

# 4

## **Covenant man goes international**

*(Genesis 14)*

Theodore Roosevelt seemed to be the center of attention wherever he was. He seemed—from what we’re told—full of vim, vigor, and vitality. ‘Gusto’ was his trademark. Once a citizen begged TR not to allow his fighting spirit to drag the United States into war. Roosevelt replied that there was no way he’d allow a war while he was ‘cooped up’ in the White House. His daughter Alice once said that her father wanted to be the bride at every wedding and the corpse at every funeral. He loved to have the world spin around him—and often that seems to have been the case. Abraham was like Teddy Roosevelt in that he became the center of attention in Genesis 14 but unlike him in that he did not seek that attention. Here international politics came to Abram; he was thrust upon the world stage; but it was not something Abram was aching for. Yet we can say that in Genesis 14, covenant man (at least Abram will be ‘covenant man’ after Genesis 15) goes international. But the question for us is: What are we meant to take away from this strange account? I would propose that here in Genesis 14

*Abraham's seed are meant to receive both encouragement and admonition for their life in this world.*

First, the encouragement. Notice **the special attention God's servant receives** in verses 1-16. And in these verses we find a clip of world politics (vv. 1-12) and a case of daring rescue (vv. 13-16).

Let us focus on verses 1-12 for a moment. Many think this is a very old account, and I would agree with them. Observe how old names are updated for a later readership: for example, Bela is 'now' Zoar (v. 2), the Valley of Siddim is the Salt (i.e., Dead) Sea (v. 3), En-mishpat is Kadesh (v. 7) and so on (see too verse 17). We have no explicit confirmation in details, but names like Arioch and Tidal fit the second millennium B.C., the geography makes sense (this is clearly not Peter Pan stuff), and, yes, kings from Mesopotamia really did carry off expeditions to the west like this (cf. K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, 318-23).

It was a revolt by Sodom and her sister cities (the five kings of verse 2) that started everything off. After twelve years of vassalage they revolted and, once the news got back, the four-king alliance led by Chedorlaomer (vv. 1, 5) came to suppress the revolt. Sodom and her sister towns may have been located around the southern end of the Dead Sea. Chedorlaomer and Co. likely came down the Transjordanian highway through the area east of the Jordan where they took out three opposing groups (v. 5), went past the Dead Sea area down to Seir, where they defeated Horites (v. 6), then turned northwest to arrive at Kadesh and trounce Amalekites (v. 7a), and then moved east and a little north to Hazezon-tamar, where they repulsed Amorites and closed in on Sodom and her confederates (v. 7b). (Analogies may not help, but if Chedorlaomer's group came to England, and Oxford, let's say, was where the Sodom group of towns was located, it would be as if the four kings would come down from Northampton to Reading and on to Southampton,

then turn northwest to Bath, before proceeding to Swindon and on to Oxford). I am only guessing, but it may be that Chedorlaomer's army neutralized all these subsidiary groups in order to isolate Sodom and her confederates—there would be no one available to give the Sodom coalition any assistance or to strike Chedorlaomer's troops in the flanks or rear. In any event, verses 10-12 suggest that mopping up Sodom's forces was not difficult. As a side note, the tar pits may have been a refuge for the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah rather than the end of them. The verb translated 'fell' can carry the idea of 'let themselves down'; hence they may have 'hidden out' in the tar pits to avoid capture. Naturally, they would need a shower after that.

One might wonder why these four kings would even want to bother to come all this way for what seems a rather inconsequential revolt. Of course, we cannot be certain, but the south end of the Dead Sea was a chief source of copper, the primary metal for making agricultural tools and weapons as well. And Mesopotamia had almost no metal ores and so had to get them from outside—from far-flung cities that they might keep under tribute to them (see Alfred Hoerth, *Archaeology and the Old Testament*, 96). But the real 'kicker' was that Lot was carted off (v. 12), and so, when he finds out about that, Abram feels compelled to attempt a rescue and so comes on the 'world stage.'

So now let us try to get a grip on the setting. Here are the newsmakers of the era (vv. 1-2), the *Time* magazine 'Man of the Year' types, strutting their stuff and their armies on the big international scene; but all this is *subsidiary* to the real center of interest, Abram (v. 14). The only reason Chedorlaomer, for example, makes the Bible record is because of Abram!

This is not our usual viewpoint. We tend to have the 'Today Show' mentality. We hope we get on camera for a split second, on that big national, early-morning TV show. We're hollering

out where we're from, waving a sign that says 'Columbia, SC,' and doing a starving-for-attention dance on a cold and wet New York City street outside a major television studio. Maybe, we think, the camera will pan our way and show us frantically waving.

Now that is not the view of the text here. Abram is not mentioned here in order to fit him in among the real movers and shakers, the international 'set' of the day. This text does *not* mean to say, 'You see how Abram appeared in the big time once very briefly?' No, no, that is all wrong. No, Chedorlaomer and Co. only appear because *they* happen to be a mere episode in the big story of Abraham. To oversimplify (and distort) a bit: you have world history and significant history, and the latter revolves around the people of God, that is, Abraham's seed. They are the 'main show' and the head knockers of this age are simply background for this show. I want you to get a taste of this in other—and more familiar—Bible passages.

