

Understanding the Scriptures

A Complete Course on Bible Study



The Didache Series

— COMPLETE COURSE EDITION —

Chapter 5

Abraham, Our Father



Read

Genesis

11:31-12:9

13:2-18

14:17-20

15:1-19:38

21:1-14

22:1-19

The builders of the Tower of Babel tried to make a great *name* — in Hebrew, *shem* — for themselves without God's help. But God had already chosen a descendant of Shem to become the new father of his people. Immediately after the story of the Tower of Babel, the book of Genesis gives us a detailed list of the descendants of Shem (Gn 11:10-27), ending up at Abram. "Abram" was his name then, but he is more familiar as "Abraham," the father of a multitude of nations.

The Life of a Nomad

- **Abram came from Ur, an important center of civilization in Mesopotamia.**
- **When he was a young man, Abram went with his father to Haran.**
- **In Haran, seventy-five-year-old Abram heard God calling him to go to Canaan.**

By the time Abram was born, his family was living in Ur, an ancient city in Mesopotamia. Ur was a great port city, with a towering ziggurat, thousands of houses and shops, and merchants from all over the world speaking every language.

Some of those merchants came by ship from places as far away as India. But Terah and his family — including his eldest son Abram — were probably caravan traders from the west. They were used to the idea of making long journeys over land, grazing their cattle along the way.

Terah had three sons: Abram, Nahor, and Haran. They all grew up and married. Haran died young, leaving behind a son named Lot. Terah seems to have raised his grandson Lot as his own son, and Lot and his uncle Abram developed a close relationship.

Then Terah decided to take his family away from Ur. Scripture tells us only that "they went forth together from Ur of the Chaldeans to go into the land of Canaan." (Archaeology supplies one possible reason: if the traditional dating of Abram's life is correct, Terah and his family might have left just when a new conqueror who hated western nomads like Terah and Abram took over in Ur.)

But when they came to the town of Haran, Terah settled there, abandoning his trip to Canaan. Haran was very much like Ur—a bustling market city where traders from all over the world came to sell their wares. It was a city where Terah could resume his familiar way of life.

So Terah and his family settled in Haran, and they prospered there. Terah died in Haran, and Abram grew old.

It was when he was already an old man that Abram's story really began. When Abram was seventy-five years old, he heard a call from God.

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. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." (Gn 12:1-3).

When God calls him, Abraham goes forth "as the LORD had told him" (Gn 12:4); Abraham's heart is entirely submissive to the Word and so he obeys. Such attentiveness of the heart, whose decisions are made according to God's will, is essential to prayer, while the words used count only in relation to it. Abraham's prayer is expressed first by deeds: a man of silence, he constructs an altar to the Lord at each stage of his journey. Only later does Abraham's first prayer in words appear: a veiled complaint reminding God of his promises which seem unfulfilled (cf. Gn 15:2f.). Thus one aspect of the drama of prayer appears from the beginning: the test of faith in the fidelity of God. (CCC 2570)



The Promises to Abram

- God promises Abram land, kingship, and worldwide blessing.
- Each of these promises will be fulfilled in another covenant later in history.
- God will reinforce each promise with a covenant oath.

There are three promises here at the beginning of Genesis 12.

1. **LAND AND A NATION.** "Go to the land that I will show you." God says. As Abram will find out, the land God will show him is Canaan. Jewish legend had it that the land of Canaan was originally meant to belong to Shem, but Ham and Canaan had usurped Shem's birthright. God will make a great nation of Abram, and the first thing a nation needs is land.
2. **KINGSHIP AND A NAME.** "I will bless you, and make your name great." Making his *name* (in Hebrew, *Shem*) great meant founding a dynasty, giving Abram political authority and power. God has thrown down the proud tyrants of Babel, and now he intends to build a kingdom on humble, faithful Abram.
3. **BLESSING FOR ALL NATIONS.** "In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."¹ God isn't just promising to give Abram some local prestige among the tribes of Canaan. Impossible as it must sound to Abram, God will use Abram to bring salvation to the whole world. The whole human family, torn apart by sin, will be brought back together again through the line of Abraham.

