

‘During Lent, each one of us sets out on a journey of discovery as we prepare for Holy Week and Easter. This book summons us to reflect on the ways in which Abraham and Sarah’s journey intertwines with our own, and is an invitation to engage in a new way with these rich and well-loved stories.’

Paula Gooder, Theologian in Residence for the Bible Society

‘It is unusual to focus on an Old Testament figure in Lent, but Christians often think of Lent as a journey, and in this book Abraham’s journey has a distinctly Lenten shape. This faithful and flawed character becomes a congenial and challenging guide. Meg Warner gets us to read Scripture with care and helps us to make the connections with our own lives now. For groups and individuals, this is a great Lent book that accompanies us to Easter and the continuing life of discipleship in the risen Christ.’

The Rt Revd Nicholas Holtam, Bishop of Salisbury

‘With honesty and compassion, Meg Warner leads the reader through Abraham’s story. She interweaves Abraham’s journeying with her own and creates a space in which her readers can do the same. Full of accessible scholarly insight and pastoral wisdom, this book will be a valuable, comforting and challenging resource for Christians looking for a fresh perspective on Lenten journeying.’

Jenni Williams, Tutor in Old Testament, Wycliffe Hall, Oxford

‘Biography meets Abraham meets Lent. In this highly original, delightfully moving Lent book, Meg Warner connects the narrative of Abraham with the drama of all our lives. Accessible, rich and powerful, this is a Lent book that has the potential to change your life.’

Ian S. Markham, Dean and Professor of Theology and Ethics, Virginia Theological Seminary

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ABRAHAM

A journey through Lent



Meg Warner

SPCK

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To R. – fellow-traveller, midwife, greatest joy

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Preface and acknowledgements



This book is the fruit of my journey with Abraham over the last decade and a half. Little did I suspect when Susanne Boorer set me an essay topic about Genesis 22 in 1999 that I'd still be working on that essay more than fifteen years later! The Abraham stories have been at the heart of my academic work over that time, but have also increasingly come to shape and undergird my way of living. I'm grateful both to those who've been influential in my academic journey with Abraham, especially Mark Brett and Howard Wallace, and to those who've helped me to see the resonances of Abraham's story in my own, especially Nigel Wright, Ken Parker and Catherine Hicks.

I owe a huge debt of thanks to Leigh Mackay, Morna Sturrock and all of the women and men who have so generously supported the Morna Sturrock Fellowship, of which I was the first beneficiary at Trinity College Theological School, Melbourne, between 2009 and 2011.

Most of this book was written during a three-month stay at Virginia Theological Seminary where I held the position of Trotter Fellow in early 2015. I am extremely grateful to my students there, to Dean and President Ian Markham, Vice-President for Academic Affairs Melody Knowles and librarian-extraordinaire Mitzi Budde.

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Preface and acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to my commissioning editor at SPCK, Philip Law, who believed in this book and who took a gamble on a new author, and to Juliet Trickey who 'got' what I was setting out to do and who I have to thank for the marvellous cover. Thank you to all of the team at SPCK who have made this process such an easy one.

Finally, heartfelt thanks to my father, John Warner, who instilled in me a love of the stories of the Old Testament from an early age, and my husband, R., who now walks those stories with me and without whom this book could not have been.

Using this book



Each of the six chapters of this book is designed to correspond with a week of Lent. You could simply read the book straight through, but you will probably get most value if you read a single chapter each week during Lent. Each chapter is followed by two sets of questions. For **individual readers** there are questions with a generally personal focus. These questions are designed to stretch you in your personal response to the material presented in the chapter. For those reading the book in **groups** there are questions that are less personal in nature and that address issues of interpretation or practical engagement with the biblical text. Of course, individual readers may choose to read and respond to the questions designed for groups and vice versa. If you are a member of a group your group leader will guide you. You will also find some further recommended reading at the end of the book that will assist you if you want to pursue any of the ideas presented in the book.

1

The call

Genesis 12.1–18

‘In which state did you formerly reside?’

It was November 2013 and I was at Melbourne International Airport, preparing to board a flight to Washington, DC, to join my fiancé at a biblical studies conference in the USA. Washington wasn’t to be my final destination, however. After the conference the two of us would be flying on to London, where he lived and where I would be making my new home prior to our forthcoming marriage. I had spent weeks packing up all my belongings. Nearly everything I owned had been sold or given away. Now all my worldly possessions (apart from twenty boxes, mostly books, still sitting on a Melbourne dockside awaiting shipping) were in two suitcases and a carry-on. The previous fortnight had been a whirl of farewells and packing. Everything had gone remarkably smoothly, until my very last night when I’d found myself physically ill with apprehension and totally unable to sleep.

