

## Abram and Melchizedek get in sync - Genesis 14:11-24<sup>1</sup>

**Before the lesson:** Make copies of the handout, “Religious Syncretism” for use in the Information session of this lesson.

**Fellowship Question:** (Use one of these to break the ice, begin some discussion, and lead into the study):

Suppose you have a visitor from another culture with you for Christmas, what is one thing you would want the person to experience as part of the “typical American Christmas?”

If you put up a Christmas tree, when do you put it up and take it down?

### **Information:**

[Although this lesson uses Christmas rituals as an illustration of syncretism, it may be taught at any time of the year. However, with a little research, you will find other illustrations of syncretism in the Christian religion within other celebrations such as Easter, if you are teaching this lesson closer to that season.]

Genesis 14 begins in a very unusual way. We have the first mention of war in the Bible and we have Abram as a victorious military leader.

We will not read the first dozen verses because all the strange names can distract us from the narrative. Just know that there were two teams of allies who fought three battles against one another. Team A won the first two battles. As part of the spoils of victory, they took residents of Sodom to be their slaves. One of those residents was Lot, Abram’s nephew. That’s where we will begin our study.

- Have a class member read Genesis 14:11-16.

How is Abram identified?

“Abram the Hebrew: Only here is he given this designation. Although scholars have argued whether ‘Hebrew’ is an ethnic or social term or even the name for a warrior class, it is clear that it is invoked only in contexts when Abraham and his descendants stand in relation to members of other national groups.”<sup>2</sup>

Two kings now come to meet with Abram.

- Have a class member read Genesis 14:17-20 and 21-24.

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<sup>1</sup> This lesson is copyrighted by Dr. Rick Jordan, Great Bible Teachers, Inc, 2023. More lessons may be found at [greatbibleteachers.com](http://greatbibleteachers.com).

<sup>2</sup> Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 60.

Before we get into the theological issues, let's look at the cultural dynamics. What differences do you see between Melchizedek, the king of Salem, and the unnamed king of Sodom?

- Melchizedek is from Salem – which means “peace.” This city would later probably be the city called Jerusalem. He seems to be the most friendly of the two kings. He brings bread and wine.
- The king of Sodom shows no hospitality. He brings nothing. This inhospitable characteristic seems to have been in the DNA of Sodom.
- Melchizedek will offer a blessing over Abram. No blessing comes from Sodom's king.
- Melchizedek accepts a tithe from Abram. Sodom's king seems to want much more.

Besides being a king, what other role does Melchizedek have? (priest of the God Most High)

We can only speculate about Melchizedek's faith and his role as a priest. The god (God?) he serves is named in Hebrew, *El Elyon*.

“El is the proper name of the sky god in the Canaanite pantheon, and Elyon is evidently a distinct associated deity, though the two appear as a compound name. But the two terms are also plain Hebrew words that mean ‘God the Most High,’ and elsewhere are used separately or (once) together as designations of the God of Israel. Whatever Melchizedek's theology, Abram elegantly co-opts him for monotheism by addressing *El Elyon* in its orthodox Israelite sense (verse 22) when he addresses the king of Sodom.”<sup>3</sup>

“Elyon may be a deity distinct from El; in the Hebrew, the meaning of *El Elyon* is ‘God Most High.’ Abraham responds to the priest's blessing by bringing God's two names together: ‘I raise my hand in oath to the Lord [Yahweh], the Most High God [El], (14:19, 22). Even that far back in his journey, Abraham had been able to incorporate, cleverly and reverentially, the personal God Yahweh with the foreigner's God, El Elyon...God is one, but God appears in differing aspects for specific persons in specific circumstances for specific reasons, all of which could be understood only within the fuller context of the story.”<sup>4</sup>

Religious syncretism is not an idea we talk about a lot. We may not be comfortable with this idea. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, syncretism is, “the combination of different forms of belief or practice”<sup>5</sup>

We believe, with Abram, that there is only one God. Is it possible that Abram and Melchizedek were worshiping the same God?

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<sup>3</sup> Alter, 61.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Borgman, *Genesis: The Story We Haven't Heard* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 74.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/syncretism>. Retrieved June 15, 2023.

Is the purity of faith possible when we merge our beliefs with the rituals or dogmas of other faiths?

How do we decide where to “draw the line” between our religion and other religions? When is it alright to incorporate another religion’s verbiage or traditions into ours?

- Distribute the handout, “Religious Syncretism.”

“This text can be helpful in helping persons understand the strange and powerful ways of syncretism. While syncretism is indeed problematic, it is also a way in which functions are taken from other gods and reassigned to the God of Israel as an enhancement of his glory.... In the hands of Israel, this dual construction dares to claim that the God who calls Abraham and gives Isaac is indeed the God worshiped in Canaan as the God of fertility even though the Canaanites did not know his true name. The Canaanites worshiped him as ‘Most High God,’ but it was the liberated Israelites who knew his name.”<sup>6</sup>

How is the religious syncretism of Melchizedek’s faith and Abram’s faith “an enhancement of [God’s] glory”?

