



Bible-study: 2020/06/14 (St. Matthew's Episcopal Church, McMinnville) – Genesis 18:1-15; 21:1-7

[Ask for a volunteer to read the passage.]

Naturally, 'Christians are tempted to discern the three persons of the Trinity here, but', says the scholar Derek Kidner, 'the passage differentiates clearly between the Lord and His two companions'.¹ Does it, though? Abraham responds in the singular, it is true, addressing only one of the men he hosts as 'the LORD': the one who speaks. But does this mean that he would have refrained from calling another of the others the same *if* that one had spoken too? We just don't know! What we *can* know is that Abraham would have been unprepared for God to have manifested Himself as a plurality, and would have found such a manifestation confusing: the Trinitarian nature of God *only* becomes apparent in light of the Incarnation; thousands of years in Abraham's future. Furthermore, it isn't certain that Abraham thinks he's in the presence of God: Claus Westermann, for example, argues that a supernatural herald would have been entitled to being addressed in that way also – as 'LORD', for such a person 'represents the one who sends him as he delivers his message'.²

Whoever these otherworldly characters were, we hear that they came to Abraham at a place known for some oaks. Beyond this the commentaries I read didn't seem especially interested in what manner of place 'Mamre' was. It *seems* to be near Hebron. *That* detail is given at the end of chapter thirteen when Abraham arrived on the "spot" for the first time. *Or it is Hebron: [see Gen. 23:19],* a cross-roads town 'on an important plateau' in southern Judea, with thick, mud-brick walls.³ I found myself wondering if it wasn't some kind of sacred grove (of trees), which were a feature of the ancient world in *many* places: 'Trees naturally inspired religious feeling and, with their roots in the earth, their fruit and growth cycle dependent on the seasons, and the mysterious wind-produced whispering in their branches, they became the homes of divine beings.'⁴

Please don't misunderstand me: I am *not* saying that Abraham was some sort of "druid;" a nature-worshipper. But there may have been at least *one* very good reason to pitch his tent in a sacred grove: in her PhD thesis about them, Darice Birge said that a nineteenth-century German historian, Carl Boetticher, 'points out the use of groves as forerunners of temples for asyla and the

¹ *Genesis (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries)* (2008), Downers Grove, I. L.: IVP Academic (InterVarsity Press), 142.

² Westermann, Claus (1986), *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, translated by John J. Scullion, London: S.P.C.K., 281.

³ Ortiz, S. M. (2005), 'Hebron', in Arnold, Bill T. & Williamson, H. G. M. (Eds.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books – A Compendium of Contemporary Biblical Scholarship*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, pp. 390-392, 390.

⁴ See: Birge, Darice Elizabeth (1982), 'Sacred Groves in the Ancient Greek World', PhD Thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 10.

existence of asylum at individual trees.⁵ Similarly, Pierre Bonnechere, in a monograph on sacred groves in classical Greece, specifies that they often functioned as sites of sanctuary and manumission.⁶ And in his epic poem, the Roman poet Ovid described how Romulus, the legendary – but apparently unfussy – founder of the “Eternal City” established a sacred grove on the Capitoline Hill to attract refugees and fugitives to bolster his burgeoning population: “Take refuge here,” said he, “whoe'er thou art; [and] thou shalt be safe.”⁷ And *if* such an attitude applied in the Near East too, this might explain why Abraham, a recently arrived *foreigner* from faraway Ur, would choose to stop at Mamre. For we are told that: ‘At that time the Canaanites were [already] in the land.’^[12:6]

Additionally, Birge writes that the sacred groves – ‘simple open-air shrines... [were] famous and much-frequented centres of prophecy and healing’, and *often* were associated with a deity thought to have bearing on *fertility*.⁸ And the theme of this morning’s passage, of course, is to do with a baby promised by God to Sarah, a person with whom ‘it had ceased to be...after the manner of women.’^[18:11] That is to say, she was post-menopausal; no longer capable of pregnancy. And I have to say, this seems like an awfully big coincidence to be merely that. Could the holy couple’s choice, then, of a pagan “high place” – much condemned by the later prophets, of course – have sprung from a predilection, demonstrated abundantly in the earlier, sordid episode with Hagar, to take practical steps themselves to realize their hope for a family rather than wait on God? After all, they far from convinced that He would or could do as He claimed:

