

AFRICA BIBLE COMMENTARY

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Tokunboh Adeyemo

Theological Editors

**Solomon Andria, Issiaka Coulibaly,
Tewoldemedhin Habtu, Samuel Ngewa**

Theological Advisors

Kwame Bediako, Isabel Apawo Phiri, Yusufu Turaki

made in the image of God and are called to rule animals and things, but not other human beings (Gen 1:29-30).

The nation descended from Abram would continue to practise slavery for many centuries. The Lord, in his love, would gradually undermine this custom over the years. In his law he would lay down principles governing the treatment of slaves and servants, to make sure that they were treated humanely. But it was only after the coming of Christ and his deliverance from the vicious cycle by which sin drags down our societies and cultures that the church set out to eradicate this evil.

Abram moved to *the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem (12:6a)*. There the Lord gave him more information about the land to which he had been directed in 12:1. He tells Abram, *To your offspring I will give this land (12:7a)*. This specific information is only given after Abram has already acted in obedience. God gives Abram land because he knows that a geographic location is necessary to build and train a people. They need a place where they will gather for worship and with which they can identify.

The land that God promised to give Abram was Canaan, which was then occupied by the descendants of Canaan (12:6b; see also 10:15-19). The Lord would eventually give Abram and his descendants the land of Canaan, because of the increasing moral decadence of the Canaanites (Gen 15:16; Deut 18:12-14). This decadence may in part have sprung from the curse pronounced on Canaan (see comment on Gen 9:18-28).

It is noticeable that Abram did not resort to violence to remove the Canaanites from the land that God had told him would belong to his descendants. He left the timing and the method of accomplishing this to the Lord. All he did was to respond in faith by building *an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him (12:7b)*. Moving on, he pitched his tent between Bethel and Ai, and there also he *built an altar to the Lord and called on the name of the Lord (12:8)*. His action in building altars was an assertion that this land belonged to the Lord, and not to any other god, and thus could be given to him. He then continued *toward the Negev* (the region south of Judah) (12:9). Abram, believing in what God had said, did not see the obstacles but saw beyond them. On the basis of God's promise, he took the land as his very own. There is a lesson for us here also. No matter what difficulties there may be, so long as the Lord has given clear indication of his will, there should be no hesitation. What the Lord says is ours will be ours for certain. It may take years, but it will happen.

Abram's behaviour should also show us that we should not use biblical promises to justify our own violence and injustice towards nations, tribes, clans or individuals. We should not take their land, bully them, deprive them of their freedom or hate them for not honouring the Lord or

for abominable practices. God is the sovereign judge and he alone has the right to execute judgment.

12:10-20 The Lord Strikes Pharaoh

Even when we are where God wants us to be, all will not necessarily go well for us materially – no matter what the prosperity gospel teaches. Abram was in the land God had sent him to, but that land was afflicted by *famine (12:10)*. The Lord does, however, guarantee to provide a way out. While there was famine in Canaan, there was enough food in *Egypt* and so Abram went there to wait till the famine in Canaan was over (12:11).

When we praise Abram as a man of faith (as in Heb 11:8-19), we need to remember that his faith was something that developed over time. Especially in the earlier part of his life, when he was still a child in faith, he often seemed to turn to human plans. So when he moved to Egypt, he developed a plan to avoid trouble because of the beauty of Sarai, his wife. He advised Sarai to tell a half-truth (or a half-lie) by claiming to be his sister (12:13). She was indeed his half-sister (20:12) but not to mention that she was also his wife was to convey a false impression, and thus to lie. Abram needed to learn to tell the truth and to trust to God for protection. This is a lesson that many of us are still learning!

The strategy worked for Abram – his life was spared and he acquired wealth (12:16) but it was at the expense of Sarai's moral purity, for Pharaoh took her as his wife – a statement that may imply that he knew her physically (12:15, 19). This immorality did not please God, and so he struck Pharaoh and his house with serious diseases (12:17). But Pharaoh was not merely an innocent victim of Abram's deception. He was also someone who abused his position of authority. Abram's fear that his wife would be seized was well founded, and shows that Pharaoh was prepared to exploit foreigners, who are often among the weaker members of society. God condemns such behaviour (Deut 24:17-20; 27:19).

Abram had failed the test the Lord had set him, but the Lord was still in control of the situation. He would not allow Pharaoh to destroy his plans to use this couple to produce a chosen people and eventually the Messiah. It is encouraging to know that the Lord's grace responds to us at the level we are at, and does not demand from us what is beyond us. We ourselves need to cultivate this attitude in regard to others. We are wrong to expect that those who accept Christ today will be mature tomorrow. Maturation in faith is a process through which God graciously guides us.

