

## **Notes on Genesis 4**

### **God's Unconditional Promises**

#### **(Genesis 12-15)**

**Fretheim Explores Genesis,**  
**Luther Productions, St. Paul, 2000**

#### **The Shift from Universal Perspective to a Single Family**

- ◆ We now shift from a universal perspective to a single family in a small town
- ◆ The first 11 chapters of Genesis focuses upon all of creation. The same is true for Revelations. The two books are “bookends” to the bible
  - Together, they reminds us that God's vision involves *all the world*

#### **God's Strategy to Save the World Through Election to Mission**

- ◆ Why did God choose a particular family (and their descendents, the Jews)?
  - Genesis 12:1-3: this promise to Abraham is a “fulcrum text” that connects the first 11 chapters with the remaining chapters
  - The text makes clear that the choice of Abraham's family is for *all the families of the earth*
  - The choice of a particular family is God's strategy to save the world: an “initially exclusive move for the sake of a maximally inclusive end” (“election is for mission”). God chose Abraham's family for a mission to all the world.
- ◆ Why did God choose this strategy? Why did God not just “command” salvation?
  - We can note that a “forced salvation” would not respect the nature of the personal relationship between God and each individual.

#### **God's Choosing Can Be a Cause of Conflict**

- ◆ Conflicts among members of the chosen people arise for many reasons. Among them is that God chooses some and not others:
  - Jacob and Esau
  - Joseph and his brothers
  - Abel and Cain

#### **God Does Not Choose in the Way of the World**

- ◆ Why did God choose those that God did for mission?
- ◆ We can note that God did not choose in the ways the world might choose. Note in the ancient world the oldest son inherited almost everything. Yet God did not follow the “way of the world:”
  - Abel and Cain. God chose Cain, the second son
  - Ishmael and Isaac. God chose Isaac, the second son
  - Esau and Jacob. God chose Jacob, the second son

### **God Surrounds Those Chosen for Mission with Promises**

- ◆ God gives promises to those chosen (those called to tasks, called to mission).
- ◆ Note the promises given to Abram are unconditional: Chapter 12:1-3, 7

### **God's Promises Generate Faith; Questions Will Persist**

- ◆ In Chapter 15 we get an interesting combination of promises and questions by Abraham: promises are not meant to cut off questions
- ◆ The promises generate faith in Abraham
  - Abraham believes in view of the promises.
  - God reckons Abraham righteous because of his faith
  - “What shape the future takes will depend on many things, but Abraham can be assured that, amid all that makes for trouble in his life and the world, it holds promise for goodness and well-being. And that makes a profound difference for all life.” (Fretheim in New Interpreter’s Bible)
- ◆ Faith does not however eliminate questions
  - Genesis 15:7-8: “‘I am the LORD who brought you from Ur of the Chaldeans, to give you this land to possess.’ But he [Abraham] said, ‘O Lord GOD, how am I to know that I shall possess it?’”
  - “It is not unnatural to faith, or unbecoming to the believer, that questions persist in the midst of belief.” (Fretheim in New Interpreter’s Bible, p.448)

### **The Certainty of God's Promises**

- ◆ Note that God’s covenant with Abraham is unilateral.
  - In chapter 15, God alone goes through the cut animals (an ancient covenant making ritual)
  - God’s promise does not depend on what Abraham does
- ◆ Can we be certain of God’s promises, since God can change God’s mind?
  - Analogy: the steadfast commitment of partners in a good marriage amid a mixture of constancy and change
  - God is both constant and changing as God relates to people who are changing.

### **God's Promise to Abraham is Grounded in God's Promise to Noah**

- ◆ God’s promise with Noah was a promise to all flesh, all creatures. This universal promise to all the world grounds God’s more particular promise with Abraham.

## The Story of Abraham as a Call

- ◆ There is a voice in the night. Abraham goes. Abraham's apparent unquestioned obedience to his call contrasts the call of Moses, who was full of questions. But was Abraham's call really so strange?
  - Note before the call comes in chapter 12, *Abraham is already on the way to Israel.*
  - Genesis 11:31: "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" (NRSV)
- ◆ God's call to Abram then comes when Abram is "stalled out" in Haran (now in SE Turkey), soon after Abraham's father Terah has died (the death of a parent is often a traumatic, life-changing). Significance of this:
  - God's call to Abraham may not be so strange: Abraham had been on his way to Israel; God redirects Abraham back to his original goal.
  - "God has ways of taking into account who we are, where we are, the circumstances of life in which we are engaged, and directing us, pushing and pulling us towards certain objectives, in view of who we have become, in view of recent experience."

## Sarah and the Promise

- ◆ Initially, God's promise is to Abraham
- ◆ Sarah does not get a promise until Genesis 17:15.

## A Note On Reading the Text: The Reader Often Knows More Than the Characters

- ◆ The narrator of the story often tells us the readers more than Abraham knows.
  - For example, Genesis 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. . .'" (NRSV)
  - Abraham must infer from the promises it is God speaking to him. The narrator however tells the reader explicitly it is God speaking.

## References

- ◆ Video series: **Fretheim Explores Genesis**. Luther Productions. St. Paul. 2000 (Available from: <http://www.lutherproductions.com/bibleseries.htm#bible2>)
- ◆ "The Book of Genesis. Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections." Terence E. Fretheim. In: **The New Interpreter's Bible, A Commentary in Twelve Volumes, Volume I**. Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994.