

## THE PATRIARCHS (Genesis 12-50)

The primeval history climaxed with the humans' desperate need for salvation, and the patriarchal history is the answer to this need. God called a single man and his family to begin the story of human reclamation. While Genesis chapters 1-11 give narratives of the origins, chapters 12-50 provide the stories about the direct ancestry of the nation Israel. Four primary characters figure in this history, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. Of these, the first three are usually called "the patriarchs," that is, the male clan leaders who became the fathers of the nation Israel.<sup>1</sup> Like the accounts of the origins of the universe and the human race, the stories about the patriarchs also are punctuated by genealogical records of which there are five:

- Account of Abraham's Family (11:27b--25:12)
- Account of Isaac's Life (25:13-19a)
- Account of Isaac's Family (25:19b--36:1)
- Account of Esau's Life (36:2-9)
- Account of Jacob's Family (36:10--37:2)

In addition to these genealogical records, the compiler of Genesis rounds off the book with the Joseph stories, explaining how the descendants of Jacob migrated from Palestine to settle in Egypt. These stories were deeply significant for the nation of slaves that was to be redeemed from Egypt, an emancipation described in the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy. Though the events concerning the patriarchs occurred centuries earlier than the exodus, they gave a sense of unity, longevity and manifest destiny to the nation. Of particular importance is the fact that when God

would call the nation out of Egypt to go to the land of Canaan, this call was not to some unexplored frontier. Rather, it was a return to the ancestral home of the patriarchs, a home that God had promised to their descendants.

With the patriarchal stories, the reader of Genesis enters a new era of sacred history, a history that now begins to merge more directly with the known history of the ancient Near East in the late Middle Bronze Age. In this new era, the God who created the universe but who was compelled

Ages of Antiquity in Genesis		
Palestine	Egypt	Mesopotamia
<b>Early Bronze Age</b> EB I (3200-2800) EB II (2800-2600) EB III (2600-2350)  EB IV (2350-2200) <b>Middle Bronze Age</b> MB I (2200-2000)  MB II (2000-1550)	<b>Early Dynastic Period</b> (2920-2575)  <b>Old Kingdom</b> (2575-2134)   <b>1<sup>st</sup> Intermediate Period</b> (2134-2040) <b>Middle Kingdom</b> (2040-1640)	<b>Early Dynastic Period</b> (2700-2400) <b>Akkad, Ur III</b> (2400-2000)   <b>Old Babylonian/Old Assyrian</b> (2000-1600)

<sup>1</sup>The term "patriarch" can be applied to a rather broad range of ancient individuals, such as David (Ac. 2:29) and various leaders between Abraham and Daniel (1 Maccabees 2:51-60). However, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are the patriarchs *par excellence*.

by his own righteousness to judge it for its violence and evil took the initiative to win back to himself his wayward children beginning with a single individual, Abram of Ur.

### God's Covenantal Promises to Abraham

The primary theme of the patriarchal narratives emerges in God's call and covenantal promises to Abram. From Ur in lower Mesopotamia, God directed Abram to Haran, in northwest Mesopotamia, and then to Canaan (11:31-32; 12:4-5). Though Abram was originally a pagan (cf. Josh. 24:2), God spoke to him, calling him and giving him a great promise (12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17). The substance of this promise, which was reemphasized and detailed throughout his life, contained three prominent features: blessing for the nations of the world (12:3; cf. 26:4; 28:14), multiplied posterity, and land in Canaan for his descendants. These promises combine to form one of the most impressive and far-reaching divine declarations in the entire Bible, for they defined the foundation of Israel's faith in the OT, and they carried implications which were only to be fully developed in the faith of the NT. The legal form after which these promises were fashioned was the ancient Near Eastern covenant.

#### COVENANTS

*Covenants were the primary legal structures of the ancient Near East. These binding contracts were sometimes established by the ritual of dividing an animal, the two contracting parties vowing their faithfulness to the covenant agreement as they stood between the halved corpses. In the case of Abraham, the animals were divided, and God, in the form of a smoking fire pot and blazing torch, passed between the carcasses to confirm his covenantal promises (15:7-21).*

The life cycle of Abram revolves around the fulfillment of the covenantal promises. There were serious threats to be overcome, not the least of which was that Abram and his wife were childless. These threats and God's fulfillment of the covenant promises in spite of seemingly insurmountable circumstances, began the building of a relationship between God and Abram on the basis of faith (15:5-6). In his nomadic travels, Abram pitched tents (denoting temporary residency, cf. Heb. 11:9-10) but he also built altars (denoting permanency). The places where he built altars would become sacred sites in the later

history of the Israelites after they came into the land. At these sites, God continued to reaffirm his covenant promises.

