

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Genesis, Pt. 2

The Patriarchs

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Introduction

With the story of Abraham, the book moves from the broad sweeping view of history to concentrate on people of a more vital interest to their own story. Left behind for a time are the genealogies designed to cover long spans of time. Genesis 12-50 is dominated by four men – Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. This period is known as the period of the patriarchs – literally the time of the “first fathers.”

The Time. There is no universal agreement as to the dating of the patriarchs. Yet the names, customs, and mode of life seem to fit into what is known of the first half of the second millennium B.C.E. Abraham’s journey from Ur of the Chaldees (Genesis 12) usually is associated with the movement of the Amorites from Mesopotamia into Palestine in the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries B.C.E.

Joseph, the last of the four major figures in Genesis 12-50, is often associated with the Hyksos rule in Egypt. The Hyksos were foreign rulers of Egypt who conquered the country in the eighteenth century B.C.E. and established a dynasty that ruled for more than 150 years. Like the Hebrews (as the Israelites were first known), the Hyksos had many people of Semitic origin among them. They made extensive use of chariot warfare. They built cities whose fortifications included walls with a steep ramp, or glacis, designed to prevent easy approaches to the walls. If Joseph did come in this period, the patriarchs would be dated from about 2000 to 1550 B.C.E.

Their Lifestyle. The picture given of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is that of people who habitually moved about. Yet it was not an aimless wandering; instead, they seem to have followed a yearly cycle, based on the availability of pasturage for their flocks. During the dry season they would move into the empty spaces in the central hill country, where, among other things, they could graze in the cut-over grain fields. There they remained until the rains came. They might even plant a grain crop on unclaimed land to be harvested when they returned after the grasses in the Negev had died out.

In contrast to our limited families of today (consisting of parents, or a parent, and on rare occasions a grandparent or grandparents) the patriarchs were heads of extended families consisting of wives, children, relatives of varying degrees, and servants – most of whom undoubtedly were slaves . A man’s wealth was measured in terms of the number of wives, sons, and cattle he possessed (see Job 1). For all these persons, the patriarch was the chief decision maker. He determined whom his sons married and which of his sons would succeed him as Patriarch. While it was customary for the eldest son to become the patriarch, it was not always so.

Abraham, the First of the “First” Fathers

From Ur to Egypt (Genesis 12). The stories of the patriarchs are religious history. Persons, places, and events are secondary to what the Lord is doing through those persons, places, and events. Abraham (called Abram until Genesis 17:5), a native of Ur of the Chaldees in southeastern Mesopotamia (on what is today the Persian Gulf), moved to Haran in northwestern Mesopotamia while he was still in the clan of Terah, his father. There, Terah died and Abraham became the patriarch (11:31-32).

In Haran, life took a new direction. Abraham was called by the Lord to leave the familiar faces of his kinsmen and the well-watered areas of northwestern Mesopotamia to go to a new land that the Lord would show him. It was a promise that carried with it universal meaning. Abraham would receive the blessing of a land, numerous descendants, and divine protection; and through him all the nations were to be blessed (12:1-3). This promise was repeated with differing emphases several times in the Abraham stories (Genesis 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:17-21; 17:1-21).

Conflict and Covenant (Genesis 13-16). Conflict between his herdsmen and those of his nephew Lot arose, causing a parting of the ways. Lot chose the well-watered valley of the Jordan, while Abraham chose the hill country. Conflict and crisis brought a reaffirmation of the promise from the Lord of numerous descendants and possession of the land (13:14-17).

Abraham appears as no ordinary desert chieftain but as one who was powerful enough to challenge the rulers of the area. Lot, captured in warfare between a group of kings, was carried off to northern Syria. Abraham, with his personal army of 318 men (“born in his house”) rescued Lot.

Social and physical conflict is followed by mental conflict (15:1-21). No child had blessed the marriage of Abraham and Sarah. Their only heir was a foreign slave, Eliezer of Damascus, whom Abraham adopted as his heir. Such a custom is known from the Nuzi tablets (about 1500 B.C.E.). Abraham agonized about his lack of a son by Sarah, and the Lord reassured him.

