

Blogging toward Sunday

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Odysseus wants nothing more than to get home. For the Greeks, as for most ancient peoples, the house and city were islands of order in the midst of a howling wilderness. They would do anything to stay home or, having left, to get back.

Israel's history, however, begins with a man who leaves home and wanders off toward the horizon, not knowing where he's going and never intending to go home again. Abram's call is the birth of Israel. It is also a turning point in the formation of humanity.

Yahweh promises that Abram will receive all that an ancient man hopes for: many descendants, a nation, a great reputation, a land, blessings for himself and curses for his enemies. Yahweh commands Adam to be fruitful (Gen. 1:26-28), but also *promises* to make Abram fruitful (17:6). At the time, Abram has no children, and he's accompanied by a barren wife (11:30). He sets up altars at Shechem and between Bethel and Ai (12:6-9), but he owns no land.

All Abram has are Yahweh's promises. At this point, it's just words. But he goes. No human has acted like this before. Like Noah later, Abram is the founder of a new humanity. He waits in faith for many years, but eventually has a son, who has two, one of whom has 12 children, who have thousands. (One of the best brief accounts of Abram's life is in James B. Jordan's *Primeval Saints*.)

For

Paul, Abram's faith has a specific focus. Abram is justified by faith in God's powerful promise to bring life from his dead body and from

Sarah's dead womb (v. 22). Christians are accounted righteous by the same faith, faith in the resurrection of Jesus, who was raised for our justification (v. 25). Because righteousness is by faith in God's promises, the promise to Abram extends to all humanity, and he is a blessing to all nations.

Paul is no innovator when he says that the promises to Abram were for also for those Gentiles who claim his faith. Jesus' table fellowship enacts the same theology. Tax gatherers are despised because they cooperate with unclean Romans. Yet Jesus calls a tax gatherer to share his ministry as a disciple, and sits down at the tax gatherer's table with sinners (Matt. 9:9-13). Jesus spends his life tearing veils, breaking the wall of partition between Jew and Jew, and between Jew and Gentile, brick by brick. (Marcus Borg's work highlights the importance of table fellowship in first-century Judaism.)

Eating

with sinners and tax gatherers, Jesus says, is no violation of Torah. The weighty things of the law are mercy, justice and truth (Matt. 23:23). Torah is God's instrument for bringing the promise of Abram to Jew and Gentile, not an instrument for stroking human pride.

Jesus

is the seed of Abram, the one in whom every promise to Abram—of seed, land, reputation—is fulfilled. Jesus is the seed of Abram, the eschatological head of the last human race. Jesus is the seed of Abram, who like Father Abram, left his father's house to go to a far country that had been promised to him.