As we'll see in the chapters to come, these three promises are actually fulfilled in three more covenants later in history.

1. The promise of **LAND AND A NATION** will be fulfilled in the covenant with **Moses**.
2. The promise of **KINGSHIP AND A NAME** will be fulfilled in the covenant with **David**.
3. The promise of **BLESSING FOR ALL NATIONS** will be fulfilled through **Jesus Christ**.

The very first verse of the New Testament, Matthew 1:1, reminds us that the whole plan of salvation goes back to Abraham: "The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

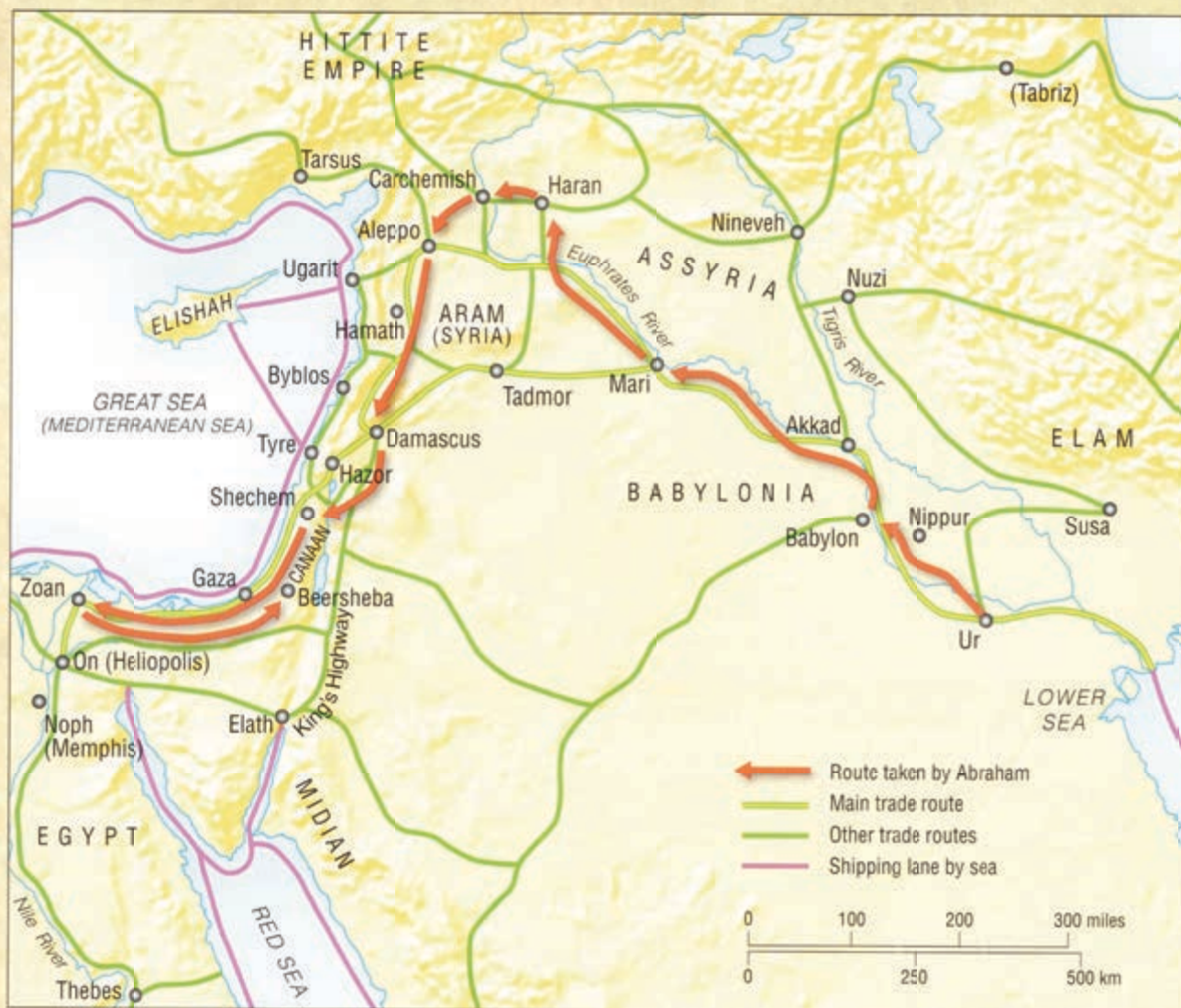
In order to gather together scattered humanity God calls Abram from his country, his kindred and his father's house (Gn 12:1), and makes him Abraham, that is, "the father of a multitude of nations." "In you all the nations of the earth shall be blessed" (Gn 17:5; 12:3 (LXX); cf. Gal 3:8). (CCC 59)