Pharaoh sensed that the diseases in his household were a punishment, and so after confronting Abram for not telling him the truth, he sent him away with his wife and his wealth (12:18-19). Pharaoh was not a believer in Abram's God, but he knew how to read events. If only some of our African leaders were equally sensitive to God! If they were,

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13:1-4 Abram Returns from Egypt

When Abram was sent away by Pharaoh he went to *the Negev, with his wife and everything he had, and Lot* (13:1). As a further commentary on what he had and in preparation for the next section, we are told that *Abram had become very wealthy in livestock and in silver and gold* (13:2). From the Negev, he went to Bethel. He had earlier built an altar there and worshipped the Lord (12:8). Now again, on the same spot, *Abram called on the name of the Lord* (13:4).

13:5-18 Abram and Lot Separate

13:5-13 Abram protects family ties

Not having enough is a problem, as we saw when Abram was forced to move to Egypt (12:10). However, having too much can also be a problem. Abram was now a very wealthy man, with large herds of livestock (13:2). His nephew, Lot, had shared in his uncle's prosperity and had his own *flocks and herds and tents* (13:5). With the Canaanites and Perizzites occupying much of the land, the area that was available to Abram was too small to provide enough food and water for all their livestock (13:6). Consequently, quarrels broke out between those who took care of Abram's livestock and those who took care of Lot's livestock (13:7a). These disputes had the potential to harm the relationship between Abram and Lot. They would also affect Abram's testimony for the Lord among the local *Canaanites and Perizzites* (13:7b).

In such a situation, it is vital to have the courage and wisdom to analyze the problem in order to reach a godly solution. Abram had failed to do this in Egypt, but this time he got it right by making his decision with reference to his relationship with God and with his family. He decided that while living close together was good in that it provided comfort and protection, it would be better if he and Lot lived apart and were at peace with each other rather than living together and quarrelling (13:8a). He was concerned to maintain their family ties, but suggested that a physical separation would be the means to maintain their emotional unity (see 14:8-16). Thus his suggestion that they separate was the appropriate decision, and not a rejection of Lot, whom he spoke of as his *brother* (13:8b).

Abram's sensitivity to the emotional needs of those he was responsible for is an example for us today. It is not uncommon for wives to feel crowded by relatives – especially by their husband's relatives. If a wife voices a complaint, her husband typically responds: 'He/she is my brother/sister; I am obliged to help him/her'. While it may sometimes be necessary to take others in under our roof (especially with so many orphans due to HIV/AIDS), it may

sometimes be better to provide for relatives at a distance, rather than creating a situation at home where everyone is unhappy and quarrelling.

Abram shows his generous and unselfish spirit in that he was willing to waive his rights as the older party and let Lot choose whether to take the land that lay *to the left or to the right* (13:9). Lot was not a man of the same calibre as Abram, and so he chose selfishly, taking *the whole plain of the Jordan, which was well watered* (13:10-11).

When it comes to the issue of land, many of the stories we hear show attitudes that are more like Lot's than Abram's. Even believers show greed and selfishness as they fight for the better or bigger piece. Arguments over land have even resulted in people being killed! Yet there are examples of those who have followed Abram's example. I know a man of God who told his brother to choose first, even though he knew that his brother would definitely choose the better land. The man of God asked God for strength to work the poorer land he had received, and set to work. Within a few years, his land was as green as *the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt toward Zoar* (13:10). With God's Spirit and hard work, a desert can be turned into a beautiful garden! God is looking for other Africans who will be like Abram when it comes to the matter of land.

Lot chose the plain without hesitation and apparently without asking Abram's advice. In using the beauty and fertility of the plain rather than his relationship with the Lord as his criterion for choosing the location of his home, Lot left the land of Canaan and moved to live among the wicked in Sodom (13:12-13). Lot chose the plain because of its potential to multiply his wealth without regard to the morality of the people he would live among. His choice would prove disastrous in the long term (18:16-19:29).

Lot's attitude is a common one on our continent. Many believers close their eyes to ethical considerations when they make business deals, seek promotion, or take other actions to advance their prosperity. It is important to take issues of right and wrong into account even as we strive for wealth. A little with the Lord is better than plenty he has not blessed (see Prov 15:16; 16:8).

13:14-18 The Lord reassures Abram

The Lord's response to Abram's choice was to confirm that he had not given away the best land, but that he and his descendants would own all the land in all directions as far as he can see, not just for a time, but for ever (13:14-15). Not only that, but the Lord would bless him with offspring as numerous as *the dust of the earth* (13:16). The Lord is the comforter and watches out in a special way for those who honour him.

The Lord told Abram *to walk through the length and breadth of the land* as its owner. It was his gift from the Lord (13:17). This gift is not like the gifts of public land that