Domestic conflict arose when, in keeping with custom, Sarah gave Abraham her maid Hagar as a secondary wife, or concubine, so that Hagar could have a child for her by proxy (16:1-15). Hagar's instant fertility gave her a feeling of superiority over her barren mistress (16:1-4). Hagar then had to flee from the wrath of Sarah. Hagar's son, Ishmael, was said to have been the father of the Ishmaelites, who roamed the southern desert areas of Palestine (16:5-15).

The Promise of a New Life and Forebodings of Doom (Genesis 18-19). The patriarch looked out from his tent one day to see three strangers approaching. True to his cultural sense of courtesy, he invited them in and gave them water to wash their dusty, tired feet. He spread for them "a morsel of bread." In the story of the three strangers, the narrator described a *theophany* – the appearance of the divine to a human being.

The divine visitors had some good news and some bad news. First, they told Abraham that in the spring Sarah would bear a child. This struck Sarah, who was well past the age of childbearing, as somewhat ridiculous. Her giggles, as she hid behind the tent door, reached the ears of the divine messenger, who heard her and gave her a gentle rebuke (18:9-15).

Then came the bad news. Abraham was told of the doom of Sodom and Gomorrah, the licentious cities in the Dead Sea area, where Lot lived. Despite Abraham's plea (18:16-33), judgment fell and only Lot and his children escaped (19:1-23).

The Test (Genesis 22). The high point of the Abraham drama was played out on a mountain, "in the land of Moriah." Later, according to tradition, Solomon's temple would be built on this site. The passage emphasizes that "God tested Abraham" by commanding that Isaac be offered as a sacrifice to God. Abraham obeys, but at the climactic moment, just as he is about to take his son's life, his attention is drawn to a ram caught in a nearby thicket. The ram serves as the sacrifice instead.

Sarah's Death and Burial (Genesis 23). When Sarah died, a burial place had to be bought. Abraham went to the village elders and there engaged in a typical bargaining session, complete with flowery phrases and exaggerated gestures. Finally, a purchase price was named – after the owner had offered to “give” the land and the cave of Macpelah to Abraham and, in the process, obligating Abraham to buy more property than he wanted.

A Wife for Isaac (Genesis 24:1-25:18). Before Abraham died, he had to see that Isaac had a wife. The practice of the parents choosing a bride for their son is still followed in some cultures. Abraham sent his trusted servant Eliezer back to Haran to find a wife for Isaac. Here we are introduced to the wily Laban, the brother of Rebekah, Isaac's future wife. While the storyteller credits the Lord with pointing out the right girl, Laban was quite willing to give up his sister when he saw the rich gifts Abraham had sent for the bride price (24:53-61).

Isaac, the Link between Abraham and Jacob

Of the patriarchs, Isaac receives the least attention. He is pictured as an introvert – a shy, quiet, meditative person dominated by the stronger personalities around him. Such a person was Rebekah, his wife. The choosing of Rebekah as Isaac's wife and her subsequent domination of her husband receives more attention in the tradition than does Isaac himself (24:15-61; 25:20-24; 26:6-11; 27:5-17).

Jacob, the Supplanter

Most of the stories about Jacob are the kind of stories one prefers to tell about a relative who is long-since dead. If he were alive, one would only whisper about his escapades at family gathering and hope that the neighbors had not found out about the wayward son's latest caper.

Jacob and Esau. Jacob was a twin of Esau. Esau was born first, but Jacob's later reputation as a schemer was such that the tradition arose that he had hold of Esau's heel when Esau was born, trying to pull him back so Jacob would come out of the womb first (25:19-26).

Esau was an outdoorsman and a man who lived by impulse. Jacob, on the other hand, was more like his father but with the cunning of his strong-willed mother. Esau, as the elder of the two sons, was first in line to be the patriarch. In addition to the birthright, he needed to secure the blessing of the patriarch as he approached death in order to have the right to succeed him (25:27-28).

Jacob – in trying to get the right to be patriarch himself over the firstborn Esau – had to secure both the birthright and the blessing. He had failed to get out ahead of Esau, but that was not his last attempt to get ahead of him!

