

The Patriarchs of Israel

Week 1

Introduction

A definition

The forefathers of the people of Israel, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph and his brothers, whose stories are told in Genesis 12—50, are the *Patriarchs* intended for our discussion.

I. Structure of the Patriarchal Narratives

The story of the patriarchs of Israel as set forth in Genesis 12—50 is structured by the second series of five occurrences of the formula, “These are the generations [descendants or stories] of ...” (the first five occurrences of the formula structure Genesis 1—11), as follows:

Division	Introducing Narrative	Introducing Genealogy
The Terah Cycle 11:27 \/ 25:18	-----> 11:27 Terah's story (Abraham and Lot)	-----> 25:12 Ishmael and his descendants
The Isaac Cycle 25:19 \/ 37:1	-----> 25:19 Isaac's story (Jacob and Esau)	-----> 36:1, 9 Esau and his descendants
The Jacob Cycle 37:2 \/ 50:26	-----> 37:2 Jacob's story (Joseph and his brothers)	

Note how the major divisions that can be discerned on the basis of content are set off by this recurring formula: each of the cycles is introduced as the story of the father of the principal character(s) of that section, e.g., Abraham's life account is introduced as the story of Terah (11:27), Jacob's life account as the story of Isaac (25:19), and the long account of Joseph as the story of Jacob (37:2). This is probably best explained by the highly patriarchal nature of Israelite society. Even though the major content of the narrative concerns the sons, it is properly the story of the patriarch because he is still functioning as the head of the family; it is *his* story because it is *his* family. It should also be noted that each of the two cycles of stories, those of Abraham and Jacob, closes with a genealogical section (introduced by the same formula) that brings to a conclusion the role of the secondary character of that section: Ishmael at the end of the account of Abraham (25:12-18) and Esau at the end of the account of Jacob (36:1-43). Finally, this structure reveals the secondary importance of the role of Isaac in the patriarchal traditions, for no separate cycle of stories deals with him. (The “Isaac Cycle” deals with Jacob and Esau.)

II. Theme and Theology of the Patriarchal Narratives

A. Promise

After a transitional passage consisting of an expanded or annotated genealogy, which gives very few (but important) familial facts (11:27-32), the major theme of the patriarchal narratives is given at the very beginning in the call and election of Abraham. Genesis 12:1-3 sets forth the basic elements of the promise to the patriarchs and is of programmatic significance for the nature and purpose of the stories of the patriarchs that follow. Their theme throughout is the progress, the vicissitudes, and the partial fulfillment of those promises that here stand like a title or heading at their beginning.

Although numerous elements have been isolated from the various formulations of the promise, three are prominent in 12:1-3: the promise of blessing (vv. 2, 3), the promise of posterity (“a great nation,” v. 2), and the promise of land (v. 1).

1. *Blessing.* The theme of God's blessing reverberates through the following narratives. It is sometimes stated independently (e.g., 35:9; 48:3), but most often it is connected with the promises of posterity (17:16, 20f.; 22:17; 26:24; 28:3) and of land (26:3; 28:4). An important corollary of this blessing of God is that through the patriarchal line blessing will come upon humankind in general (12:3; 26:4; 28:14). It is at this point that the patriarchal theme is most closely tied to the universal prehistory of Genesis 1—11, for, in the creation ordinances (1:28) and in their restatement after the flood (9:1), God blesses human kind and commands them to be fruitful and fill the earth.

2. *Posterity and Land.* When the significance of these two great promises in the call of Abraham has been perceived, the point of the narrative flow becomes transparent. Abraham is to become a great nation (12:2), but Sarah is barren (11:30); the land of Canaan belongs to his descendants (12:1, 7), but the Canaanites now occupy it (12:6b). Right at the beginning the narrator consciously juxtaposes God's promise and Abraham's circumstances. The whole great promise of innumerable descendants is reduced to the single but staggering question: will Sarah bear Abraham a son? This question is the overarching, all-consuming interest of chapters 12—21. The promise is stated in the most extravagant way: Abraham's descendants are to be as the dust of the earth (13:16), as numerous as the stars in heaven (15:5). Abraham and Sarah, childless, attempt stratagems to fulfill the promise: he adopts a slave born in his own house (15:2f.); Sarah, to protect her position as his wife, provides her maid Hagar as a secondary wife, through which union Ishmael is born (ch. 16). But each of these attempts meets with God's promise of a son through Abraham and Sarah (15:4; 17:18f.). Finally, when old age makes the promise seem impossible in human terms, “the Lord visited Sarah as He had said” (21:1) and Isaac is born. Even the haunting narrative of the sacrifice of Isaac (ch. 22) relates to the same theme: Abraham is called to an obedience that jeopardizes the promise should he fail, but that, by demanding Isaac's life, also jeopardizes the promise should he carry out his awful instructions.