From the beginning, the compiler of Genesis juxtaposes God's promises alongside Abram's circumstances. Abram was to become a great nation, but his wife, Sarai, was sterile (11:30). The land of Canaan was to belong to Abram's descendants, but the Canaanites occupied it (12:6b). When Sarai was almost taken into the harem of Pharaoh in Egypt, God intervened to protect her as the future mother of the covenant son (12:10-20). When Abram generously allowed his nephew to settle in the choicest areas of the Jordan Valley, while he himself turned toward the rugged hill country, God reaffirmed to Abram the promise of land (13:5-18). When Abram contemplated the adoption of a slave in order to gain an heir, God spoke to him that his heir was to come from the sperm of his own body. In fact, his progeny would become so numerous that they would rival the number of stars in the sky (15:1-5). When, at Sarai's suggestion, Abram had a child by a slave-wife (16), God appeared to him and explained that the promised son would be born through his free wife, Sarai (17:15-16, 19), even though Abram was now ninety-nine (17:1) and Sarai was eighty-nine (17:17). God gave Abram a sign of the covenant, the ritual act of circumcision for all 8-day old male sons in his household, and he even changed Abram's name to Abraham (from *Exalted Father* to

*Father of a Crowd*). He changed Sarai's name to Sarah (= *Princess*) to further mark his promise. The name of the covenant son was to be Isaac (= *He Laughs*). Even in her old age, Sarah was endangered by the desire of a local city-state king who wished to include her in his harem, but once again, God intervened to protect his promise (20). Finally, when Abraham was about a hundred and Sarah was about ninety, the promised son was born, just as God had said (21:1-7).

The test of faith in God's promise was not over yet, however. There still was the problem of Abraham's first-born slave-son (21:8-21), which necessitated God's explanation that Isaac, the son of promise, was the true heir (21:12). Even more challenging, God tested Abraham by commanding him to sacrifice his promised son as a holocaust in the land of Moriah (22:1-2). At the beginning, God had called Abraham to cut off his past (12:1). Now he challenged him to cut off his future. Yet Abraham's faith did not waver (22:8), and at the last possible moment, God stayed the execution (22:9-18). Abraham's faith had proved genuine in this final test (22:12)! This event marks the beginning of substitutionary sacrifice, the death of an animal in place of the death of an individual, and this meaning would carry on into the later books of the Torah and the whole sacrificial system.

#### **PATRIARCHAL LIFE**

*Many scholars put Abraham at about 2000 BC. A good deal about the surrounding culture in Mesopotamia can be filled out by the archaeological discoveries of vast cuneiform libraries in places like **Ebla** (in modern Syria), **Nuzi** (in modern Iraq near the Tigris) and **Mari** (in modern Iraq on the Euphrates). These ancient documents provide information about social customs, inheritance rights, primogeniture, slave adoption, slave wives, the rights of free women, and government administration. Such information illuminates and explains some of the more curious stories in the Genesis record.*

*In general, the patriarchs are described as semi-nomadic tent-dwellers, even though Abram originally came from a sophisticated urban center. It is possible that Abram was a merchant trader, given the size of his retinue (14:14). The patriarchs dwelt in woven goat-hair tents with soil floors and straw mats. Water, wine, and milk were stored in skins; bread was cooked daily by heating a flat stone and placing the dough on it while it was still hot. The flat cake would then be turned in order to cook the other side. Staples of diet included meat, figs, grapes, dates, bread (often unleavened), and milk from camels, goats, or cows. Grain was ground into flour with a stone mortar and pestle or with a small millstone.*

