



## BIBLE STUDIES FOR GENERAL ASSEMBLY 2018

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### SESSION 1: Walking the half-way (Genesis 11:31 – 12.4)

[Biblical quotations are all from the NRSV]

#### Genesis 11:31 - 12:4

<sup>31</sup> Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there. <sup>32</sup> The days of Terah were two hundred five years; and Terah died in Haran.

**12:1** 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. <sup>2</sup> I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." <sup>4</sup> 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.

### 1) INTRODUCTION

Why would any of us choose to move away from a place where we've been staying, where we feel settled and where everything is familiar, in order to go and live for a while in a different place? Either there's something unsatisfactory about the place where we are, or there's something about our intended destination that has an appeal of some sort. In each of our Bible Studies we'll be looking at some well-known stories about God's people choosing to move away from one place in order to go to a different place.

Before we begin, I'd just like to emphasize that I'm using the idea of 'place' in a metaphorical sense. For the purposes of our Bible Studies we're going to understand the 'places' as representing the spiritual place where God's people are in their walk with God – so, not in terms of geography or political ambition but in terms of a way of life, a relationship with God and the world.

As we contemplate the narratives as they're told in the biblical text, I'd encourage you to make mental connections with your own experiences. Make a note of any thoughts you have as to how this Hebrew Bible perspective relates to our Christian faith.



A map of the region does form the backdrop to these stories and helps us to make sense of what is going on within the logic of the narrative. However, the journey we really want to learn about isn't so much the physical one that forms the surface-level of the narrative. The real significance of these stories for us lies in what they reveal to us about our own faith and our way of being church – our way of being a people of God in the world today.

On the theme of journeys undertaken by the people of God, one of the best known is the call of Abram that is told in Genesis 12, in which he hears God calling him to leave his home in Haran and go on a journey 'to the land that I will show you', and of course we know that Abram responds to the call of God and sets out on the journey as instructed. No protests. No questions asked. He simply goes 'as the LORD had told him.'

### **A TEXT FILLED WITH MYSTERY AND PUZZLES**

What is rather more mystifying is the story of how Abram came to be living in Haran in the first place. We rarely pay much attention to the previous bit of the story – it isn't included in the 3-year lectionary so the chances are it doesn't get read in church. So in this session I thought it might be interesting to take a closer look at the part of the narrative that tells us about the real beginning of Abram's journey.

Let's take a look at how much the narrator chooses to tell us, and at how much he chooses to withhold.

<sup>31</sup> Terah took his son Abram and his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, his son Abram's wife, and they went out together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan; but when they came to Haran, they settled there. <sup>32</sup> The days of Terah were two hundred five years; and Terah died in Haran.

#### **i) What motivated the journey of Terah?**

I guess that most of us have had the experience of leaving a place we once called home, in order to move to another place and setting up a new home there. We've probably all done it several times. It's likely that each time, before we upped sticks and moved, we put some thought into it and had sensible reasons for deciding to go. Either that, or we had no choice in the matter.



Why did Terahh with some members of his family choose to leave their home city? The narrator doesn't tell us. Neither is it possible for us to work it out for ourselves from other clues in the narrative. Usually, the reason people in the Bible have for *choosing* to leave their home to go and live somewhere else is either:

- to escape some life-threatening situation, such as a famine or war (no hint of anything like that in this story),
- or because they're nomads who don't have a settled home (the indications are that Terahh's family were settlers rather than travellers),
- or it's because they feel called by God to do so, as in the case of Abram in ch.12.

But exactly what it was that motivated Abram's father to set out on *his* journey with the idea of going all the way to Canaan, we're not told. Why would he choose Canaan? Had he heard that it was a fertile land, a good place for farming? We're not told!

Why does he then decide not to bother going to Canaan after all but to settle in Haran instead? Because it answered all his needs? We're not told this either. There seems to have been no particular reason for any of the things that Terahh did.

He doesn't even take all his family. Terahh had three sons. The youngest son, Haran, died but not before giving Terahh at least three grandchildren. (Incidentally, the name of Terahh's youngest son and the name of the place where they settled look the same in English translation but in Hebrew they begin with a different consonant: Haran – soft 'h' – is the name of the son who died; Haran is the name of the place.) Only one of Haran's children, whose name was Lot, accompanies grandfather Terahh on his journey. Terahh's middle son, Nahor, just doesn't go with him. Why? We're not told.