Our author *emphasizes* the age of our heroes: ‘Abraham and Sarah were *old, advanced* in age’. Then again, everyone is *exceedingly* old in *Genesis*, aren’t they? Some, *absurdly* so. Terah, Abraham’s father, for example, was seventy when he had his son: ^[11:26]. And 205 when he died (in Haran): ^[11:32]. ‘Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore him Ishmael.’^[16:16] And, at the beginning of chapter immediately prior to the events relayed in today’s verses, is said to be 99: ^[17:1]. 99! That’s some “good innings.”

Conservatives; evangelicals tend to take such things at face-value; “on faith.” If God can raise His Son from the grave after almost three days of decomposition and rot – *Hallelujah!* Then why not this too? Some in the same “camp” – my own – even point out that life expectancy was better than we might realize “back then.” And perhaps it was! For early, pre-literary man: ‘Studies of extant hunter-gatherers find that a significant proportion of those reaching adulthood lived into their seventh decades’.⁹ The urbanization and industrialization which came after were disastrous for our species – *initially*.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁶ See: Bonnechere, Pierre (2007), ‘The Place of the Sacred Grove (Alsos) in the Mantic Rituals of Greece: The Example of Alsos of Trophonios at Lebadeia (Boeotia)’, in Conan, Michael (Ed.), *Sacred Gardens and Landscapes: Ritual and Agency*, Washington, D. C.: Harvard University Press, pp. 17-42, 27-28.

⁷ Frazer, James George (1989), *Ovid in Six Volumes: Volume V - Fasti*, Cambridge, M. A.: Harvard University Press, 153. (Book III: 429-452.)

⁸ Birge (1982), 16.

⁹ Carey, James R. (2003), *Longevity: The Biology and Demography of Life-Span*, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 215.

Until the advantages of such – mass-produced pharmaceuticals, etc. – could offset the drawbacks. And anyway, what fossil data indicates is that the average lifespan in the Old Testament Levant was a meagre forty years.¹⁰

And yet other serious, careful exegetes – exegetes devoted to Scripture as inspired and inerrant as I am and hope you are – have argued that the Bible does not expect us take the patriarchal lifespans literally. Craig Olson, for instance, of Dallas Theological Seminary, states that, generally-speaking, ages in *Genesis* are ‘symbolic numbers’¹¹ – “symbolic” numbers ‘intended to memorialize and convey honor to the lives of real ancestors who played significant roles in the founding of the nation Israel.’¹² A practice, he says, which was shared with regional neighbors like the Sumerians.

There is, in fact, points out Olson, *internal* evidence to question the stated ages: he notes how the patriarchs would have lived so long that they overlap with one another, *and yet* they seem entirely ignorant of their contemporaries’ existence. Others note the extreme frequency with which “7” occurs throughout, and have seen various unnatural patterns and “symmetries”.¹³

But this is *not* to say that Abraham and Sarah, *specifically*, were not elderly. In fact, their story – their commitment to this “God” who had intruded into their lives – *hinges* on Him doing something *amazing*: Isaac is the proof that God is...God. And not a fake; a fraud like the idols they see everyone else sacrificing too.

However, the *extraordinary* longevity Abraham and Sarah enjoyed raises the question for sceptics, certainly, of *genre*. Although as Kenneth Kitchen points out, it is noteworthy that, overall, ‘there are almost no miracles or obvious fantasies’ otherwise.¹⁴ Indeed, by-and-large, Abraham’s life is ‘unremarkable’:¹⁵ *yes*, here and there we find him conversing with angels, but *most* of his life was solidly humdrum – spent with donkeys and goats. And I think that that is a detail worth remembering. Just as in *Esther*, God’s involvement is, usually, subtle; *discrete*, so we should expect the same in our own lives.

