

CHAPTER 4

ABRAHAM AND LOT

(*Gen. 13, 18*)

Since it always seems to afford a certain type of Christian a great deal of satisfaction, when he can find fault with the great men of the Bible, Lot has drawn more than his fair share of their fire. It is often suggested that, since God's call had come to Abram, Lot had no right to try and share in it. If anyone made a mistake, it was Abram not Lot, for it is clearly stated that it was Abram who took Lot with him (12:5). Though we cannot be certain what the basis for Abram's authority over his nephew may have been, the linking of him with Sarai suggests that it lay in the accepted rules of clan life at the time, cf. 11:31. That Lot was not opposed to going with his uncle is suggested by 12:4; 13:5.

Similarly, others have blamed Lot for separating from his uncle (13:11). They suggest that his "worldly-mindedness", which was to show itself later, made the influence of his "spiritually-minded" uncle unwelcome. The simple physical fact is that they had to separate. Even though Canaan was not as heavily populated as it was at the time of the Conquest we are reminded, "At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites dwelt in the land" (13:7).

It has apparently been a feature of Palestinian life as far back as we can trace, that the nomad was welcome to graze the short-lived herbage of his settled neighbours and, it may be, the stubble after the harvest, which helped to manure the fields. The same principle accounts for Egypt's willing-

ness to admit nomadic groups under certain circumstances. The degree to which this was possible depended on the size of the settled population at any given time, but obviously the number of the nomads and the size of their flocks and herds had to be strictly limited. If there is any moral at all in the separation, it is surely that riches acquired in Egypt bring few or no blessings with them.

Great stress is often laid on Abram's faith and generosity in giving his nephew a free choice which part of the land he would live in. In fact, it is difficult to see how a man of his character could have acted otherwise, the more so as the whole outlook of his time expected such an attitude from the elder and richer. He had caused his nephew to come this long way from whatever land he called home, and he could not leave him in the lurch.

Obviously God's promise to Abram, a reaffirmation of 12:7, once Lot had left him (13:14-17), is in measure a commendation of his action. Yet there is no suggestion that it was because of his faith. Rather it was because Abram had acted rightly and righteously. In Israel's ethics one sign of the truly godly man was that "he swears to his own hurt and does not change" (Psa. 15:4). Right or wrong, Abram had brought Lot with him and he was not going to back out of the consequences. In fact the spiritual lesson would seem to be that God will see to it that we shall not ultimately be the losers by doing that which is right and fair. Sometimes God gives even more than we abandon to others; sometimes it seems that we have lost by our generosity and right dealing. Always, however, there is the Divine blessing and providing.

There are many who blame Lot for his "selfish" choice. They are the type of people who give a child a bag of sweets and then tell him to offer them to the assembled company. They think little of his feelings as he sees them rapidly grow less, and above all his favourites vanishing fast. Abram's offer was genuine and what Lot chose coincided with his uncle's wish that he should really choose. It might even be

suggested that Lot, knowing that the land had been promised to his uncle, deliberately chose a relatively small and marginal portion, however fertile, so as not to impinge upon Abram and his descendants.

Though it has no bearing on the spiritual application of the story, it is worth mentioning the problem of the site of the cities of the plain. Today it is fairly generally accepted that they were at the south end of the Dead Sea, and that their ruins lie under the shallow waters. That is probably why the Israelis have called their settlement there S'dom. The mention in Gen. 14:3–10 is too vague for any deduction to be drawn. Certainly, however, the south end of the sea could not have been seen from Bethel (13:2), and it is difficult to see how it could have been called, by any stretch of imagination, “the Jordan valley” (13:10, 11). The same inference that they must have lain at the north end of the sea should be drawn from 18:16, if indeed it implies that they could be seen from Hebron. So, in spite of the lack of any archaeological discoveries, we would do well to think of them as being at the north end of the Dead Sea.¹

Then Lot is blamed for deliberately running himself into temptation (13:13). This, however, assumes that the reputation of the cities of the plain was already known to Abram and Lot. Indeed, had it been, we should rather blame Abram for not warning his considerably younger nephew, indeed for giving him such a free choice. The comment in 14:13, suggests that when Lot preferred Sodom, he was already aware of the moral danger.

If we want to criticize Lot – why should we? – we should do it on the basis of what the New Testament leaves unsaid about him. He is called “righteous Lot, greatly distressed by the licentiousness of the wicked” (2 Pet. 2:7). What is not attributed to him is faith. In Heb. 11:9, 10 the faith that marked out Abraham, Isaac and Jacob is seen especially in

¹ The arguments are summarized in George Adam Smith, *The Historical Geography of the Holy Land*²³ pp. 505–508. NBD rejects a northern location but on apparently inadequate arguments.

their willingness to do without the security offered by an earthly city and to live instead in tents. It is this faith that Lot evidently lacked and which caused him, once he did not have his uncle's support, first to move near Sodom and then to make his home there. He did not learn his lesson even when he was made a captive in war (14:12, 16).