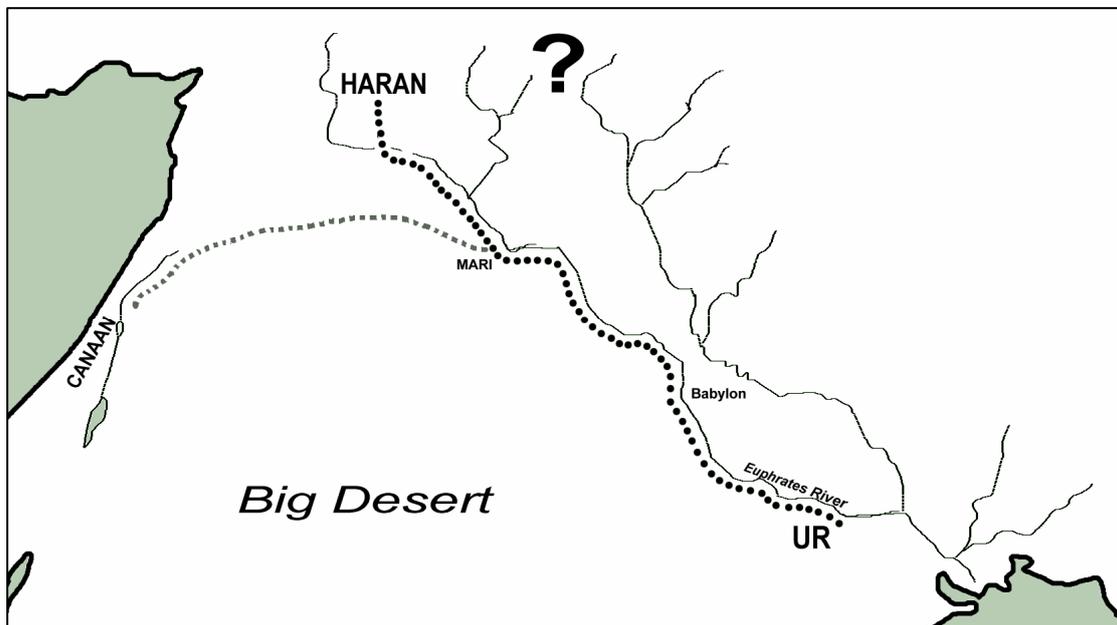
It seems that our narrator just isn't interested in the reasons why some members of Terahh's family didn't want to join him on his journey; he's only interested in those who did go with Terahh – especially the eldest son, Abram – though, again, we're not told why any of them thought this might be a good idea. All these big gaps in the narrative serve to downplay the importance of the father Terahh who comes across as

behaving in a somewhat random manner and finally not completing the journey that he originally intended to make.

## ii) Where did the journey begin and end?

The exact starting point of the journey that Terah made with a few members of his family is also a bit of a puzzle. We're told his journey began in a place called Ur, which the narrator helpfully informs us was a Chaldean (i.e. neo-Babylonian) town. Well, that sounds clear enough.

But let's take a look at where these places might be located in relation to one another.



You'll find Ur in most biblical atlases as being located in the southern part of the Chaldean empire (present-day Iraq), while Haran is right up near the Syrian-Turkish border. What doesn't make any sense at all is when we're told that as the family of Terah travelled together, they simply 'came to Haran' as if it were on their way, and settled there.

The question is, what on earth were they doing all the way up there if they had set out to go to Canaan? Did they get lost?

To get to Canaan from Ur, if Ur is where people seem to think it is, you would have to travel north along the Euphrates River for a while – you can't go as the crow flies because that would involve crossing a great, inhospitable desert. Even today there are hardly any roads going



through that desert region between present-day Iraq and the Jordan Valley. It's safer and more sensible to follow the course of the Euphrates – but there does come a point, at Mari, where you can leave the river behind and journey west along what was an established caravan route, skirting round the northern edge of the great desert.

Going all the way up to Haran would have been quite a detour. The traditional location of Ur leaves us with the story of a journey that makes no geographical sense. Maybe Ur was really somewhere else; somewhere up north? If Terah's hometown was somewhere near where I've put the big question mark, we can now understand how it was that they came to Haran and Terah decided to settle there.

However, a version of the story that locates Ur so far north would be a lot less meaningful for readers among Jewish exiles held captive in Babylon. For them (and for their descendants), the idea that they were in a place where Abram had once dwelt would suggest that when they eventually returned to their homeland they would be walking in the footsteps of their revered ancestor. In other words, their journey home would be a fresh beginning; a chance to go back to Square One as the new children of Abraham.

So to sum up the story so far:

- we don't know why Terah set out on his journey in the first place;
- we don't know why only half of his family decided to go with him;
- we don't know exactly where the journey began,
- and we don't know how they ended up in Haran or why they decided not to journey any further when they got there.

Our narrator has left us with a lot of unanswered questions! All we're really told is that Terah set out to go to the land of Canaan and never got there.

What strikes us immediately as we move into chapter 12 is how differently the story of Abram's journey to Canaan is told.