But back to the issue of genre: *most* scholars see some sort of variation

¹⁰ See: Boldsen, Jesper L. and Paine, Richard R. (1995), ‘The Evolution of Human Longevity from the Mesolithic to the Middle Ages: An Analysis Based on Skeletal Dats’, in Vaupel, James W. & Jeune, Bernard (Eds.), *Exceptional Longevity: From Prehistory to the Present*, Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, pp. 25-36.

¹¹ Olson, Craig (2017), ‘How Old was Father Abraham? Re-examining the Patriarchal Lifespans in Light of Archaeology: A Paper presented to the Southwest Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society’, available at https://www.academia.edu/33972456/How_Old_was_Father_Abraham_Re-examining_the_Patriarchal_Lifespans_in_Light_of_Archaeology, (accessed June 11, 2020). (My emphasis.)

¹² *Ibid.*, 18.

¹³ See, for example: Greidanus, Sidney (2007), *Preaching Christ from Genesis: Foundations for Expository Sermons*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 26-27. Or, Wenham, Gordon J. (2000), *Genesis – Volume 2: Chapters 16-50 (Word Commentary)*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Thomas Nelson, Inc., xxviii-xxx.

¹⁴ Kitchen, Kenneth A. (2003), *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, Cambridge, U. K.; Grand Rapids, M. I.: William B. Eerdmans, 361.

¹⁵ Walk Thru the Bible (2010), *A Walk Thru the Life of Abraham: Faith in God’s Promises*, Grand Rapids, M. I.: Baker Books (Baker Publishing Group), 5.

in genre in *Genesis*; that the genre *shifts*. Especially from whatever it was in the very earliest chapters – or chapter(!), to something slightly different in the passage we’re looking at. Tremper Longman, for example, writes: ‘The bottom line is that *Genesis* 1-3 may be described as *theological* history. That is, it does intend to tell us about the past, and it is written to tell us about God and our relationship with him. Indeed, all of *Genesis* may be so described, but since the figurative language, interplay with ancient Near Eastern mythology, and issues of sequencing are not as intense as in the first part of *Genesis*, there is, in my opinion, a higher degree of literary specificity in *Genesis* 12-50.’¹⁶ In other words, as he explains, as we get deeper into the book, it becomes a much more generic, *flat* (uncomplicated) account of events that are supposed to have *actually* taken place. Abraham existed. His adventures happened. And were of lasting consequence for the world. This is the implicit claim of the text. The belief, at least, of the human author.

Sadly, no archaeological evidence *proving* Abraham’s existence has been found. There isn’t a (camel) driving licence with a smiling “headshot” of him, and a clear date-of-birth, sitting proudly in a museum somewhere; in the Louvre or whatever. Which means we don’t know, *exactly*, when he lived. Indeed, [t]he burning question here is whether or not the patriarchs fit [at all] into the time period the Bible situates them. Is it possible...? For that matter, can we give *any* biblical event an absolute date as opposed to a relative date? ... Perhaps the most important [most *precise*] chronological evidence [in the Old Testament is given for] the exodus[, which] is found in *1 Kings* 6:1: ‘It was mid-spring, during the fourth year of Solomon’s reign, that he began the construction of the Temple of the Lord. This was 480 years after the people of Israel were delivered from their slavery in the land of Egypt.’ This type of relative dating certainly helps..., but it doesn’t allow us to put it on *our* dateline; that is, it doesn’t allow us to give it an absolute date.

