

Old Testament History, Literature and Theology

Geography & Abraham

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Genesis, Nephilim, Mesopotamia, Mari, Nuzu, Abraham, Covenant, Circumcision, Alphabet, Ugarit

Abstract

This lecture examines the transition from the primeval history in Genesis to the patriarchal narratives of Abraham, beginning with an analysis of the divine grief and human corruption in Genesis 6. Dr. Ted Hildebrandt provides a comprehensive geographical survey of ancient Mesopotamia and the Levant, highlighting how key archaeological discoveries at Mari, Nuzu, Ebla, and Ugarit illuminate the second-millennium BC cultural background of biblical customs. The narrative explores Abraham's identity as God's friend, detailing his three symbolic "cuts"—leaving his homeland, ratifying the unconditional covenant, and performing circumcision—while demonstrating how the revolutionary technology of the alphabet democratized learning. Finally, the session addresses textual criticisms regarding historical accuracy and evaluates the three figures considered as potential heirs prior to the birth of Isaac.

Outline

I. Introduction and Primeval Context (Genesis 6)

- A. Opening course business and Leviticus reading assignment preview
- B. The "Sons of God" and "Daughters of Men" in Genesis 6:1–4
 - 1. The Sethite View: Inter-marriage between godly descendants of Seth and ungodly line of Cain
 - 2. The Kingship View: Ancient Mesopotamian rulers building violent harems (Hamas / violence)
 - 3. The Angel View: Fallen angels taking human form and intermarrying with human women
- C. Hermeneutics and textual analysis of the Nephilim
 - 1. Etymology of Naphal ("fallen ones") vs. context-driven biblical interpretation
 - 2. Core hermeneutical rule: Context determines meaning over word history
- D. Divine Grief and the Heart of God (Genesis 6:5–8)
 - 1. God's sorrow over pervasive human evil, violence, and corruption
 - 2. Theological reality of grief and pain in heaven before the final wiping of tears
- E. The Concept of Divine Repentance
 - 1. Biblical instances of God changing His mind (Exodus golden calf, Numbers)

II. Post-Flood Narrative and Cultural Context (Genesis 9)

- A. Noah's Vineyard and the Curse on Canaan (Genesis 9:18–29)
 - 1. Noah's drunkenness, Ham's dishonoring exposure, and Shem and Japheth's respectful covering

2. Ugaritic parallels defining the ancient duty of sons to cover their fathers
3. Exegetical correction: Canaan (Canaanites) cursed, not Cush/Africa (refuting misapplication to slavery)
4. Reciprocal justice (lex talionis) and the foreshadowing of Israelite-Canaanite conflicts

B. Individual and Corporate Personality in Ancient Near Eastern Culture

1. Contrast between modern Western individualism and ancient group identity
2. Intergenerational impact and systemic consequences of choices within family units

III. Geographical and Historical Framework of Mesopotamia and the Levant

A. Geographical Overview of the Ancient Near East

1. Strategic waterways: Persian Gulf, Tigris, and Euphrates rivers ("E.T.")
2. Geopolitical dynamics between mountain populations (Iran) and plains populations (Iraq)
3. Ur of the Chaldees: Arguments for a Northern Ur origin versus the Southern Sumerian Ur

B. Major Archaeological Sites and Textual Discoveries

1. Mari: 25,000+ cuneiform tablets on Euphrates trade routes (Hammurabi & Zimri-Lim)
2. Nuzu: 5,000+ tablets preserving ancient second-millennium BC family and legal customs
3. Haran: Patriarchal homeland of Terah, Rebekah, Rachel, Leah, and Laban
4. Ebla: 18,000 tablets (c. 2400 BC) establishing pre-Abrahamic cultural baseline
5. Ugarit: 12,000 tablets introducing the Ugaritic language and Baal/Asherah mythology
6. Egypt: Nile valley civilization, Alexandria's learning center, and the Amarna letters

IV. The Evolution of Writing Technologies and Information Access

A. Cuneiform and Syllabic Scripts

1. Complex 800+ symbol systems restricting literacy to elite professional scribes

B. Invention and Impact of the Alphabet (c. 1800–1200 BC)

1. Phoneme-based 22–30 symbol system democratizing literacy among common people

C. Historical Parallels in Media Revolutions

1. Gutenberg printing press (1450s AD) expanding scriptural access across Europe
2. The Digital "Alphabet" (0s and 1s) transforming global Christian communication

V. Patriarchal Narrative: Abraham, God's Friend (Genesis 12–25)

A. Abraham's Identity and His "Three Cuts"

1. Abraham designated as "God's friend" (James 2:23)
2. First Cut: Leaving country, kin, and father's house in Ur/Haran (Genesis 12)
3. Interlude: Rescue of Lot and encounter with Melchizedek, King of Salem (Genesis 14)
 - a. Non-Jewish priest-king of God Most High (El Elyon) receiving Abraham's tithe
4. Second Cut: Ratifying the Covenant (Genesis 15)
 - a. Passage of the smoking firepot between severed animal halves
 - b. Divine solemnization of the unconditional covenant: land, seed, and global blessing
5. Third Cut: Circumcision as the Permanent Covenant Seal (Genesis 17)
 - a. Bodily sign sealing the unconditional covenant community

b. Historical connection to covenant inclusion and baptismal theology

VI. Textual Veracity and the Three Alleged Heirs

A. Evaluating Critical Textual Challenges

1. Camel domestication in 2000 BC confirmed by Ebla discoveries (2400 BC)
2. Existence of the Hittite Empire verified at Boghazkoy, Turkey
3. Placename "Dan" in Genesis 14:14 as a modernizing geographic gloss/updating

B. The Three Figures Considered as Abraham's Heirs

1. Heir #1: Eleazar of Damascus (adoption of chief household servant per Nuzu/Hammurabi law)
2. Heir #2: Ishmael (surrogate maternity via Hagar following second-millennium BC norms)
3. Heir #3: Isaac, the true son of promise born to Abraham and Sarah ("laughter")