So it was that, tired and groggy at eight the next morning, having ticked the box on an Australian customs form that said ‘Resident Departing Permanently’, I encountered the question, ‘In which state did you formerly reside?’ The question brought me up with a jolt. Here, for the first time, I was being asked to talk about my home in the past tense. I still had to say farewell at the departures barrier to my friends Davo and Sara who had driven me

to the airport in their more or less reliable 1974 Land Rover, but as far as Customs were concerned I had already left Australia.

I was setting out on a very big journey. I was leaving behind my flat, my job, my family, my friends and my country in order to go and build a new life in the United Kingdom. Washington was just a convenient stopping point for a few days – a chance to get my breath back, to re-calibrate before setting out on the final leg. The real destination was London, where I would have my first experience of marriage and hopefully find work and friends.

In our biblical story for this first week of Lent we meet Abraham, a Babylonian septuagenarian, who is also setting out on a very big journey. Genesis 12 tells us that Abraham was called by God to leave his country, his family and his father's household and travel to a new country that God would show him. Abraham wasn't alone; he was accompanied by his wife Sarah, his nephew Lot and some servants. It is worth noting that Abraham is called 'Abram' at this point in the story, and his wife 'Sarai'. Later on God will give them their new names, so that eventually they will have left not only country, family and household but even their names (and therefore identities) behind!

Your Lent journey

We'll return to Abraham in a moment, but it is important to remind ourselves that the beginning of Lent is also the start of a journey. If your intention is to read this book through Lent, then you are embarking on a journey and taking the first steps towards a new place that God will show you. You may be reading with a group, or you might be reading alone. Either way, you should be prepared to make a journey. It is unlikely that you will find yourself, like Abraham and me, leaving your country and family to travel physically to a new place, but I can't guarantee

it won't happen! But even if your journey isn't the sort that requires suitcases, it is a journey you are setting out on, nonetheless. Who knows where you will be when Easter comes?

This book will be a guide for the journey. For each week of Lent there will be a chapter of this book to read, and some verses from the book of Genesis. At the end of each chapter you will find some questions to help you to think about what you have read.

You may be new to the journey of Lent, or you may have travelled it many times. Either way, it is possible that Abraham will be a new guide for you. Typically, Lent books tend to concentrate on the Gospels, and especially the Passion narratives. Perhaps it may seem odd to you to spend Lent with Old Testament stories. I can guarantee that you will discover that Abraham's story has a distinctly Lenten shape. There are many points at which Abraham's story resonates strongly with the New Testament, and where that happens I will let you know. I hope that you will find that Abraham is a congenial, if challenging, guide and that his story leads you into many of the places you would expect to travel (and some you would not) were you to follow Jesus' path to Golgotha this Lent. In this book you will be offered the chance to learn a little more about the Old Testament, and about Genesis in particular. My primary aim, however, is to help you reflect on the ways in which Abraham's story resembles, resonates with or challenges your own. I will tell you some of my story as we go, in the hope that that will help you to reflect on yours and on how Abraham can be a fellow-traveller with you.

Setting out

Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you.

The call: Genesis 12.1–18

I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

(Gen. 12.1–3)

Our text this week is Genesis 12 and the well-known story of Abram/Abraham's call. You have probably heard many times about Abraham's extraordinary trust and how he left his home to travel to a place he'd never been to, at the request of a God he'd never before encountered. You may be thinking that you could never match that kind of faith, or that Abraham's call sounds like one you could never imagine receiving in your busy, twenty-first-century life. How would you even recognize such a call?

Let's look a little more closely at the story. I wonder whether you have ever noticed: when, in Genesis 12.1, God calls Abraham to leave his country, kin and father's house, Abraham has already left! In order to see this, we need to read back a little. We first hear about Abraham and his family at the end of Genesis 11. In v. 31 Terah, Abraham's father, takes Abraham and Sarah and their nephew Lot and leaves their home in 'Ur of the Chaldeans' (in modern-day Iraq) to go to the land of Canaan. This happens before God calls to Abraham! Half-way through their journey, however, the family reaches Haran and settles there. It is a little like my journey to London that had a halfway stop in Washington (except that Abraham probably didn't have to read a conference paper!). The difference is that Terah and his family stay in Haran and never finish their journey. Why not? There are many things that we are never told. We don't know why Terah wanted to leave Ur, why he wanted to go to Canaan or why he decided to stop and settle in Haran. The text tells us that Terah died in Haran

(Genesis 11.32), so perhaps Terah's health was the reason for staying.