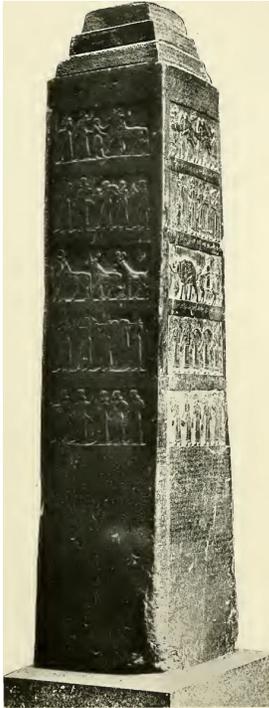
An absolute date allows us to see just how long ago from today an event took place. There is more than one way to keep a calendar, but most of us are familiar with an absolute dating system that uses as a fixed point the birth of Jesus Christ. ... And, as is well known, dates before Christ’s birth are counted backward and cited as B. C. (“before Christ”). ... The question before us is whether we can translate the relative dating of the Bible [such as the one from *1 Kings*] into absolute dates that allow us to see when these events took place relative to our own time?

For this we turn to other ancient Near Eastern chronological texts. Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia and other neighbors of Israel also kept historical and chronological records. These records, like the biblical ones, are relative... However, the key to the transformation from a relative to an absolute chronology comes primarily from an Assyrian text.

The Assyrians kept what are now called *limu* lists. These are lists that record some event that marks a certain year of a king’s reign or of some other public official (*limu*). These *limu* lists [concern a period of] 910 to 612 B.C. [And o]ne year the significant event was an eclipse, allowing astronomers to date this particular year to a specific year in *our* absolute calendar: 763 B.C. (June

¹⁶ *Genesis (The Story of God Bible Commentary Series: Volume I)* (2016), Grand Rapids, M. I.: Zondervan, 83.

15/16). [Now, t]o make a long and complex story short, this one firm date allows us to fix a number of other dates in Assyrian history once we start following the trail of all the relative dating done elsewhere. Significant for biblical chronology is the fact that the Bible contains some chronological indicators that cross over to Assyrian history. Further, Assyrian history also mentions some contact with Israelite kings. Perhaps most notable is the reference in the so-called Monolith Inscription to Shalmaneser [the] III's [devastating – to the “People of God” –] campaign in Syria, where the [emperor] encountered an Israelite king named Ahab (853 B.C.), and a reference to the same Assyrian [emperor] in context with King Jehu may be found in the Black



Obelisk, an archaeological artifact. Once these events are established on an absolute calendar, then other biblical relative dates can be placed in our absolute chronology.

In this way, we are able to establish a date for Solomon's fourth year (see the previous reference to *1 King 6:1*) to 966 B.C. If we take the 480 years of that verse literally, then the exodus would have occurred in the fifteenth century B.C. (966 + 480 = 1446 B.C.).

The next important bit of information for us as we try to date Abraham is found in *Exodus 12:40*: the people of Israel had lived in Egypt for 430 years. Thus we take 1446 and add 430 years and we end up with the date 1876 B.C. for the time that Jacob, Joseph and the rest of the family left Canaan to go to Egypt. If we then add 290 years, representing the time Abraham spent in Canaan as well as the life spans of the other patriarchs, we end up with a birth date for Abraham in 2166 B.C., which then leads to a date of 2091 B.C. for his arrival in Palestine (*Gen 12:4-5*).¹⁷

Finally, do be aware that the manner in which our Lectionary plan of readings has divided *Genesis* to present us in a single morning with a neat little story of a promise of a miraculous child and then that child's birth, excludes – “jumps” over – a notorious digression that one might say provides significant insight into the character of God and His design for humanity: the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in chapter nineteen by ‘sulfur and fire from the Lord’. ← This discomfiting episode is, in fact, *nowhere* given attention by the Lectioneers. (They even almost excise *all* of Jesus' *multiple* references to it from (the gospels of) *Matthew [10:15, 11:23,24]* and *Luke: [110:12 & 17:29]*.) And we've said before that those who prepared our Sunday readings seem deeply averse – *allergic(!)* – to acknowledge what might be called “the dark underbelly” of the Bible. Yes, *obviously*, such a story is problematic – a “public relations nightmare,” no less – and particularly in *this* month: June, as large parts of the country – coastal cities especially – prepare for “Pride” parades. But should we just look away? Pretend such verses do not exist? There isn't time enough now to grapple with them to the extent they deserve, of course, but I do want to say a couple of things:

¹⁷ Longman, Tremper, III (2005, *How to Read Genesis*, Downers Grove, I. L.: IVP Academic (InterVarsity Press), 88-90.

