

Genesis 13 Abram and Lot Partition the Land

9/21/2001 10:12 AM

Overview

Connection to ch. 12 with balanced linked keywords:

- 13:1,3-4 belong structurally to ch. 12, since they complete the northern movement that recalls the southward journey of 12:8-10 (Bethel → Negeb → Egypt and back).
- 13:2,5 belong together and structurally with ch. 13. (“Lot also” recalls “Abram”)

Up to now, Lot has been associated with Abram. But the promise is to Abram, not to Abram and lot, and this chapter describes how they parted ways. It has three sections, each concluding with a description of someone dwelling in the land.

2-7, Conflict

Structurally, vv. 2,5 are to be read together. “Abram was very rich ... and Lot was also.” We might expect such statements to introduce a happy ending, “and they all lived happily ever after.” In fact, the result of this prosperity is tension and strife, as they find themselves in competition for the choicest grazing grounds and the wells. We see here three warnings for prosperous believers, a category that (from a global perspective) includes all of us in the US.

- **Wealth** does not always solve problems; sometimes it causes them.
 - Eccl 5:11, When goods increase, they are increased that eat them
 - Prov 30:8,9, Remove far from me vanity and lies: give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me: 9 Lest I be full, and deny *thee*, and say, Who *is* the LORD? or lest I be poor, and steal, and take the name of my God *in vain*.
 - 1 Tim 6:9 But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition.
- Having **authority** over other people brings responsibility for them as well. One might look at large retinues of servants as a sign of prestige. But they are a management burden. Abram and Lot are very fond of one another; witness how they have stuck together through thick and thin. Here they are driven apart, not by any tension between the two of them, but by squabbles among their servants.
- The **World** is an ever-present pressure. Mention of the Canaanite and Perizzite:
 - Additional pressure on the resources—how the world makes it harder for us to get along with each other
 - The problem of their testimony—here they want to be known as believers, but unbelievers see them squabbling.

All this sets up a problem that Abram graciously reconciles in the next section.

8-13, Resolution

8-9, Abram's Proposal

This passage is an excellent case study for the difficult issues of *strife* and *division*. 1 Cor 3:3 outlines the paradigm that we can follow through here: envying leads to strife, which in turn leads to division.

- *Envy* arose in this case because there were too many flocks for the available land, and each group of herdsmen wanted the land occupied by the other. Envy is the result of an attitude that focuses on our rights rather than our duties. The solution is contentment with what the Lord has given us and trust in him to provide anything else we need (Heb 13:5,6), a firm resolve to “crucify the flesh with the affections and lusts” (Gal 5:13-26; the whole passage deals with this dynamic). We should suffer ourselves to be defrauded (1 Cor 6:7), and endure grief, suffering wrongfully (1 Pet 2:19), following the example of our Savior and trusting in God.
- Envy is an internal emotion, but if not handled appropriately, it manifests itself outwardly as *strife*, contention with those of whom we are envious. We have already seen the strife between the herdsmen of Abram and those of Lot. James 4:1 also bears witness to this dynamic: “From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?”
- *Division* is the ultimate result of strife, and sometimes the only acceptable outcome, as we shall see.

The objective.—“Let there be no strife, ... for we be brethren.”

Strife in itself is not wrong; we are to “strive against sin,” Heb. 12:4, and Paul rejoiced to have “fought a good fight,” 2 Tim 4:7.

But with people, we are to seek to avoid strife:

- Romans 12:18 If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.
- Hebrews 12:14 Follow peace with all men,

In particular, strife has no place among brethren.

- The blessing of God is seen when “brethren dwell together in unity,” Ps 133:1.
- In John 13:35, our Lord makes our love for one another the means by which we are to be known as his disciples.
- Philippians 2:3 “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory.”
- Ephesians 4:3, we are to “endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”
- 1 Corinthians 1:10, “Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you; but *that* ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.”

Abram, restored to fellowship after his lapse in Egypt, is sensitive to the problem this situation poses, and seeks a resolution.

Application: We must never be content to dwell with strife among brethren. It is carnal, destructive, and displeasing to God. Based on the paradigm of 1 Cor 3:3, when we find ourselves in contention with someone, we should look into our hearts and try to discern where the underlying envy is.

The means.—“Separate thyself,” taking first choice of the land.

Abram moves to defuse the strife by removing the underlying envy. He gives Lot free and open choice of the available land and agrees not to have his flocks in the same area. In the nature of the case, this requires a physical separation between them. Separation is not desirable, but it is better than strife. We have an ordered list of preferences.

- The most desirable situation is living together in unity.
- Less desirable is living separately, at peace with one another.
- Least desirable is living in strife.