It is only at this point that God's call to Abraham comes. Abraham's call, then, is not a call to leave his first home, but to leave the halfway place where he and his family had settled. This doesn't take anything away from the fact that Abraham was called by God, but it does make a difference to how we might understand his call. We can now see in it a mix of human plans and God's plans. Ironically, God is calling Abraham to do exactly the thing that Abraham had already set out to do before he got side-tracked! Once God calls Abraham, however, the journey to Canaan takes on a whole new significance. Canaan is no longer simply a destination that Terah chose and failed to reach. Canaan becomes the destination that God has chosen for Abraham, *and* Abraham becomes the person whom God has chosen for Canaan.

This gives us a new way of thinking about Abraham's call. And it helps us, I believe, in thinking about discerning our own calls. If we are waiting, literally, for a bolt out of the blue to tell us to 'go' or 'do' or 'be', we may find ourselves disappointed or confused. I suspect that for most ordinary people, like Abraham and like me, God's call can be discerned only in the context of a sort of confused mess of our own plans and those of God for us. Each time I have found myself trying to discern a call from God, I have tried to tease out strands of my own desires or frustrations from other strands of what might be God speaking to me. Inevitably, I eventually give up and realize that the two cannot be neatly separated. The two wills, mine and God's, are inextricably bound. Even though I want to know that the 'urge' or 'push' I am experiencing towards some new direction is from God, I need to acknowledge that some of it also belongs to me. This does not mean, of course, that some of it isn't from God too! As a result, it is extremely

important that I get as much clarity as I can about my own desires, fears or unacknowledged agendas, in order to work out whether the ‘urge’ I feel is simple self-seeking. I may not be able to discern clearly which desires are mine and which are God’s for me, but it is important to do my best. A spiritual ‘director’ or ‘guide’, my parish priest or just a wise friend can be a vital sounding-board in this regard.

Another thing that I generally realize, on each of these occasions, is something that you might also find. You may realize that you are already somewhere along the way to the place where God is calling you. You have already started out. Perhaps you’ve not got very far. Perhaps, like Abraham, you may have become side-tracked, so that you have ‘settled’ prematurely in your own version of Haran. Perhaps you’ve even started to run in the opposite direction – like Jonah setting out for Tarshish (in the far west) when he’d been called to go to Nineveh (in the far east)!

At the beginning of each new Lent we are challenged to discern where it might be that God is calling us. There may be a major piece of discernment that you are currently engaged in, or it may be a smaller-scale (but no less real) discernment about where God wants you to ‘travel’ over Lent. One of the things that you share with Abraham in this regard is that *you have already set out*. Whether or not you know it, the fact that you have begun to read this book shows that you have already left Ur. You might not have travelled very far, or you might be well on your way to Canaan. You might have got part way to Haran and decided that it would be safer/easier/more comfortable just to stay there. This will be part of your discernment. If, indeed, you find that you have become marooned in Haran, part of your discernment will involve working out exactly what it is that Haran represents for you, and whether you want to stay there.

'I want to be a priest!'

When I flew out of Melbourne for London in 2013 I did have a sense that I was responding to a call. But it is also true that I'd first travelled *to* Melbourne (from Perth, in Western Australia) in order to pursue a call many years earlier. I had given up a lucrative and secure job teaching law at the University of Western Australia and begun theological studies. Even though my parents had viewed this development with some dismay I discovered that I loved the study of theology, and over the first year or two a suspicion that I might be called to ordination as a priest began to grow. I also became aware that I *wanted* to be ordained rather badly. I talked to everybody I could. Some people, including my spiritual director, were dubious. Others encouraged me. I explored every 'lead' to try and get a sense of this vocation, and while some seemed to suggest I might be on the right track, other leads proved to be dead ends.

I had a particular problem in all of this, and it related to my parents. My father is an Anglican priest and he and my mother had only recently returned to my city after having served in a parish on the other side of the country for several years. I adored my parents and it was wonderful to have them back, but it didn't take too long before I began to realize that I had become used to their being away. My faith had altered in that time and I had got used to being the only 'Warner' in the diocese! I didn't know whether I could cope with ordination training in a city where my dad had been such a presence. So I hit on the idea of seeking ordination in the Diocese of Melbourne (which just happened to be on the opposite side of the country). My parents were devastated, but I was determined. So I left. I moved to Melbourne, resumed my theological studies and applied to be ordained.

Six months later I had to acknowledge that in some respects, at least, I had been wrong. Although my study was going well,

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