

times, the names of places often derived directly from the heads of the families which made up local settlements. If Abram had settled in a new location by himself, then there might have been a place called 'Abram', but he was content to make agreements with other local Canaanite inhabitants, to live with them, and fight with them!

Some have raised the objection that 318 men together with others from Mamre, Eschol and Aner should have proved too small a group to rout a major Eastern army. This is not really an issue, though, because the Bible (as well as general military history) is filled with stories of small forces defeating larger ones by enterprise, wit or decisive action (see also Gideon, Judges ch.7). This, clearly, was the case in this story. Lot and his family and possessions were saved by Abram's action from disgrace and possible death, and the brief, succinct story of Abram's military success (vv15,16) was the basis for all that would happen next.

Application

The whole story see-saws between the initial strength of the four eastern kings, to the weakness of the five Dead Sea kings, to the strength of Abram doing God's will, which was to bless the entire region through bringing liberation and peace, and to save and defend his nephew. In this he acted in a manner that would be described in later Israelite law as the work of a 'kinsman-redeemer' (Lev. 25:25-28, 47-53). This was the responsibility of a senior family member for another family member when their life is put in danger, and was a principle of care around which the whole extended family was built. If Abram was to be the forefather of a large family, then he had to show these qualities required of a family head, as in this story.

Throughout the whole story, Abram's faith is also tested. We too easily overlook the importance of faith in this story, for it was a test not just of Abram's military intelligence and authority, but a test of his trust in God and His promises. The faith to which Abram was called had to be played out on a large stage, for it would only be possible for Abram to be a blessing to the nations if he could defend himself and act in the cause of justice. This may well be the reason why Abram was entrusted by God with wealth and a large, personal, extended family; Abram had to survive within a hostile world if he was to be a blessing to it.

The story is incomplete, however, and we will only see its full significance tomorrow as we read what happens next. Abram had been blessed by God, and in our reading today, he used his wealth to defend his wider family and bring peace to the general region of southern Canaan. This made Abram even wealthier, as he was now in possession of the entire 'booty' captured by the Eastern kings including the wealth of the Dead Sea city states and his nephew Lot. What would he now do with this extraordinary personal wealth? We will find out tomorrow.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What have we discovered about Abram in today's reading which we did not know about him before?
2. Is war always the right way to deal with those who live by violence? Should Abram have chosen a peaceful way of retrieving his nephew, such as bargaining?
3. Why do you think that God allowed Abram great wealth? What are the dangers and responsibilities of great wealth today?

Discipleship

Today's scripture raises a whole host of moral questions for us about everything from wealth to the conduct of war. It is important, however, to discuss these issues on the basis of real situations. We may ask what would we have done if we were Abram? Or how can wealth be used for good, and for God's purposes? This text reminds us that we must sort out these issues in the real circumstances of our own time, as Abram did in his. Abstract arguments will not do, and the acid test of any theories we have about faith, pacifism, wealth or trust in God, is how they help us deal with real life situations. Real faith in God is rooted in real life.

Final Prayer

Praise God for the abundant wealth He gives us, whether it be wealth of faith, wealth of love, wealth of possessions or wealth of happiness. May each of us be blessed with such wealth as overflows from us, so that we may be as generous to other people as God has been to us. From the riches of the Lord, may we always be a blessing to others. AMEN

Prayer

Lord Jesus, Your majesty is astounding, Your knowledge is deep, and Your generosity is never ending. Have mercy on us who find it hard to maintain the standards of faith we have been shown and taught. Lead us moment by moment, and bring the best out of us each minute of the day. Thank You, Lord Jesus, AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: the Elderly in the Church

Pray for those people who find that as they grow older, chronic illness makes their lives more difficult. These are people who need a ministry of care and healing, and the church is the place that should offer this ministry. Pray for any you know who suffer in this way, and ask the Lord to bring peace and healing to those who are struggling with the loss of their health.

Meditation

I need to be reminded of Your faithfulness each morning, Lord God,
for that is when the pattern of the day is set.

I either focus the day upon myself, my world and my needs,
the tasks of the day and their successful execution;

Or I can decide to turn my gaze away from this and on to You
who can truly see the bigger picture, far more than I can see.

You are waiting to lead me properly, honestly and thoroughly
through the ups and downs of all that will happen;

Whereas I just stumble my way unthinkingly through daily work
With what I think is my perspective, but lacks true depth and clarity.

Lord God, I worship You, the One who holds eternity in a handsbreadth,
And sets my day and all its deeds just perfectly within Your span,

Though I can see no further than my hand. But having turned to You,
The world I see, my day, my life, come into focus, gloriously!