By the time that Abraham was told by God of the coming judgment on the cities of the plain (18:17, 20) he was fully aware of the true situation. This is already implicit in his stinging snub of the king of Sodom (14:21–23), when he refused to profit from him in any way. So he did not misunderstand the force of God's words, when he said, "I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me; and if not, I will know". God was not suggesting that he did not know. Rather he was saying that, in an age in which gods were believed to act on passing whims, he would base his judgment on a judicial enquiry. That Abraham so understood it is shown by his basing his plea on the fact that God is "Judge of all the earth".

Abraham's prayer is frequently misunderstood and then misapplied. We read that "Abraham still stood before the Lord" (18:22). By ancient rabbinic tradition this is one of the *tiqqune sopherim*, i.e. deliberate scribal changes, made mostly for reverential reasons, the original being "the Lord still stood before Abraham"; few scholars doubt that this was the original. It implies that God was waiting for Abraham to open his heart to him.

God was not inviting Abraham to change his mind by prayer; rather he was giving him the opportunity of understanding God's mind and nature through prayer. Abraham was really praying for Lot rather than Sodom – there is no suggestion that he was concerned about the other cities of the plain. If he ever doubted Lot's safety, he very soon lost his fear as he spoke to the universal and all-righteous Judge. But he was still concerned for Lot's possessions, his comfort, his standing in society. The saving of Sodom would

mean the saving of all this for his nephew. But as he increased his demands by lessening the number of righteous needed, he evidently realized more and more the implications of his request.

Self-righteous Christians often blame him for stopping at ten righteous. He should have gone on they say. Far from it! He knew full well that Lot and his family accounted for four of the needed total. If these four had not been able to win over six more during the passing years, then the situation of Sodom must be desperate, and it had become a plague spot, which threatened the whole of Canaan. He was right; there are things we cannot ask for without flouting God's moral government.

The final pages in Lot's life bear out the comment made earlier. Though he knew that God's hand had been over him to save him, he still could not rely on God's protection. He had to have the safety of a fortified community, however small, and so saved Bela, or Zoar, from destruction at that time (19:18–22).

We find the behaviour of Lot's daughters disgusting, and yet they showed more faith than their father. He, stripped of ambitions, wife, home and possessions, could not see God's hand in his survival and was prepared to end his days as a pauper, skulking in a mountain cave. The girls realized that their survival was a clear sign of God's grace and were determined to live on for future generations, even if the means they chose would under normal circumstances have carried the death penalty with it. Lot had left Zoar, for its inhabitants feared that he carried the curse that had overwhelmed the cities. That is a perfectly adequate explanation why the girls knew they could not find husbands. Yet we may perhaps see in their action that they were answering local fear and rejection by an even more radical rejection. It was their declaration that they knew the available young men were as worthy of death as the two to whom they had been engaged, and so they would have none of them.

We may well ask, why Lot did not turn to his uncle in the

hour of disaster. The obvious answer is that a younger man who has thrown away prosperity and property very often shrinks from turning to the older and prosperous, lest he should say, "I told you so". This probably played a part, but we ought to look deeper.

It is remarkable that in the story of Abram's victory over the five confederate kings (14:13–24), which resulted in Lot being freed and having his property restored, there is not a word said of what may have passed between uncle and nephew. This must not be overstressed, because the centre of the stage is held by Abram and Melchizedek, and the whole chapter seems to come from a non-Israelite source.¹ For all that the silence conforms to much human experience.

For the worldling the man of faith seldom creates much ill-feeling; he tends to be regarded as not a little mad, and his prosperity, if it is there, can be explained away as chance. The God-fearing man, however, who walks in the light of worldly wisdom, finds the man of faith a continual rebuke, and detests it, when the latter's success rebukes his manner of life. Had Lot returned to Abram, it would have been a tacit acknowledgement that he had been right all along, and he could have found no valid reason for not joining him in his walk of faith.

As the curtain falls on Lot in his poverty and shame, it rises on Abraham seeing the beginning of God's fulfilment of his promises, not so much in his prosperity, but rather in the gift, at long last, of the son through whom the promises would pass on to later generations. This was underlined by God's giving him a new name, changing Abram to Abraham, even as he changed Sarai to Sarah (17:5, 15).

It is usual to stress the change in meaning between Abram and Abraham, but since there is no discernable difference in meaning between Sarai and Sarah, we may question whether the difference between Abram = Exalted Father

¹ Cf. Speiser, *Genesis* (Anchor Bible), pp. 108f.

and Abraham = Father of a Multitude (of nations) lies only in the meaning. Let the reader remember that in Hebrew the final syllable is strongly accented, and that in addition the *H* is clearly pronounced. If he will then utter both names loudly and clearly, he will realize that God was now giving his servant a name that demanded respect, as he was introduced into the presence of the great men of the earth. Something of the respect with which he came to be regarded may be seen in 23:6. So over against Lot's shame we can place the honour given to the man who was prepared to trust his God completely.