God would reinforce each of these promises individually with covenant oaths at three different points in Abraham's life.

"When they had come to the land of Canaan, Abram passed through the land to the place at Shechem... Then the Lord appeared to Abram, and said, 'To your descendants I will give this land.'" (Gn 12:5-7)



Abraham's Migration in the Near East, ca. 2120 BC



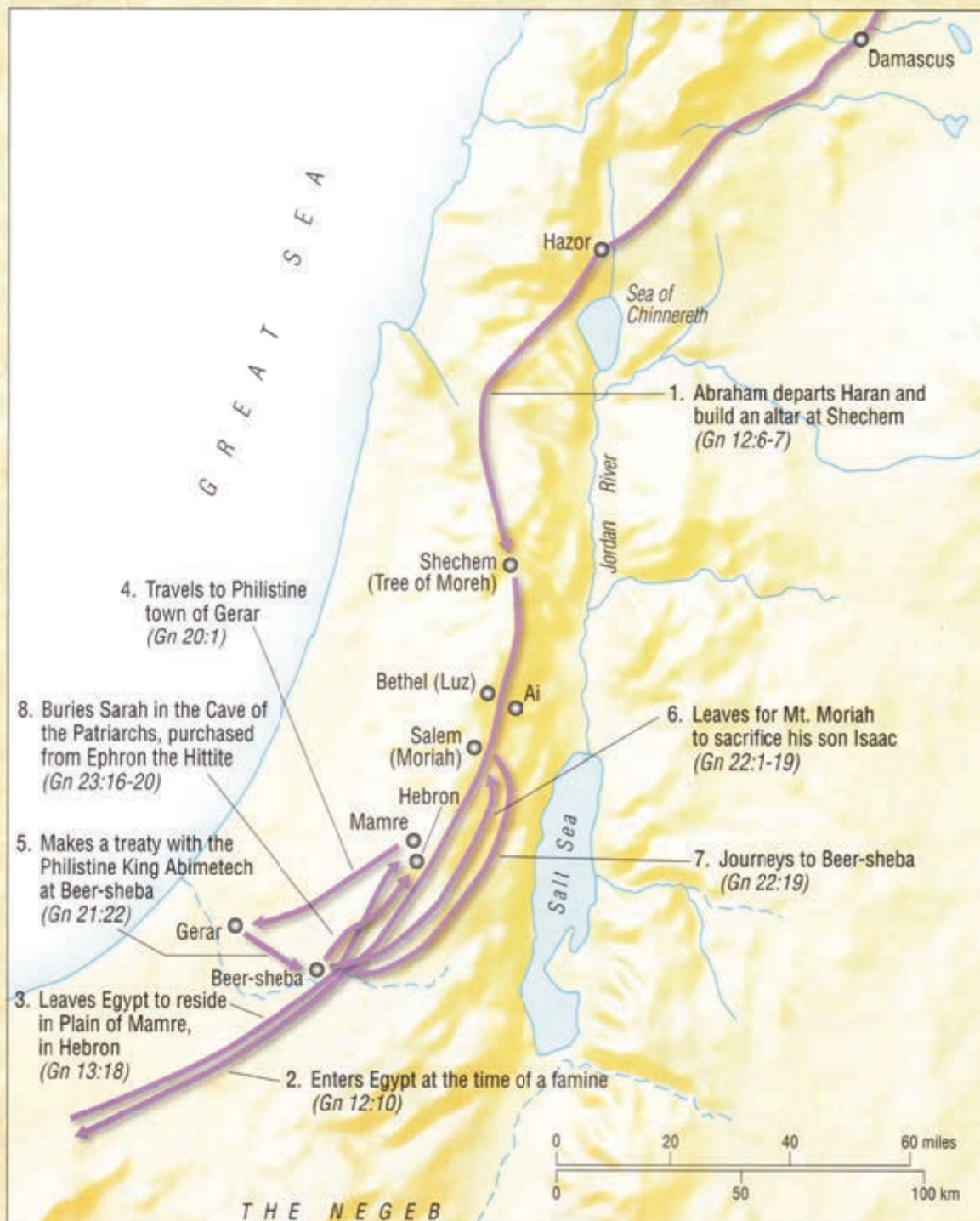
From Abram to Abraham

The book of Genesis explains Abram's name change as a change in meaning—"Exalted Father" (Abram) to "Father of a Multitude" (Abraham). Some linguists suggest that the name change had another significance as well. Abram, they say, was an East Semitic form of the name, a form that Abram would have used in Ur. Abraham was the West Semitic form of the same name. By taking the western form of the name, Abraham showed the world that he belonged permanently in Canaan, the land in the west that God had given him.



Abraham Journeying into the Land of Canaan by Gustave Dore.

The Journeys of Abraham in Canaan, ca. 2100 BC



1. God's Oath: Land and a Nation

- **Abram believes God's unlikely promise of an heir.**
- **By a common ritual of the time, God swears a covenant oath to give Canaan to Abram's descendants.**

God's promise to Abram was hard to believe: Abram had no children, he was an old man already, and his wife, Sarai, had never been able to conceive. How could he have a dynasty with no descendants?

In Abram's time, having a multitude of descendants was considered the greatest possible blessing. Abram must have wondered why he seemed to be cursed. His journeys to Egypt and other places made him very wealthy,² but it was all meaningless if he had no son to carry on his name.

Once again, God came to Abram with a promise of great things. But this time Abram dared to ask how the promise could possibly be fulfilled.

After these things the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision, "Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O LORD God, what wilt thou give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" And Abram said, "Behold, thou hast given me no offspring, and a slave born in my house will be my heir." (Gn 15:1-3)

Abram's questions were perfectly reasonable. But God was about to do something extraordinary, something beyond human reason.