Bible Study - Genesis 14:1-16

¹ This is what happened next, Kings Amraphel of Shinar, Arioch of Ellasar, Chedorlaomer of Elam, and Tidal of Goiim, ² made war with Kings Bera of Sodom, Birsha of Gomorrah, Shinab of Admah, Shemeber of Zeboiim, and the king of Bela (that is, Zoar). ³ These latter kings brought their armies together in the Valley of Siddim (that is, the Dead Sea). ⁴ They had served Chedorlaomer for 12 years, but in the 13th year they rebelled.

⁵ In the 14th year Chedorlaomer and the kings with him came and defeated the Rephaim in Ashteroth-karnaim, the Zuzim in Ham, the Emim in Shaveh-kiriathaim, ⁶ and the Horites in the hill country of Seir as far as El-paran near the desert; ⁷ then they turned back and came to En-mishpat (that is, Kadesh), and conquered the territory of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites who lived in Hazazon-tamar.

⁸ So the kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim, and Bela (that is, Zoar) marched out, and went into battle in the Valley of Siddim ⁹ with Kings Chedorlaomer of Elam, Tidal of Goiim, Amraphel of Shinar, and King Arioch of Ellasar, four kings against five.

¹⁰ Now the Valley of Siddim was full of bitumen pits; and as the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah fled, some fell into them, and the rest fled to the hills. ¹¹ So the enemy took all the goods and provisions of Sodom and Gomorrah and made off; ¹² they also carried off Abram's nephew Lot and took his possessions, as he lived near Sodom.

¹³ Then a survivor came and informed Abram the Hebrew, who was living near the oaks of Mamre the Amorite, and brother of Eshcol and of Aner. They were allies of Abram. ¹⁴ When Abram heard that his nephew had been captured, he summoned the trained men born of his household, 318 of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. ¹⁵ During the night he divided his men against them, defeated them and pursued them up to Hobah,

north of Damascus.¹⁶ He recovered all the goods, and also brought back his nephew Lot with his possessions, together with the women and other people.

Review

This is a difficult passage of scripture to read. If you have trouble with the names of the kings and whose 'side' they were on, then read the explanation (next paragraph) and then read verses 10–16 again. You may then gain a clearer picture of what is happening. One thing is clear; this is a very different type of story from anything we have as yet read in Genesis!

Four eastern kings, Amraphel, Arioch, Chedorlaomer and Tidal, acted together as a confederation under the leadership of Chedorlaomer. They had conquered other lands, and presented a real military threat to five city states near the Dead Sea, and were able to exact tribute (taxes) from them and their kings, Bera, Birsha, Shinab, Shemeber and Bela. These kings decided after 12 years of extortion that they would stand for no more. Having rebelled (v4), it took a year before the Eastern kings decided to take action by moving down through the region of Transjordan, creating panic (vv5-7). Eventually, they lined up their seasoned forces against those of the rebel kings in the valley of Siddim, to the south of the Dead Sea. Despite the advantages of local knowledge, the five local kings were roundly defeated (vv10-12) and their region was plundered. Lot was also captured, along with his family and personal wealth.

I will describe the features of Abram's military action to retrieve Lot in the main Bible study, but it is clear that we are dealing with a quite new Biblical phenomenon. This is war amongst the nations; moreover, Abram is in the thick of it. The personal world of Abram and his experience of God which we have inhabited since chapter 12 has been swept aside and exchanged for the brutal history of nations. God is not mentioned in our passage at all! What we read today, though, is only half the story; one that was written down by a skilful storyteller who only reveals the full purpose of the narrative at the end (vv17–24 to be read tomorrow!)

For all Abram's acts of bravery, summoning troops, engaging battle and rescue of Lot, the forefather is never described as more than 'Abram the Hebrew' (v13). In ancient times, a leader who victoriously performed such deeds would have expected nothing short of glory! Abram led 318 of his men, with others in alliance, and by a surprise night attack routed seasoned troops who had inflicted terror on the entire region for at least a decade! Some would have cried 'make him king!' Other ancient peoples assigned divinity to leaders who saved them from their enemies! Certainly, Lot would have been most grateful, and his settlement in Sodom now seemed foolish, though they were the risks of settling anywhere near a city state in those days. At the close of our reading, all of Lot's possessions were in the hands of Abram who had saved him; the young nephew had greedily split from his uncle, but now owed him his life and all he owned.

But that is not the sum total of this story. As we read on tomorrow, we will find that all we have read is veiled, a masterly 'setting the scene' which leads us towards the extraordinary spiritual truths about to be revealed. When God does break through within the last part of the story (v18ff), His revelation will be crucial for all Scripture.

Going Deeper

As we study today's passage in detail, some may find the description of war difficult, but do stay with the study, because even at times of war, we still have questions about God which need to be resolved. We will firstly look at the kings and kingdoms involved in this action, then the details of what happened, and finally the significance of Lot's rescue.

