

Patriarchs and Promise

John Houghton ©

A. Introduction

1. The era of the Patriarchs introduces us to the broad geographic canvas of the Middle East known as the fertile crescent, stretching from Ur in the east to Egypt in the west. (See map) This is the cradle of civilisation, yet the Bible drama is little concerned with the growth of great population centres and political power, such as Egypt. History turns instead on the migration and travels of one exceedingly wealthy family. It is the saga of a dynasty – a tale of money, sex and power – and of faith and covenants (Hebrews 11:1-22). The map of God's purpose is drawn with some very crooked lines!

B. Abraham

1. Abraham is a man of faith but he is not perfect.
 - a. Sarah was twice compromised by her husband. First with Pharaoh in Egypt (Genesis 12:10-20) (See map) and then with Abimelech in the South (Genesis 20:1-18). Her attitude of trust in God is an example for others (1 Peter 3:1-6).
 - b. Sarah, desperate for a child, urges Abraham to have sex with her Egyptian maid, Hagar. Jealously, Sarah drives the pregnant woman away for a while (Genesis 16). Ishmael is born – the fruit of unbelief that continues to have consequences today.
 - c. God institutes circumcision and changes Abram's name (exalted father) to Abraham (father of a multitude) (Genesis 17). He also changes Sarai's (my princess) to Sarah (princess). The covenant is declared to be everlasting. A child is promised by Sarah. Ishmael is also blessed, but is outside the faith firstborn line.
 - d. Later, when Isaac is born, Hagar mocks Sarah. Hagar and Ishmael are cast out by Abraham, whereupon God protects them (Genesis 21:9-21). With an ironic twist, Paul refers to this to distinguish between spiritual slavery to Judaism and freedom in Christ (Galatians 4:21-31). The Gospel is now equally available to Ishmael's descendants as it is to Isaac's, so anyone can, by faith, enter the firstborn blessing.
2. Isaac is duly born according to God's promise and Abraham's faith is vindicated (Romans 4:16-22). As a test, God commands Abraham to offer Isaac as a human sacrifice. At the last moment a substitute is provided by God and Abraham receives his son back (Genesis 22). This points to the substitutionary atonement and resurrection of Jesus – note v.14. (John 8:56-58; Hebrews 11:17-19). It also says that Yahweh is not Molech!
3. Upon Sarah's death, Abraham purchased a piece of Canaan, the cave of Machpelah at Hebron, as a family tomb. It marked the first possession of the land. Abraham remarried, had more children, died and was buried with Sarah. They both looked for a heavenly reality beyond the earthly (Hebrews 11:8-10).

4. With the death of Abraham the covenant promise passed to Isaac and in turn to Jacob. From Jacob would come the twelve patriarchs of Israel and ultimately the twelve tribes who would invade and occupy the land of Canaan.
5. Before that, the path would lead inexorably to Egypt where the Hebrews would settle, suffer, and from where one day they would exodus *en masse* on an epic journey eastwards that would change the course of world history.

C. Isaac

1. Isaac is a weak man compared to Abraham, even to the extent of needing his servant to find him a wife while he mourned over his mother's death – Genesis 24.
2. Like father, like son, Isaac jeopardises Rebekah's honour with Abimelech in order to save his own skin – Genesis 26:7-11. Moving from Gerar he founds Beersheba by digging a well and makes peace with Abimelech.
3. Jacob and Esau are born (Genesis 25:19-26), the farmer and the hunter, and God reaffirms his covenant to Isaac (Genesis 26:1-5). Yet at the end he is tricked into giving the blessing to the wrong person by his wife's conspiracy with Jacob.

D. Jacob and Esau

1. Jacob was a supplanter from birth, the cuckoo in the nest – Genesis 25:23-26. He obtains his father's firstborn blessing by deception, yet it is in accord with divine justice, Esau having first despised his birthright (Genesis 27:26-40; Romans 9:6-13).
2. Esau trades his birthright for a bowl of stew. His irreverence for the promise forfeits it for ever (Hebrews 12:14-17). He marries pagans and takes to the hill country of Seir (Edom). He fathers Amalek, a thorn in the side of Israel and a spiritual symbol for the flesh.
3. Jacob flees, meeting God remarkably ('Jacob's ladder') at Bethel. The covenant is reaffirmed to him (Genesis 28:10-22). He finds refuge with his uncle Laban at Haran and works for fourteen years to marry his employer's two daughters, Leah and Rachel (Genesis 29).
4. By means of a truly occult act, Jacob obtains a large flock at Laban's expense (Genesis 30:37-43). He is obliged to flee, is pursued, but a peace treaty is struck.
5. On the way to meet Esau, Jacob encounters the Lord at Peniel. He is disabled, and his name is changed to Israel, meaning Prince with God (Genesis 32:24-32). From now on the name Israel will bear both a fleshly and a spiritual meaning.
6. Esau is reconciled with his brother (Genesis 33). Returning to Bethel, the family idols are put away. Rachel dies giving birth to Benjamin.
7. Jacob produced twelve sons.
 - a. By Leah – Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun (Dinah).
 - b. By Bilhah – Dan, Naphtali.

- c. By Zilphar – Gad, Asher.
- d. By Rachel – Joseph, Benjamin.

E. Sexual sins

1. The book of Genesis records a time before the law of God was given, yet customs prevailed among the nomads and settlers, some of which accorded to the will of God and some that did not. These are still the frontier days of a relatively young world living on the brink of survival.
 - a. The rape of Dinah and the revenge of her brothers on the Shechemites (Genesis 34).
 - b. Reuben has sex with his father's concubine and forfeits blessing (Genesis 35:22; 49:4).
 - c. Onan refuses to sire children on his dead brother's behalf (Genesis 38:6-10).
 - d. Judah is tricked into having sex with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, thinking she is a prostitute (Genesis 38:12-26).

F. Joseph

1. Joseph has dreams. His brothers sell him into slavery in Egypt. He resists Potiphar's wife's advances but goes to prison where he interprets his cell-mates' (cup-bearer and baker) dreams. Remembered by the cup-bearer, he interprets Pharaoh's dreams and is made Minister of Agriculture (Genesis 37-48).
2. During the predicted famine his brothers come twice to Egypt and are reunited with their brother. Jacob and his family move to Goshen near Rameses. He blesses Joseph's sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, in reverse order. Just before he dies, Jacob prophesies over his twelve sons. He is buried in Hebron.
3. Before his death in Egypt, Joseph also prophesies the return of God's people to Canaan (Genesis 50:24-26). It is his last act of faith (Hebrews 11:22).
4. Genesis is an honest tale of faith in the midst of corruption. The earthly priorities of a nomadic people are offspring, large flocks, water and grazing. Morality is ill-defined, though fundamental justice exists, and legal rights are respected. Faith is slender, though strong. First it will pass through slavery and death before it sees any fruit.

G. Questions for reflection

1. In what ways does the honesty of this tale help you in your own life and outlook?
2. What is your response to the unconditional love of God and how do you share it?
3. What parallels do you see between Joseph's life and the life of Christ?