Remember Luke 2:1-4a? *Now it came about in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This enrollment was before that made when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all were going to be enrolled, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, into Judea, to the town of David...* (drawing on Nigel Turner for verse 2). Will Durant tells us that at Augustus' death the Roman empire took in 3,340,000 square miles. He tells us that when Augustus visited Greek Asia in 21 B.C. he was hailed in dedications and orations as 'Savior,' 'Bringer of good tidings,' and 'God the Son of God.' Yet Caesar and his decree are mere background for the real story. And what is that? It's about a carpenter from Nazareth who takes his intended along to Bethlehem and about her first-born son and his feeding trough. Caesar is only a backdrop. Luke 3:1-2 borders on the hilarious; let's set it out clause by clause:

Now in the 15th year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar,  
Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea,  
Herod being tetrarch of Galilee,  
His brother Philip tetrarch of Iturea and the region of  
Trachonitis,  
and Lysanias tetrarch of Abilene,  
Annas and Caiaphas being high priests,  
the word of God came to John the son of Zecharias in  
the wilderness...

For six clauses Luke builds up expectancy, as he pulls up the movers and shakers of the times, who dominate the headlines and get the interviews and fill the tabloids. But they are all a mere prelude to the main and most significant event of the day: the word of God came to John.

We must then get this 'corrected' view, this Bible view that understands that the premier folks of this age are not that earth-shaking. We need a bit of the healthy cynicism of that lady in Macon, Georgia, who once called up her congressman, Bill Stucky, to complain that her garbage had not been picked up. Stucky was a bit miffed that she bothered him about it, so he asked her why she didn't look up the number of her local sanitation department and call there. Back came the replay: 'Well, congressman, quite frankly I didn't want to go up that high!' (Paul Boller, *Congressional Anecdotes*).

Put in right perspective, Chedorlaomer and Amraphel and Washington D. C. and Putin and Beijing and the Pentagon and the United Nations are merely the background of history. God's premier attention is ever on Abraham's family. They are not swallowed up in politics, lost amid scandals, or smothered under the helpless diplomacies and summits of governments and nations. Though they don't make *People* magazine or the evening news, God's mind and his story always seem focused on wherever his people are. So what matters is what happens

among Abram's family. What counts is when a father who belongs to Abram's seed sits down on the edge of his eight-year-old's bed, goes over a Shorter Catechism question and answer with him, illustrates and explains the answer, and then prays with the lad before he puts him to bed. What matters is when two or three of Abram's daughters meet together in one of their kitchens in order to intercede for friends and neighbors—or when a Christian turns in a solid day's work. What's significant is when one of Abram's sons spends twenty hours studying and agonizing over a biblical text and then on Sunday morning stands up and preaches it to thirty-five people—or when a Christian mother spansks her four-year-old for disobedience and then, a few moments later, takes her on her knee and prays for her. All this we infer from the special attention God's servant receives.

Now we come to the admonition: notice in verses 17-24 **the typical dilemma God's servant faces**. Abram went off with his 318 men, plus those of his allies. There may have been upwards of a thousand men in pursuit of the four victorious kings. It's something like 110 miles from Hebron, Abram's base, to what is later known as Dan in the far north of Canaan—and then another forty or so miles from Dan over to the region of Damascus (see vv. 14-15). Abram divides his troops, strikes at night, drives away the enemy and recovers both Lot and loot. On his return he encounters two different kings, the king of Sodom and the king of Salem (probably = Jerusalem). No sooner is the king of Sodom mentioned (apparently cleaned up after the tar pit) than Melchizedek cuts him off:

But Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and  
 wine  
 —he was priest to God Most High.  
 And he blessed him and said:  
 'Blessed be Abram by God Most High,

possessor of heaven and earth;  
 and blessed be God Most High  
 who has surrendered your enemies into your hand.  
 And he gave him a tenth of everything (vv. 18-20).

Melchizedek is mysterious, but he seems to be a king-priest in Jerusalem, one who held on to the knowledge of the true God in the midst of Canaan's religious and moral cesspool. He blesses Abram and blesses God. Then we meet the arrogance and perhaps the disdain of Sodom's king: 'Give me the persons, and take the possessions for yourself' (v. 21). The king of Sodom is trying to direct matters, trying to bring Abram under his authority and sway. But Abram will have none of it—he has already declared his allegiance in his 'tithe' given to Melchizedek. He rejects vassal status toward Sodom. Abram is not the only one who faces this dilemma. Many of his 'family' still stand (and do so again and again) before Sodom and Salem. They face the question, Where is my sufficiency? In the gifts of Sodom or in the bread and wine of Salem? To whom do you belong? The question of discipleship to Sodom or Salem pops up continually.

Matthew Propp always thought he was Matthew Propp until one day when, we might say, he got the props knocked out from under him. He was applying for work in the New Mexico prison system and had to search out his birth certificate. He discovered that the Propps who had mostly raised him were not Propps but Smileys, that they had run off with him when he was fifteen months old when an adoption procedure fell through. He was actually Anthony Russini, and time was when his biological parents had spent tens of thousands of dollars to try to locate him. And so at twenty-two, I suppose Matthew/Anthony had to decide to whom he belonged.

And if you share Abraham's faith and belong to Abraham's family you will face the same alternatives—and not merely at

the beginning of believing life but all along the way. It is simply basic first-commandment stuff—‘You shall have no other gods besides me.’ Sodom is always out looking for lackeys (not disciples), always making deals. Salem is about a God who, as possessor of heaven and earth, is adequate to give all that is needed. And in the end all that matters is whether you go on clinging to the One who offers you bread and wine.