And behold, the word of the LORD came to him. "This man shall not be your heir; your own son shall be your heir." And he brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them." Then he said to him, "so shall your descendants be." And he believed the LORD, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness. (Gn 15:4-6)

Even though it might have seemed very unlikely, Abram still believed God's promise. But he wanted more assurance about the land. "How am I to know that I shall possess it?" Abram asked.

Now comes a scene that seems very strange to modern readers. To understand it, we need to know how oaths were sworn in the ancient Near East.



In the time of Abram, and for many centuries afterwards, a serious oath was usually sealed with a sacrifice. We know from ancient inscriptions that the animals in a way represented the people who were swearing the oath. "If I break this oath," the people were saying, "may it be my blood spilled on the ground instead of this animal's." An especially solemn way to swear an oath was to cut the sacrifice in two and then walk between the two halves of the sacrifice.

So in answer to Abram's question, God told him, "Bring me a heifer three years old, a she-goat three years old, a ram three years old, a turtledove, and a pigeon."³ Abram brought all the sacrificial animals, and he cut each of the

three large animals in half. All day long he guarded the sacrifices. When the sun began to go down, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and God appeared to him again, repeating the promise that Abram's descendants would possess Canaan — though only after being delivered from bondage in a foreign land. (The foreign land would be Egypt, as the book of Exodus will tell us.)

When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold, a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between these pieces. On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites."

The firepot and torch represented the presence of God himself. By passing between the halves of the sacrifices, God was swearing a covenant oath with Abram, solemnly promising that the land would be his.



Lippi's *Circumcision of Christ* depicts the fulfillment of God's covenant with Abraham in Genesis 17:9-14.

VOCABULARY

ABRAHAM

A descendant of Shem; founder of the Hebrew nation.

ABRAM

The original name of Abraham.

ANGEL

A messenger from God. Angels are pure spirit. In Scripture, their appearances are usually terrifying.