We should seek both fellowship and peace, but if the two are impossible, better to sacrifice fellowship than peace.

10-11a, Lot's Choice

Abram's approach to the strife is to surrender any claim to his own rights, and give his nephew carte blanche. If Lot had had the same attitude, the separation might have been avoided. But he shows his carnality by his choice, in two ways.

1. He selfishly chooses the most attractive portion of the land, the plain of Jordan. Watered by the only constantly flowing river in the land, warm year-round because of its low elevation, its fertility (at least in the days before the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah) is compared with Eden. He does not defer to his uncle. He does not suggest they share the Jordan valley and the mountain, but takes “all the plain of Jordan.” He does not even couch his greed in the middle-eastern style of bargaining where he tries to look as though he is ceding the choice to his uncle: “No, you choose first.” He just grabs the best for himself.
2. Furthermore, he is moving to the very edge of the land of promise (Num 34:2-12), effectively turning his back on the place to which God had led them.

11b-12, The Separation

“Lot journeyed east[ward].” His action echoes three previous ones in Genesis, all associated with judgment. (From the land of promise, you can't go west: that way is the sea. Eastward is away from the promised land.)

- Adam and Eve, 3:24
- Cain, 4:16
- Men of Babel, 11:2.

Beyond the simple fact of the transition, we see here a shift in Lot's preferences.

- Though he and Abram were originally city dwellers (Ur and then Haran), they became nomads, living in tents, to follow the Lord's direction.

- Even here he “pitched his tent,” but does so “among the cities of the plain, ... toward Sodom.”
- Later we shall see him as a resident of the town, sitting in the gate with the elders and living in a house (19:1,2).

13, *The Inhabitants of Lot’s Portion*

Abram is left with the Canaanites and Perizzites of v.7. Has Lot found unsettled territory? Not at all. There are residents there too, and Moses informs us that they are distinctive for their wickedness.

Recall discussion of 10:9; 6:11. “Before YHWH,” when used to modify a predication rather than an action, always reminds us that the characteristic in question is known to God, and its subject is answerable to God for that characteristic. The region that Lot has chosen is distinctive for its fertility, but also for its wickedness, and God will hold them accountable. Calvin: “Lot, when he fancied that he was dwelling in paradise, was nearly plunged into the depths of hell.”

Consider the choice that he has made: fleeing unintended conflict with his loving and generous uncle Abram, he immerses himself into a society of selfish people who will seek to take advantage of him at every turn. Surely, by looking out for #1, he has actually chosen the worse part.

14-18, Reward

The dynamic of 1 Cor 3:3 is that separation can be traced back to carnal envy. Lot’s selfish choice shows that he is the carnal one in this transaction, and now the Lord vindicates Abram’s role by giving him a special blessing.

So far, it seems that Abram has been bested in the deal. But now the Lord shows him that it was not futile to trust in God rather than in man for blessing. God has already promised to give the land of Canaan to his seed (12:7), but now the Lord strengthens this blessing.

1. The promise is now not just to his seed, but “to thee and to thy seed.” He will have enjoyment of it.
2. The extent of the land that he will enjoy is made clear. “Lift up thine eyes,” as Lot had done to see the plain of Jordan to the east (v.10). Standing where Lot had stood, Abram must now see all that Lot saw, and more besides. God promises that it will all belong to him and to his seed, even the portion that he has ceded to Lot.
3. The duration of his holding is specified: “for ever.” This promise is the cornerstone of the future earthly kingdom.
 - Calvin insists that the term means only “that period which was brought to a close by the advent of Christ,” reflecting his amillennial stance. But though in some cases a period described as “for ever” may later end, the point of this expression is to deemphasize any ending and present the period as unbounded.
 - Sometimes the term refers to promises that are later withdrawn through divine discipline (1 Sam 2:30). This is Leupold’s position. But this is emphatically NOT the case with the land. Even at the time of the Babylonian captivity, when the Jews are driven from their land because of their sin, Jeremiah is told to buy a portion as witness that they will be

restored (Jer 32), and Zech 12 pictures them still living in the land at the time when they turn to the Messiah.

Of course, all this talk about Abram's seed seems vacuous, as long as Sarai is barren, So the Lord continues (16) by promising to make his seed as the dust of the earth.

Then (17) he sends Abram off to claim the land by walking through it. Abram responds by making his way south to the region of Hebron, which will be the site of much of his later history. Once there, he continues his practice from Shechem and Bethel of building an altar to worship the Lord.

Other Examples

The basic paradigm carnality → envy → strife → division can be seen elsewhere in the Bible. Several other examples show us that sometimes it is necessary to divide, though never desirable.