## 2) A TEXT FILLED WITH EXPECTATION

**12:1-4** <sup>1</sup> 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. <sup>2</sup> I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. <sup>3</sup> I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." <sup>4</sup> 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.

### i) What motivated this journey?

This time we know exactly what motivated the journey: it was the call of God. In addition to the call of God to continue a journey that began years previously in Ur of the Chaldees, there is also the promise of great blessing. So this time the journey is one filled with hope and expectation. Clearly, good things are going to come about as a result of this journey, not only for Abram himself but for many other people too in years to come.

We notice that when God calls Abram to journey he doesn't say 'Go to Canaan' but 'to the land that I will show you'. The precise destination is less important than the fact that the journey is to be guided by God. Whereas Terah seemed to have had it in his own mind that he was going to Canaan but ended up going no further than Haran, Abram's primary destination is a promise.

### ii) Where did this journey begin and end?

Well, obviously the journey began in Haran, but it also began with a change in circumstances. The transition in the narrative from chapter 11 to chapter 12 implies that the journey began with the death of Terah.

This makes good narrative sense. A change in circumstances often can provide us with a sense that it's time to move on, to try something new. I'm sure many of us here will have experienced something like that in our own lives and in the life of the church. Circumstances change and invite us – or even force us – to have a rethink.

However, if you've got a good head for maths and you look at the ages of Terah and Abram at different points in the story in chapters 11 and 12, the numbers indicate that Terah would still have been alive when



Abram left home, so it's not clear what the narrator wants us to think. The numbers and the narrative structure fight against each other. Well, I'm not too good at maths, so in my reading the place in the narrative where we're told of Terah's death is significant. It's what enables the story to move on.

Abram would now be the head of the family and in a position to make decisions on their behalf. He would be the one who now carried that responsibility on his shoulders.

As for where the journey ended, if we read on in the story of Abram/Abraham we see that he did arrive and settle in the land of Canaan, though he still had other journeys to make.

### **PAUSE FOR REFLECTION**

**As we look at the narrative that tells of the journeys of Terah and Abram, does any of it resonate with your experience of being part of God's Church in the world today?**

**Does the story provide any hints for what it might mean for us to be a people who are Walking the Way?**

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### **3) IDENTIFYING SOME THEMES**

Here are some of the themes that sprang out to me when I reflected back on the story.

#### **MOTIVATION.**

This story emphasizes that being aware of the reasons we have for making any kind of a journey makes it more likely that we won't give up half-way there. If our reasons aren't strong enough, then when we encounter an inviting landing-stage along the way we might well not bother going any further but remain where we are in a place where we're comfortable, telling ourselves that we've finally arrived.

#### **EXPECTATION.**

The way we feel about any kind of journey is naturally going to be affected by what we expect is going to happen when we arrive or on the



journey itself. (Look at people's faces on the commuter trains on Monday mornings and compare them with the faces of young people setting out for a concert or party.) When we journey in response to God's call, our expectation is that something good will come of it even if we're not sure where the journey will take us. When God says 'Go', the people of God go, because we trust that God's purposes are good. God's promise to us is a promise that fills us with hope and confident expectation.

#### CHANGED CIRCUMSTANCES.

A change in our circumstances can often be an opportunity – or a spur – to consider make some even bigger changes. At the very least, it encourages us to ask questions about what we're doing, and why.

#### THEOLOGICAL CLARITY.

We can speculate on whether or not the journeys of Terah and Abram represent a theological journey. The narrator withholds information about the faith of Terah – God isn't mentioned at all in the verses relating to Terah – whereas right at the start of chapter 12 we have YHWH speaking directly to Abram. (According to Joshua 24:2 the entire family had worshiped other gods in the land beyond the Euphrates.) Might the the clarity of Abram's journey as compared with the apparent haphazardness of Terah's be a theological commentary as Abram hears the voice of YHWH for the first time?

For us too, being clear in our minds about our theological reasons for doing what we do must make a difference to our sense of commitment. Of course our theology might change over time, but if we're vague in what we believe, the chances are we'll be equally vague about where we think we're going.

#### ADVENTURE.

If we read on in the story of Abram who became Abraham, we discover that even after reaching Canaan he still had other journeys to make – e.g. to Egypt to escape famine, and to the land of Moriah where he thought he was going to have to sacrifice his son Isaac. The point has often been made: staying permanently in one place or in one situation doesn't seem to be what God has in mind for his people. Maybe that's because in order to grow we need adventure!



**TO SUM UP:**

Motivation matters

We can expect God's purposes to be for the good

Changed circumstances encourage fresh thinking

Theological clarity helps us to see where we're going.

Fresh adventures and experiences are good for growth!