The Isaac cycle (relating mainly the story of Jacob and Esau), 25:19—37:1, resonates with the same theme. It begins with the account of the birth of Jacob and Esau (25:21-26). Their destiny and story are foreshadowed in two ways; first, by the oracle to Rebekah (v. 23), which reveals that it is two *nations* that struggle in her womb and that the younger shall supplant the elder; second, by the following brief but pregnant account of Esau's sale of his birthright to Jacob (vv. 27-34). Immediately thereafter the specific promises given to Abraham in 12:1-3 are repeated to Isaac in 26:2-5. The long story that follows – the endangering of the ancestress (26:6-11), Jacob's theft of Esau's blessing (ch. 27), the resulting fraternal rivalry that endangers the life of the heir of the promise (27:41-45), the barrenness of Rachel and the rivalry between her and Leah to produce sons for Jacob (29:31—30:24), and especially the specific reaffirmation of the Abrahamic promises to Jacob at Bethel on his way out of the land of promise (28:13-15) and again at the same place on his return (35:9-12) – all these events reveal that the central theme here also is the fulfillment or non-fulfillment of the promises of land and of posterity.

The Jacob cycle, whose main content is the extended and carefully constructed narrative of Joseph, is different in form from the Terah and Isaac cycles of stories but relates to the same theme. It begins immediately with Joseph's dreams (37:5-11), which once again foreshadow the ascendancy of the younger over his elder brothers. The long story that follows relates how these dreams do indeed come true, as Jacob seems to have suspected they would (37:11b). Whatever other lessons it teaches, however, its present meaning expressly relates to the preservation of the expanding people of the promise: it is Joseph himself who knows that God sent him ahead to preserve for his family "a remnant on earth" and "many survivors" (45:5-8), and that, though his brothers intended evil, God meant it for good, to preserve alive many people (50:20).

Thus the patriarchal period is supremely the time of the promise. But it is a promise that is strangely, almost perversely, postponed. The vision may be of descendants like the dust of the ground (13:16), the stars of the heaven (15:5), or the sand of the sea (22:17), but the reality is Abraham's long vigil for one son, Jacob's long exile for fear of his life, and at the end only seventy people (46:27). The land is to belong to them and their descendants, but they wander like resident aliens through the "land of their sojourning" (17:8; 28:4; 37:1; 47:9), which is owned by the Canaanites (12:6b; 13:7b).

The only land they ever possessed was one field for a burial plot (23:17-20) and another for an altar (33:19f.). The experience of Abraham presages the whole patriarchal story, for he arrives in the land (12:5) only to walk straight through it, out the other side, and down into Egypt (12:10). And so, at the end of the patriarchal period, through the beautifully told story of Joseph, the patriarchal family are no longer even sojourners in the land. They have removed to Egypt. Indeed, it is in this way that these narratives are closely tied to what follows, for the promise has not been realized and the goal has not been reached. The fulfillment of the promises of land and of posterity will be realized only by the dramatic events of the Exodus and Conquest that follow, as the text itself frequently sets forth (e.g., Exod. 6:4-8).

B. Covenant

The chief means by which God set up and normalized a relationship between Himself and the patriarchs was His Covenant. A *covenant* is the establishment of a particular relationship or the commitment to a particular course of action, not naturally existing, which is given sanction by an oath normally sworn in a solemn ceremony of ratification.

God's covenant with the patriarchs is established with Abraham in two passages, Genesis 15:7-21 and 17:1-21. In Genesis 15 the covenant is sealed and ratified by God in a solemn and mysterious ceremony in which God places Himself under oath by passing between the halves of sacrificed animals in the awe-inspiring form of a flaming torch and a smoking furnace, ominous symbols also used in magical ritual. Here God condescends to place Himself symbolically under a curse in order to affirm to Abraham the certainty of the promises He has made. Although using somewhat different vocabulary and ideas, chapter 17 also sets forth the covenant with Abraham, but it stresses primarily the promise of posterity (17:4-6), while chapter 15 centered on the promise of land, and it adds the requirement of circumcision, the sign of the covenant. Important to stress is that, in this covenant, it is God who takes the oath. Nothing is required of Abraham (circumcision is the *sign* of the covenant, 17:11). In this way the Abrahamic covenant differs from that with Moses in Exodus 20. In the covenant with Abraham it is *God* who lays Himself under obligation; whereas in the Mosaic covenant it is *Israel*, the recipient of the covenant, which takes the oath and is thereby placed under stringent stipulations.