CIRCUMCISION

The visible sign of God's covenant with Abraham. Circumcision set the People of God apart from other nations.

ISAAC

Son of Abraham and Sarah; born when they were very old. Although Isaac was not Abraham's first son, he was the only child born of Sarah, Abraham's wife, making Isaac the heir of God's promises.

ISHMAEL

Abraham's son by Hagar, Sarah's servant. The founder of the Arab tribes.

GOMORRAH

See Sodom.

LOT

Abraham's nephew. He settled in the prosperous plains, leaving Abraham in the wilderness of the hill country.

MORIAH

The mountains around Jerusalem, where Abraham went to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice.

SARAH

The wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac.

SARAI

The original name of Sarah.

SODOM

Along with Gomorrah, one of the cities of the plain destroyed by God because of wickedness. Lot had settled there, but was warned by angels to flee.

UR

A city in the Plain of Shinar, the original home of Abraham.



"Abraham planted a tamarisk tree in Beersheba and called there on the name of the LORD, the Everlasting God." (Gn 21:33)

STUDY QUESTIONS

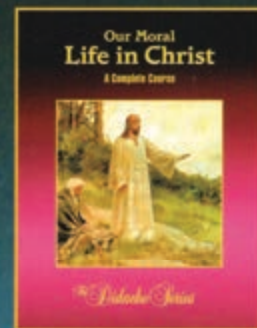
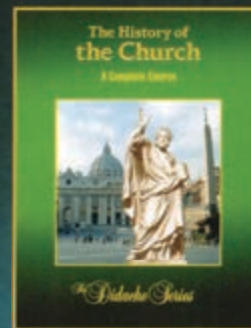
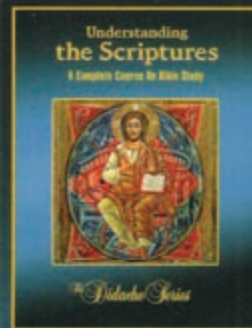
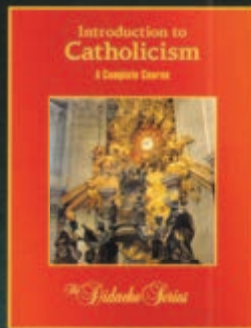
1. In what city did Abram grow up?
2. Who were Abram's brothers?
3. How old was Abram when he first heard God's call?
4. What lesson can we learn from Abraham's submissiveness to God?
5. What were the three promises God made to Abram?
6. Through which three of Abraham's descendants are these promises fulfilled?
7. What does Matthew 1:1 remind us?
8. Why did a firepot and a torch pass between Abram's sacrifices after he had questioned God about his promises?
9. What was the sign of God's covenant with Abram?
10. What were God's promises to Abraham?
11. What was to be the sign of the covenant between God and his people?
12. How old was Sarah when she was told she would have a son?
13. What was the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah?
14. How should those who have homosexual tendencies be treated?
15. Who was Lot and why did he have to leave his city?
16. How are God's actions at Sodom and Gomorrah signs of his judgment and mercy?
17. Why were Ishmael and his mother thrown out into the wilderness?
18. In what ways was the proposed sacrifice of Isaac a "type" of the Lord's sacrifice on the cross?
19. What city was built on the mountains of Moriah?



"Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God,..." (Gn 22:12)

The Didache Series

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The goal of *The Didache Series* is to present the basic doctrinal, scriptural, moral, and sacramental tenets of the Catholic Church in a manner that is both comprehensive and accessible. Accordingly, the books of this series rely on sources such as Sacred Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the lives of the saints, the Fathers of the Church, the General Directory for Catechesis, and the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

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✠ Francis Cardinal George, OMI
Archbishop of Chicago

"As a Catholic educator I welcome the *Didache* religion textbook series and recommend it wholeheartedly. With its basis in Scripture and in the teachings found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, this series should be a great asset to those concerned with teaching Catholicism in its richness and entirety. There is a definite need for textbooks that adequately present the Catholic Faith to young people. *The Didache Series* responds to that need."

Dr. Scott Hahn
Professor of Theology and Scripture
Franciscan University of Steubenville



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