#### **The Isaac Stories**

One of Abraham's last duties was to find a wife for his son, Isaac. He determined not to marry his son to a Canaanite (24:3), but rather, Isaac must marry someone from his own clan (24:4). A trusted slave was commissioned to find the young woman, and Rebekah was brought back from northwest Mesopotamia to Canaan to be married to Isaac (24). Again, the central issue is the covenantal promise and the protection of the covenantal heir. Alas, Isaac and Rebekah, like Abraham and Sarah before them, were childless (25:21a). Nevertheless, because of God's intervention, they had twins, Jacob and Esau (25:21b-22). Each of these sons was to sire a nation (25:23). The younger of the twins was to be the covenant son (25:23b), though God's choice created great difficulty, since it flew in the face of ancient Near Eastern customs of primogeniture. Nevertheless, the rights of primogeniture were surrendered by the older son (25:27-34). In time, even though by subterfuge, the patriarchal blessing passed to Jacob, the covenant son (27). Still, the life of the covenant son was in serious danger because of Esau's sworn vengeance to kill his brother (27:41).

### The Jacob Stories

Jacob's life, also, was an arena of challenge for the covenant promises. His difficulties in acquiring the wife he loved (29:16-30), and the birth of twelve sons and a daughter by his two free wives and two slave-wives (29:31--30:24; 35:16-18), raised the question about the heir to the covenant promises. In the cases of both Abraham and Isaac, only one son was to be the heir to the covenant promises. In the case of Jacob, however, the covenant promises passed to all his sons without distinction (35:11-15). Though there were still formidable threats to Jacob's family, including the tension between Jacob and his wives' relatives (30:25--31:21), God protected him (31:22-24). When Jacob traveled back to Canaan, he faced the threat of Esau's sworn blood vengeance (32:3-8). In Jacob's distress, God in the form of an angel confronted him at Peniel, wrestling with him and blessing him (32:22-32). Finally, when Jacob and Esau were reconciled, Jacob knew that God had intervened, for he said that seeing the face of Esau was like seeing the face of God (33:1-10). Near the close of his life, God appeared once again to Jacob (35:9-15), changing his name to Israel (= *He Struggles with God*) and repeating to him the covenant promises made to Abraham.

### The Joseph Stories

In the Joseph stories, the covenant promises ceased to be individualized as they had been previously. As before, however, the central concern is the protection of the covenant promises through the protection of the covenant family. The exile of Joseph by his brothers (37, 39-40) and the possibility of Judah dying without posterity (38) were significant threats. An even greater threat was the possible extinction of the family of Jacob due to the severity of a famine in Canaan (42:1-2). God elevated Joseph, the exiled brother, to vizier in Egypt (41), and through him, he saved the lives of his brothers and their families (42-47). In the end, Joseph recognized that his betrayal by his brothers and his exile into Egypt had been used by God for the greater purpose of preserving the covenant family (45:4-11; 50:20-21). The character of salvation, featuring God's sovereign superintendence of history, is captured in Joseph's words: "You sold me" but "God sent me" (45:4-8).

The Joseph narratives conclude with Jacob's blessing of Joseph's sons, Ephraim and Manasseh (48), and his prophetic words over the entire group of the twelve sons (49). These blessings and pronouncements were prophetic for the future of the nation. Ephraim would eventually rise to be the prominent tribe in the north of Canaan, while Judah would rise to be the prominent tribe in the south of Canaan. The Book of Genesis closes with the family of Jacob living in Egypt but anticipating the trek back to Canaan, the land of promise (50:24-26).

At the end of Genesis, the reader is now ready for the most important redemptive event in the Old Testament, the exodus from Egypt. The pattern of salvation-history is that God bends history to accomplish his purposes, and this theme of divine sovereignty over history will be played out again and again in both Testaments.

#### ISRAEL IN EGYPT

*Biblical scholars usually suggest that Joseph entered Egypt during the Hyksos Period (ca. 1700-1550 BC). The Hyksos seized control of Egypt during a time of weakness, and like Joseph, they were not native Egyptians but came from Semitic, Hurrian, and Hittite stock. (The name "Hyksos" means "foreigners.") That Joseph was able to rise quickly to prominence may have been due to his Semitic background. At the same time, putting Joseph in the Hyksos Period helps explain the intriguing statement in Exodus 1:8 that a new pharaoh came to power who "knew not Joseph." This may well refer to the change of power at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty that succeeded the Hyksos.*