Gen 36, Jacob and Esau

In verses 6-8, Esau and Jacob face the same kind of resource constraint that Abram and Lot encountered. We know from 25:29-34 that Esau has a problem with priorities, regularly putting the flesh ahead of spiritual values. So here he, like Lot, chose separation over remaining in the land of promise. He effectively splits himself off from the promised line, and becomes the father of the Edomites.

Acts 15, Paul and Barnabas

The same paradigm of “envy, strife, division” shows itself in the history of Paul and Barnabas, who in Acts 15:39 “departed asunder one from the other” rather than continue in “contention” over John Mark.

The underlying “envy” in this case appears to be who is in control of the mission.

- The first mission began with Barnabas in the lead (“Barnabas and Saul,” 13:2),
- but Paul appears to have taken the lead in Cyprus (13:13, “Paul and his company”), and here he is the one who suggests the need for a return visit (15:36).

Barnabas assumes he is still the senior one, and once again wants to take along his nephew John Mark. Paul feels equally strongly that he should define the team.

Both of them have valuable insights:

- John Mark *does* need patient attention (as Barnabas suggested)
- His defection on the first journey *was* serious (as Paul emphasizes).

The issue on which neither would yield is who should call the shots. As with Abram and Lot, they partition the field.

1 Cor 3:3 suggests that we must recognize the presence of carnality among the players, and in fact, when Paul wrote Romans some years after Acts 15, he still confesses, “I am carnal, sold under sin” (Rom 7:14).

1 Cor 7, Divorce

Perhaps the most tragic example of this dynamic is in families, where it takes the form of divorce.

- v.4 requires husband and wife to relinquish authority over themselves to each other at the most intimate level. Compare Eph 5, requiring the husband to love the wife as Christ loved the church (25), and the wife to submit to the husband as she does to the Lord (22). This kind of attitude is the polar opposite of envy.
- There is no exception to this requirement for believing couples. 1 Cor 7:10-11, echoing the Lord's instructions to believing couples in the gospels, forbids separation. If you are a Christian, you can give up your rights. It is expected that you will crucify the flesh with the affections and lusts. For you, strife in marriage is an indicator that you must yield, as Abram did, and not leave.
- This is a supernatural requirement, and unbelievers may not be able to achieve it. Thus Paul's special instructions for unequally yoked believers (1 Cor 7:12-16) recognize that sometimes the unbeliever may decide to leave. As long as they remain, they derive special blessing from association with the believer (14). But if their envy brings about strife, and they want to leave, the believer is not to stand in their way. "If the unbelieving depart, let him depart" (15), as Lot did from Abram, and as Esau did from Jacob. (Of course, the believer is not free to remarry under these circumstances, but living single is preferable to strife in marriage.)

Outcomes

The examples in Genesis are a comfort for us in circumstances when we yield to others for the sake of peace.

- Abram received the promise that he and his seed would inherit all of the land, *including* that claimed by Lot.
- Both Abram and Jacob have the privilege of being in the focus of God's dealings with his people, rather than marginalized and separated to idolatry.
- Even the separation of Paul and Barnabas ultimately brought about good. Two teams took the field, rather than one. We know the outcome of Paul's journey with Silas, and Barnabas' work with John Mark ultimately led Paul to commend him as "profitable for the ministry," 2 Tim 4:11.
- So in domestic situations, we ought not to grasp for control, but trust in the Lord as we yield ourselves to one another.

Appendix: Additional Thoughts on Division

The NT warns us against divisions; see 1 Cor 1:10; 11:18. It may be helpful to observe how each level of spiritual maturity relates to divisions among believers. The three levels are the natural man (unsaved, 1 Cor 2:14); the carnal man (baby Christian, 1 Cor 3:1), and the spiritual man (mature, 1 Cor 2:15).

Genesis 13 Abram and Lot Partition the Land

- Those who *cause* division are “natural men,” unsaved. “Sensual” in Jude 19 is the same word as “natural man” in 1 Cor 2:14, and Rom 16:17 says that such people “serve not our Lord Jesus Christ.”
- Those who *harbor* division are carnal, baby Christians, 1 Cor 3:3.
- Those who live in unity manifest the work of the Spirit, Eph. 4:3

Still, sometimes the NT commands separation:

- 1 Tim 6:5, “withdraw thyself” from corrupt church leadership rather than submit to it
- Rom 16:17, “avoid” those who cause divisions (!), cf. Tit 3:10
- 2 Thes 3:6, “withdraw thyself” from brothers who walk disorderly
- 2 Tim 3:5, “turn away” from those who have the form of godliness but deny its power.