Buying the Birthright (Genesis 25:29-34). The birthright was his first goal. Esau, slave of his appetites, fell into Jacob’s trap like a hungry bird. Coming from an exhausting and probably futile hunt, Esau smelled the red bean soup Jacob was cooking. When he asked Jacob for food, Jacob set a high price – Esau’s birthright. Esau, listening more to his hunger pangs than to his head, agreed. And so on a solemn oath, Esau sold Jacob his future for a bowl of bean soup (25:33).

Stealing the Blessing (Genesis 27:1-45). But the birthright was not enough. Jacob still had to have Isaac’s blessing. On his side, he had a very powerful ally – his mother, Rebekah. Isaac favored Esau, perhaps because he saw in him those characteristic of strength and self-confidence he lacked and secretly longed to have. Isaac, as the saying goes, enjoyed poor health. Troubled by eye disease and other ailments, he feared that death might overtake him at any time. He decided, therefore, that the time had come to pass on to his older son the responsibility of being patriarch. Calling Esau in, he gave him instructions to prepare for him a dish of wild game and bring it to him. Then he would bless Esau (27:1-4).

As Esau left to hunt game, Rebekah (who overheard the conversation) immediately gave Jacob instructions to kill a young goat and bring it to her. Taking the goat, she made stew, dressed Jacob in Esau’s clothes, and put fresh goat skins on Jacob’s arms and neck so he would be hairy like Esau (25:5-17).

When Jacob went to Isaac, claiming to be Esau, Isaac was suspicious because the voice did not sound right. If it were Esau, he had returned rather quickly. Calling Jacob to him, Isaac felt his now-hairy arms and neck, and ate the savory stew. As he kissed Jacob prior to the blessing, he smelled his clothes. The voice was Jacob’s, but the body odor was Esau’s! And so the blind Isaac – deceived by his sense of taste, feel, and smell – blessed the deceiver. Jacob left with a blessing Isaac could not take back, even though Esau soon came in and Isaac learned the truth of what had been done (27:18-45).

Jacob on the Run (Genesis 27:46-28:2). Rebekah, having overheard Esau’s threats to kill Jacob, immediately persuaded Isaac to send Jacob to her brother Laban’s house in Haran to escape the wrath of Esau. In a dream, the Lord appeared to him, saying, “I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring;

and your offspring will be like the dust of the earth...and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your off spring (28:13-14).

Jacob and Laban: An Amateur versus a Professional (Genesis 29:1-30). On coming to the territory of Laban, Jacob met his cousin Rachel at the well where sheep were watered. One look was all it took! He fell hopelessly in love with Rachel. Laban, shrewd man of the world, sized up the situation. Before Jacob knew it, he was committed to work seven years for the privilege of marrying Rachel since he had no money for the bride price.

When the seven years had passed and Jacob went forward to claim his wage, he received a shocking surprise. Custom decreed that the veiled bride be brought to the groom's tent under the cover of darkness. So it was that Jacob only saw his new bride after the honeymoon was over. His bride was not Rachel! It was her unattractive older sister Leah.

Jacob, with murder in his eyes, was pacified by this new father-in-law with the promise that when the seven-day celebration of Leah was over, he could marry Rachel. Of course, after the second wedding was over, he had to work an additional seven years to pay for her (29:27-30).

Jacob and Laban: The Tables Turned (Genesis 30:1-31:55). The years passed, and Jacob, the father of many children, had learned well his lessons from Laban. Getting Laban to agree to let him have any animal that was not white, Jacob used a mixture of folk medicine (30:37-39) and shrewd observation to cause more of the animals to be born spotted, speckled, or black. While Laban was away, Jacob gathered his family and flocks and left the territory. Laban followed in angry pursuit when he found out what had happened. Before he caught up with Jacob, God appeared to Laban in a dream and told him not to harm Jacob (30:40-31:24).