Firstly, the parallelism that seems to exist between our chapter – eighteen, and the following is intriguing. *Both* begin with a man sitting at the entrance to his home, idly, “minding his own business,” who then offers hospitality to strange, supernatural beings passing by. We’ve (already) discussed that Abraham’s visitors are ambiguous but that Jewish audiences – the *original* audience – would have presumed them to have been *angels*. And this is *exactly* – explicitly – how the pair of figures who come to Lot are described: [v.1]. There is also, in *both* chapters, a sequence of bowing, washing of feet, baking bread and laughter (in that order). And the commentator Andrew Steinmann finds this ‘striking’.¹⁸ And it is.

Secondly, and here we get more topical, it is *far* from agreed that the crime for which the cities are ruined is homosexuality. That is, consensual sexual activity between consenting adult males. In *A Question of Truth*, Professor Gareth Moore, an English Dominican abbot, put it like this: ‘If there is a moral judgement [expressed in the unnatural, burning “rain” that fell on Sodom and Gomorrah, and surely there was – that was the point of it], it is against homosexual rape; but a condemnation of homosexual rape is evidently not a condemnation of all homosexual relations, any more than a condemnation of heterosexual rape is a condemnation of all heterosexual relations.’¹⁹ And that seems unarguable, right? Let’s just remind ourselves of what transpired: Lot, Abraham’s nephew, offered shelter to two homeless visitors – as all godly people are called upon to do, and after having admitting them to his house, it is surrounded by a gang of men, ‘young and old’ demanding to ‘know’ Lot’s guests, who respond to this threat by blinding the attackers in some mysterious fashion. All the occupants of the house then seize that opportunity to escape and flee to the hills, but Lot’s wife looks back (to watch the drama of God’s displeasure), and is turned to a pillar of salt.

Alternatively, consider this: *we* (probably) hear that demand to ‘know’ as a euphemism. But Scott Morschauser urges caution about imaging such a thing. He argues that the gang are actually engaged in a heavy-handed ‘investigative procedure’, and act thuggishly through fear that the ‘angels’ are spies from a hostile power.²⁰ And I think that this interpretation makes much more sense of the fact that the author of *Genesis* specifies that the confrontation at Lot’s house was made by ‘the men of the city, ...to the last man’: [19:4]. If the issue here is really about paranoia about the possibility of war with another kingdom, it is understandable that so many should be *mobilized* in response. This “gang” is actually a militia; a “militia” readying itself for a fight. And it is worth being reminded that only a few chapters earlier – in fourteen – Sodom and Gomorrah were assaulted by a powerful alliance of potentates: ‘King Amraphel of Shinar, King Arioch of Ellasar, King Chedorlaomer of Elam, and King Tidal of Goiim’: [v.1]. They were looted and some of their citizenry enslaved: [v.8-12].

The other, *traditional* interpretation, on the other hand, rests on the

¹⁸ *Genesis* (Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries) (2019), Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, 191.

¹⁹ (2003), London; New York, N. Y.: Continuum, 113.

²⁰ “Hospitality,” Hostiles and Hostages: On the Legal Background to Genesis’ (2003), *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Volume 27, No. 4, pp. 461-485, 473.

extremely odd idea that *every* man in that town was a vicious pervert. Of course, if the incident is mythology, then why not? Those men could have wings and glowing green eyes too. But, *traditionally*, this text is understood to be a record of things that happened in the *real* world, and in the *real* world, nowhere it populated *entirely* by deviants, praise God.

