

Genesis 14

This chapter is an oddity in the Book of Genesis. It is so because it is neither connected in any way with the material that has come before it, or will come after it, nor does it help to advance the storyline of Genesis. It is a stand-alone chapter composed of three nominally-related stories.

Story one concerns a war between kings and their cities. On the one side we have four kings and on the other we have five. The four kings had dominated the five for twelve years. Having had enough, the five kings rebelled. In a series of campaigns, the four kings defeated their opponents, took their goods and went home. Other than the names of some of the cities involved, such as Sodom and Gomorrah, and the names of some of the people groups involved, the Amalekites and Amorites, there is no knowledge of any of the other leaders or cities. The only possible connection with the Genesis story is that many of the warriors of Sodom and Gomorrah end up dying in bitumen pits (naturally occurring tar pits, such as the La Brea tar pits in California). This could be an earlier version of the end of those two cities/peoples prior to the fire and brimstone destruction recorded a few chapters later.

Story two, concerns Abram freeing his nephew Lot. In the previous chapter, Abram allowed Lot to choose which part of the Land of Promise, Lot wanted. He chose what appeared to be the best land. The land that looked like the Garden of Eden. It was also the land of Sodom and Gomorrah; the land which rebelled and lost. The result of this defeat was that Lot and his family were taken captive. An escapee finds his way to Abram and informs him of his nephew's capture. Abram immediately gathers his forces (318 men to be exact), surprises the enemy at night and defeats them. He then brings Lot and all his possessions back home. The only real connection this story might have with the ongoing narrative, is that Abram's ability to defeat a larger, seemingly undefeatable force is the result of God's ongoing blessing.

Story three, is a story which has garnered much attention, while at the same time not offering much clarity as to its purpose or the personage involved. The personage involved is that of Melchizedek, the king of Salem (Jerusalem) and priest of the "Most High God." After Abram's victory he and the freed King of Sodom meet Melchizedek. Melchizedek, brings out bread and wine, and gives thanks for Abram's victory. Abram then gives Melchizedek a tenth of everything. The King of Sodom next offers to split Sodom's rescued booty with Abram (which would have obligated Abram to the king), but Abram refuses. Instead Abram keeps nothing that was not his, stating that no can then say that they, rather than God made Abram rich. Unfortunately, the story never tells us anything more about Melchizedek, the God he worships or why Abram gave him a tithe of the booty.

Reflection: While these stories give us little historical or theological insight, they do offer us a window on the compilation of the book of Genesis. By including these stories, we learn that the writers were not as much interested in writing a carefully crafted story as they were about including material which pertained to their ancestors. Even when the stories were a bit cryptic (who was Melchizedek and why did he receive a tithe?) and not clearly related to the ongoing story, they were included because of their connection to Abram, the father of the faith. Thus, relational connections allowed the compiler of Genesis to include extraneous stories without worrying about a deeper connection to the tale.

Questions:

1. Which of these stories appeals most to you and why?
2. Does the fact that these stories are disconnected from the larger story matter to you? Why or why not?
3. How important to you are the stories of your ancestors? Why is that?