“In a sense, all faiths are syncretistic, that is, all religions are transformed as they pass through different cultures. As new faith traditions interact with new social environments, both the culture and the religion are transformed so both forces can coexist.... One thing is certain: both the religion and culture never remain the same – both become new expressions.”<sup>7</sup>

What enables syncretism in a religion? [Use the handout, “Religious Syncretism.”]

1. Imperialism – an empire/colonist takes over the country and forces its faith on the natives
2. Commerce – as trade routes flow, so do the ideas and religions
3. Exoticism – a fascination with religions on the edges/outside of the mainstream and a desire to incorporate ideas, rituals, holidays, etc.
4. Pluralism – an openness to tolerate another’s beliefs and rituals
5. Absorption /Translationism – “this” means “that”; an adaptation/absorption of a new idea, ritual, etc.

Many of our Christmas traditions are “pagan” traditions that have been “baptized” and usurped. Can you name some of these? (“Christmas” tree, mistletoe, holly and ivy, Saturnalia holiday, etc.)

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<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Atlanta, GA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 136.

<sup>7</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *Genesis, Belief Theological Commentary on the Bible* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 165.

Is this what Abram was doing with this name/image of Melchizedek's god?

“It is odd that a Canaanite cult is presented in such a positive light within the biblical text, especially when we recognize that superiors blessed subordinates, who in turn provide tithes to those who are of a higher status. The giving of tithes was not a goodwill offering but recognition of one's superiors.”<sup>8</sup>

Sometimes we absorb and sometimes we adsorb another's culture and faith.

*From Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1988. Print):*

*“Absorb.” Def. 1: to take in and make part of an existing whole. Def. 2a: To suck up or take up such as: a sponge absorbs water, charcoal absorbs gas, and plant roots absorb water.*

*“Adsorption.” Def. 1: The adhesion in an extremely thin layer of molecules (as of gases, solutes, or liquids) to the surfaces of solid bodies or liquids with which they are in contact.*

Abram absorbs the new name for God (El Elyon) and the new description of God (Maker of Heaven and Earth) into his own monotheistic religion. It is now an integral part of the Jewish (and later Christian) faith.

- Have class members read Psalm 115:15; 121:1-2; 124:7-8; 134:1-3; 146:3-6.

“This formula [Yahweh, Maker of Heaven and Earth] has become a standard liturgical one in Israel. In none of these is there a concern about how the world came to be. Rather each of them speaks about the present reality of the same God who makes a difference now. In three of them the formula carries with it the notion of ‘help.’ The other two uses do not mention help. But they speak of blessing, the power for life. ... These verses in chapter 14 invite us to take creation faith out of the arena of ‘origins’ and see it as a source for life, buoyancy, and joy in the trials of the day.”<sup>9</sup>

“The effects of Canaanite and Persian culture on the evolution of the Hebrew faith have been documented in over a century of scholarly work. Mitchell Dahood's innovative interpretation of the psalms is based on his mastery of the Ugaritic texts discovered at Ras Shamrah in 1929. These documents have led to a veritable knowledge explosion about Canaanite mythology and religion. With regard to the Hebrew psalms, Dahood concludes that ‘Israelite poetry continues the poetic tradition of the Canaanites, borrowing Canaanite poetic techniques, parallelism, vocabulary, imagery, [mythology], etc.’”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> De La Torre, 165.

<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann, 137.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.webpages.uidaho.edu/ngier/syncretism.htm>, quoting Dahood, *The Anchor Bible: Psalms*, Vol. 3, p. xxii.

This is not unique to the Old Testament. In the New Testament, we also have examples of religious syncretism.

- Have a class member read Acts 17:22-31.

“The struggle is illuminated by the sophisticated theological assertion in the mouth of Paul (Acts 17:22-31). There Paul’s argument is that the ‘unknown God’ is now known. He is not an idol to be manipulated but is a Lord who compels repentance....it is Abraham in response who discloses the true name. It is only Abraham and not the priest of Salem who knows the name of God.”<sup>11</sup>

The Church, from its earliest days, had to deal with what was essential, what was non-essential, and how those with different beliefs should be treated. As the five forces of synchronism ebb and flow, the Church continues to struggle, to choose, and to evolve.

In our personal journeys of faith, it is the same. Forces (cultural, political, social, spiritual, etc.) occur that invite or force us to reexamine our beliefs. We then release some, absorb some, and adsorb some.

**Transformational Exercise:** On the back of your handout, take some time to journal on these two questions: What are non-negotiables for your faith? What is an example of synchronism that you have in your faith journey?

[Invite class members to share their reflections on the two questions above. Close in a prayer something like this: *God, your ways are greater than our ways. Your thoughts are greater than our thoughts. Many people who seek you find you to be different than we found you. Give us the wisdom we need to know what is appropriate to adapt from other seekers of truth and love. Amen.*]

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<sup>11</sup> Brueggemann, 136, 137.

## Religious Syncretism

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### Absorb Vs. Adsorb

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