Kings and people

In being thrust suddenly onto the world stage, we have again been reminded that God operates not only at the personal level. Abram had previously learned some important lessons about faith through his failure in Egypt and this led to his subsequent success in dealing with Lot (ch13). Throughout this, Abram's personal wealth and security undoubtedly grew (12:16, 13:15). We might question why God allowed this first 'man of faith' to become so rich, but his general wealth was at least used within this story. It meant that Abram was able to form alliances with others (v13) and summon a sufficiently large number of people from his own household to bring about a military defeat on some difficult foes.

The four kings from the east, Amraphel, Arioch, Chedorlaomer and Tidal, and the five regional kings from around the Dead Sea, Bera, Birsha, Shinab, Shemeber and Bela, are all named with great care in this scripture, together with place names and comments from the writers about

names (see Bela and Zoar v2). This indicates that the writers were working from court records of past events, possibly from around 2,000 BC, and they attempted to explain these to the readers for whom they wrote, the date of which scholars continue to argue, but possibly in the 6th century BC. It has since proved almost impossible to be clear about exactly who these kings were or where they reigned, except that of the five local kings, one was king of Sodom, and one of Gomorrah, both of which were near the Dead Sea, though yet again, no-one is clear about exactly where. What has been written, however, is sufficient for the story. What we can take from this is the sense that the writers of scripture wanted us to read this and say to ourselves, 'yes, this is real history'. It has become too fashionable to read the stories of Abram as somewhat distant from historical fact, which is opposite to the message the text is bringing to us.

The constant use of the word 'king' in this story is interesting. Indeed, if a translation were to include every instance of it, it would be much longer and more repetitive. At the end of the story, Abram has shown himself superior in every way to all the other kings, both the abject and defeated kings of the city states near the Dead Sea, and the aggressive and power hungry kings of the eastern states. The whole story begs the question, who is in command? Who is the real authority behind what has happened in this episode of history? The specific answer, of course, is provided by the conclusion of the story (vv17-24), but the impression gained here is that God has exercised His sovereign will over the world through Abram. This was no small matter for it was a fulfilment of God's promise to bless the nations through Abram (12:3), as well as the saving of Lot.

What happened?

Abram is shown in this story to be God's faithful warrior. A man of peace, or so we have imagined, has taken to the field of battle in order to do God's will. He was not involved in the original action as he was located in the less populated hill country of southern Canaan, near Hebron, out of reach of international politics of the day which was focussed around the city states of the Jordan plain. Abram's wealth was hidden in the hills, but Lot's wealth was vulnerable because of his choice to live in Sodom. In a wider context, Lot's bad decision was one of a series which brought him down. From being a wealthy man in chapter 13 when he first chose to live near the city, he returned there after the disaster of this episode, and ended up a broken man in Genesis 19, living in a cave. It is a sad story.

The description of the original battle in the Valley of Siddim reads like an official yet abbreviated battle report of abject military failure. The defending armies had chosen their own difficult home territory of the Valley of Siddim, a region now under water at the southern end of the Dead Sea which then contained pits from which had been dug large, boulder sized lumps of naturally occurring tar, or 'bitumen'. The description of fleeing men jumping in to these pits (v10) is memorable, but should not be read as if the men were jumping to their deaths into tar! The pits were caves or holes in the ground which afforded cover, and it was a mark of failure that the defending armies had to use the natural landscape not to entrap the enemy, but as a means of trying to hide from them! Lot, however, as a wealthy man, was unable to hide. He was removed forcibly from his home and commandeered with his property as the plunder of war by the successful eastern kings and their armies.

The rescue of Lot

Abram heard about the whole matter from someone who had escaped the battle (v13). He is described in verse 13 in a unique way, as 'Abram the Hebrew'. This is one of a number of unique features of this scripture, which makes scholars believe that the story originates in an ancient record separate from the other stories of Abram, but this can only ever be conjecture. The best explanation of the title is this; 'Abram the Hebrew' emphasises Abram's connection with his four times great grandfather, Eber who appear from the genealogy (11:16ff) to have been a significant figure at the time of the building of Babel. Some have guessed that he was known as a king; but again, this can only be conjecture.

Abram summoned the men of his own household (v14). This sounds a natural move, but yet again the word used to describe the men is unique in scripture, coming from an Egyptian language and meaning 'men retained for services'. It sounds as if Abram had a private army, but scripture leads us away from this view by clearly defining the men as 'born of his household', that is, from the extended families of servants, herders, shepherds and other workers. All this indicates the sheer size of the settlement associated with Abram. Abram also seems to have had local alliances with three brothers in the region of Hebron; Mamre, Eshcol and Aner. The name of the first is also used in the expression 'oaks of Mamre' (13:18); in those