very different sort than much of what passes for being in the will of God today. These are not subjective feelings, but **objective realities**. They come from outside of Abram, not from within his own heart. “**This land, over there.**” “**Those people called Hebrews.**” This is the word of God made certain. It is **not a secret will of the mystics**, but the revealed will of God, which we today know because of the Bible. Knowing and doing this will of God it is rooted not in feelings and emotions, but in the commands of God.

Second, the voice Abram heard was of a very different sort than what passes for hearing God’s voice today. This was **a person** who appeared to Abram so that he **saw him with his eyes** and **heard him with his ears**. To be sure, he was not incarnated in the flesh yet, but he was nevertheless present to Abram’s senses. The words were not ideas floating around in his mind, but syllables crashing against the air and vibrating on his ear drums. Very few people who claim to hear a word of knowledge from God today will go so far as to say this is what is going on.

Third, these promises and person come together for Abram to prove to him that this is not only his personal God, but the God who is capable of giving him the promises. We know today that it is the God of heaven and earth, the God of all creation. Abram turned aside from his household gods, his city gods, and Yahweh became his personal God before all others, worshiping only him, trusting only him.

As Calvin says, **faith alone produces obedience. Biblical faith is put into a real object outside of ourselves.** “*I will bless thee,*” Calvin thinks upon. “This is partly added, to explain the preceding sentence. For, lest Abram should despair, God offers

his own blessing, which was able to effect more in the way of miracle, than is seen to be effected, in other cases, by natural means.”²⁶

Today, the blessings and promises are that we inherit the eternal land, not some land in North America. Not some land over in Israel, but the very kingdom of God, and a new heavens and new earth. The promise is for a people from every tribe and tongue and language and nation. God is calling you into this kingdom through his word preached today. The Seed has come. The Name has been lifted up and exalted.

You know, in the ancient world, only in Israel did a personal God become the God of the nations.²⁷ For he is the God of creation, the king of heaven and earth. This is why polytheism has been so ruined in our days. But unless we recover our faith in this word made sure, we will see the complete darkness envelop the world again, for the only light of the world is Jesus Christ—God became flesh, flesh that died, flesh that was risen and created anew, flesh that ascended into heaven, above all other names.

Therefore, look forward, as Abram did, to a city whose foundations are made by God. Pitch your tent, don't linger in your homes, pretending that this world is your home. Live by faith and obey the command. Believe upon this God today, and so repeat the faith of Abram, and so become sons and daughters of Abram, receiving his promises tasted today, real as can be, and fully consummated when all things are made new and he returns again.

²⁶ John Calvin and John King, *Commentary on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 347.

²⁷ John H Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Old Testament): Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 69.