Jacob and Esau: A Man Faces His Past (Genesis 32:1-33:20). The biblical narrative did not gloss over the weaknesses of the ancestors, neither with Abraham nor with Jacob, whose sons gave their names to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Traveling down the King's Highway, the major north-south route east of the Jordan, Jacob realized he would soon enter the territory of Esau. First, he sent messengers to Esau to tell him he was coming (32:2-5). When he received word that Esau, with an army of 400, was coming to meet him, he divided his forces and flocks, hoping an attack on the forward group would give the second group a chance to escape (32:6-8). The prayer of a man facing death and destruction was

quite different from the prayer of the brash young man who had stolen his brother's blessing (28:20-22). Jacob was the picture of abject humility when he met Esau. Surprisingly, Esau (now a prosperous desert chieftain) was generous to his brother who had cheated him.

Joseph: From Patriarch's Son to Prime Minister

The story of Joseph takes the form of a miniature novel. The hero, Joseph, is introduced; the villains, his brothers. Then Joseph goes through a series of reverses and advances, climaxing with a suspense-filled scene where Joseph, the prime minister of Egypt, reveals his identity to his brothers who thought he was long-since dead.

A difference in this story and the stories of the other patriarchs is in how God communicates with Joseph. Here there are no divine messengers – no theophanies. Instead, God guides Joseph through the events and circumstances of life.

A Fancy Coat and Angry Brothers (Genesis 37:1-36). Joseph, the eleventh of Jacob's twelve sons, was his father's favorite. He relished the position, lording it over his older brothers by showing off his fancy clothes and telling them of dreams in which he came out superior to them.

Rough shepherds that they were, they decided to take drastic action to squelch their obnoxious younger brother. Some wanted to kill him, but Reuben prevailed to put him into a pit in the dry country, hoping later to rescue him. Instead, he was sold to a caravan, either to the Ishmaelites (35:25, 27) or Midianites (32:28, 36). Eventually he was sold in Egypt to Potiphar, an officer of the pharaoh.

Joseph Loses Another Cloak and Lands in Jail (Genesis 39:1-20). Years passed, and Joseph was put in charge of Potiphar's business. Mrs. Potiphar tried to seduce the handsome young servant. He refused her advances, and as he ran away, she seized his cloak and yelled, "Rape!" As a result, Joseph landed in jail.

Joseph the Prisoner and Interpreter of Dreams (Genesis 39:21-41:36). Joseph, ever the man of responsibility, soon became a trusted prison aide (39:22). When the king's butler and baker, imprisoned because they were in disfavor, had strange dreams, Joseph interpreted them correctly. As he predicted, the butler was restored and the baker was hanged. The butler forgot Joseph after promising to reward him (40:1-23).

Then Pharaoh began to have strange dreams. When all his wise men failed to interpret them, the butler finally remembered Joseph. Joseph was called before the pharaoh, where he interpreted the dreams as predicting Egypt would have seven years of plenty to be followed by seven years of famine. The pharaoh was so impressed by Joseph's wisdom that the former chief prison trusty was made prime minister of Egypt. He was put in charge of preparations for the great famine (41:1-36).

Joseph and His Brothers Again (42-45). The famine came. Joseph's brothers came to Egypt to buy grain, not realizing that their obnoxious younger brother was now Egypt's chief grain salesman. They did not recognize him (42:8). Joseph revealed his true identity to them (45:1-4). Rather than blaming them for their mistreatment of him, he interpreted it as the providential work of God, who sent him to Egypt to preserve them (45:7).

The Family in Egypt (Genesis 46-50). The brothers returned to Palestine and brought their father to Egypt. Genesis ends with the blessing of Jacob's sons (Genesis 49), the story of Jacob's death and burial, and finally Joseph's death, preceded by his request not to be buried in Egypt (Genesis 50).

Summary

Thus in Genesis 12-50 are presented 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 find blessing" (12:3), and he solemnly promises him land and nationhood. How this is to be effected and in what terms it will come, however, waits to be disclosed. But these chapters also say much about the style of life that must characterize those who respond to God's call and belong by commitment to his covenant people: it is to be a life of trust and faith in him who calls. Indeed, the book ends with the scene set for the next act in the drama of redemption, deliverance from slavery in Egypt.

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