C. Faith and Righteousness

In the stories of Abraham, as we have noted, the promise of innumerable descendants is reduced to the single, absorbing question of one son, the fulfillment of which is singularly postponed while the promise is stated in ever more extravagant terms. Clearly a major point of these stories is Abraham's faith and obedience. This can be seen in the account of his call. The summons to Abraham is radical:

He is to abandon all his roots – land, kindred, and immediate family (12:1) – and that for a most uncertain destination, “a land that I will show you” (v. 1). Modern westerners, who live in a mobile society where the bonds of family and family residence are so easily broken, need to recall here that it was very difficult for ancient people, rooted in patriarchal and patrilocal culture, to relocate. So when, after the call, the narrator presents Abraham's response in terse and utter simplicity (“So Abram went as the Lord told him,” v. 4), clearly Abraham is presented to us as a model, a paradigm of faith and obedience.

That the text intends to teach about the relationship between faith and righteousness can most clearly be seen in 15:6: “And he [Abraham] put his faith in the Lord and he reckoned it to him as righteousness.” The importance of this verse is signaled by the fact that it is not part of the narrative of what happened between God and Abraham (vv. 1-5), but is the narrator's summarizing word that Abraham's righteousness consisted in the fact of his faith in God's promise. If righteousness is conceived, as in modern western society, as conformity to an abstract moral code, this equation is indeed hard to understand. In the Bible, however, righteousness is not a norm prescribing ethics, but faithfulness to a relationship. The righteous person is faithful to the claims of all his or her relationships. Therefore, according to this passage, God judges that a person's righteousness in relation to Himself is fulfilled when that relationship is characterized by faith (see Rom. 1:16f.; 4:1-25; Gal. 3:6-9).

III. Dating the Patriarchs

If we follow the chronological references in the Old Testament literally, we can arrive at a specific date for Abraham. Of course it is necessary to work backward. A good place to begin is with the dedication of the temple. First Kings 6:1 puts that event in the fourth year of Solomon's reign (966 B.C.) and says that the Exodus took place 480 years earlier. Thus we arrive at a date of about 1446 for the Exodus. Then Exodus 12:40-41 puts the entrance of Jacob and his sons into Egypt 430 years earlier, taking us back to 1876 B.C.

Next we look at the specifics of the patriarchal period. From Genesis 12:4; 21:5; 25:26; and 47:9, we learn that Abraham entered Canaan when he was 75 and was about 100 when Isaac was born. Isaac was 60 at Jacob's birth, and Jacob was 130 when he stood before Pharaoh at the time of the Hebrew migration to Egypt. If we add 25, 60, and 130 we arrive at 215 for the total time that the patriarchs lived in Canaan. If we add 215 to 1876, we arrive at the date of 2091 for Abraham's entrance into Canaan. Since he was 75 at the time, we add 75 to 2091 and arrive at 2166 B.C. for the date of his birth in Ur (Howard F. Vos, “Date of Abraham,” in *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Manners & Customs: How the People of the Bible Really Lived* [Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1999], 11).

IV. Conclusion

The patriarchs were very real historical figures. Their religious impact on the world has been momentous. First, Genesis 12—50 says much about the style of life that must characterize the people of God: it is to be a life of trust and faith in and obedience to Him who calls them. Second, these chapters present the basic facts of the beginning of redemptive history: God has freely chosen one man and his descendants through whom “all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:3), and He solemnly promises them land and posterity. The significance of this redemptive history is set forth in part by its explicit presentation as the answer to the universal problem of human alienation from God and from one another through the sin set forth in Genesis 1—11. But the fulfillment of these promises and the salvation-history here begun waits for its partial realization in the dramatic events of the deliverance from slavery in the Exodus story and for its final consummation in the greater Son of Abraham (Matt. 1:1) who draws all men to Him (John 12:32), thus providing the blessing for all the families of the earth promised at the beginning of the patriarchal story.