

A BIRD'S EYE VIEW OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

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SESSION TWO PATRIARCHS

1. Abraham

Father of the Hebrew people

Reading: Genesis 11:27-12:9; 15:1-6; 17:1-22

2. Isaac

Second father of the promise

Reading: Genesis 21:1-7; 22:1-18; 25:19-34

3. Jacob

Father of the nation of Israel

Reading: Genesis 27:15-23; 28:10-19a; 32:9-13, 21-31

4. Joseph

Leader in Egypt

Reading: Genesis 37:3-11, 23-33; 39:1-2, 6b-8a, 10-12; 16-21a; 41:1a, 8-30, 39-40, 57; 42:1-3, 43:26-28

Discussion questions:

What were the elements of God's promise to Abraham – do they mean anything to us today?

What does 'Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness' mean?

1. Abraham

Father of the Hebrew people

Reading: Genesis 11:27-12:9; 15:1-6; 17:1-22

After the first eleven chapters of Genesis, the rest of the book is devoted to the story of one family – the ‘Fathers of Faith’ or patriarchs. The first of these is Abraham (who at his birth was given the name Abram). Abraham’s father, Terah, had set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to journey to Canaan but had settled in the land of Haran, living there for many years until Terah died. After his father’s death, Abraham moved to Canaan near Bethel, to Mamre near Hebron, and to Beersheba. At each place he set up a tent shrine. In a human sense, he was the founder of the Hebrew religion. The stories are largely what have come to be called ‘salvation history’ (i.e. their primary if not exclusive interest is God’s saving relationship with Abraham, his family and the world).

The story of Abraham begins with God’s command for him to leave his home and journey to the land of Canaan:

The LORD had said to Abram, “Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you. “I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”

(Genesis 12:1-3)

Abraham is raised up to found a people who will be the means of the proclamation of God’s plan of redemption to the world. God promises Abraham a country (land), descendants (seed), and a worldwide and timeless impact (blessing).

Abraham came from a background of polytheism (belief in many gods). Though his coming to faith in the one true God is important it is not emphasised. Rather what is stressed is his walking by faith. He showed obedience (not knowing his destination); trust (depending on God - not taking refuge in the fortified settlements, ‘cities’); and was willing to believe in God’s promises for the future (see Acts 7:2-8 and Hebrews 11:8-19). The Bible stories of Abraham and the other patriarchs are a record of faith and doubt, obedience and disobedience. A fundamental part of God’s promises to Abraham was that he would have a multitude of descendants.

(The LORD) took him outside and said, “Look up at the heavens and count the stars - if indeed you can count them.” Then he said to him, “So shall your offspring be.” Abram believed the LORD, and he credited it to him as righteousness.

(Genesis 15:5-6)

Nevertheless, when Abraham and his wife, Sarah, were well advanced in years he still had no son and heir but God renewed his promises to Abraham (Genesis 17:1-8) giving him the new name ‘Abraham’ (father of many nations) and the covenant sign of circumcision (a religious rite that involves the shedding of blood but without lasting injury). Covenant is an important theme in the Bible – it is not a contract between equals for goods or services but a promise (or a privilege) that carries with it a sense of responsibility. Fulfilment of the divine promise came to Abraham when Sarah gave birth to a son, Isaac.

The story of Jesus Christ in the New Testament is anticipated by the men (and women) of faith in the Old Testament, who in a sense pre-figure Christ (typology). If something points to Christ it is all right to say so - but it is unnecessary and unbiblical to make everything point to him.

2. Isaac

Second father of the promise

Reading: Genesis 21:1-7; 22:1-18; 25:19-34

God named the son of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac, before he was born. The name Isaac means 'he laughs' which recalled the laughter of his mother, who thought that she and Abraham were too old to have a child (Genesis 18:13-15). After Isaac was born his mother, Sarah, declared that God had brought her laughter (Genesis 21:6).

Isaac was similar to Abraham insofar as he was the successor (seed) and stood under the divine promise made to his father but whereas Abraham is a giant of the faith and the founder of the Hebrew religion, Isaac seems, in comparison, to be a rather ordinary man and we know relatively little about him. The promises given to Abraham mean that the three key events in Isaac's life were his birth, his marriage and God's testing Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac on Mount Moriah. His birth and his marriage are significant in the family line of sons and heirs of the promise born to Abraham.

The famous story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice of Isaac shows that the faith of Abraham was no less than that of the pagans who offered human sacrifice (Genesis 22:1-18). However, such human sacrifice is nowhere approved of in the Bible. The clear implication of the story is that Isaac was as willing to be sacrificed as Abraham was to offer him. While we do not know how old Isaac was at the time, the fact that he was able to carry the wood for the offering implies that he was more than a child. Isaac is only recorded as asking his father one question 'where is the lamb for the burnt offering' (Genesis 22:7), suggesting that he was thoughtful yet trusting. In any event, the LORD refused such an offering, providing a sacrificial lamb (Genesis 22:13) confirming Isaac as the bearer of the covenant-promise.

The circumstances of Isaac's marriage are given a lengthy treatment (Genesis 24). God's interest in the one who will be the mother of the children of the promise is clearly evident. Abraham commissioned his servant to find a wife for Isaac from his kinsfolk near Haran and, eventually, Isaac married, Rebekah, his father's great-niece. After Abraham died, God blessed Isaac (Genesis 25:11), but for 20 years Isaac and Rebekah remained childless, a reminder of God's power to act at the right time. In due course, Rebekah discovered that she was expecting twins.

The LORD said to her, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."

(Genesis 25:23)

Isaac and Rebekah's twins were very different. Esau, the elder, was a hunter and a man of the fields but Jacob, the younger, was a quiet man, who stayed among the tents. Consequently, Esau was Isaac's favourite but Jacob was Rebekah's. The two boys became rivals and eventually Jacob convinced Esau to sell him his birthright for a bowl of lentil stew. This story shows that God's choice of Jacob over Esau, as the one through whom the line of promise would continue, did not run contrary to the wishes of either of the two brothers. It is clear from the narrative that Esau was the one who "despised" his birthright, while Jacob is portrayed as one who would go to great lengths to gain it.

The stark ending of the narrative, "So Esau despised his birthright" (Genesis 25:34), leaves us in little doubt that Esau, though he had the rights of the firstborn, did not value these over a small bowl of stew. So, when in God's plan, Esau lost his birthright and consequently his blessing, there was no injustice dealt him. The narrative has shown that he did not want the birthright. He despised it.

3. Jacob

Father of the nation of Israel

Reading: Genesis 27:15-23; 28:10-19a; 32:9-13, 21-31

Almost a quarter of the book of Genesis is devoted to the life of Jacob, the father of the chosen people, but younger son of Isaac. Esau (the elder of the twins) sold Jacob his birthright (albeit for a knock-down price - a bowl lentil stew) and later, with his mother's help, Jacob tricked Esau out of his father Jacob's blessing.

The story of Jacob deceiving his father in order to secure his blessing is carefully written with great detail. Although the story ends with Isaac's words of dismay and anger, Isaac's conclusion is "I blessed him – and indeed he will be blessed" (Genesis 27:33). So, just as God had said before the twin boys were born, "The older will serve the younger" (Genesis 25:23).

Fearful of his brother, Jacob fled to Paddan Aram with the excuse that he needed to marry someone from his own clan. At the end of a day's journey Jacob arrived at Bethel, where, as he slept, he was granted a vision of a ladder or stairway between heaven and earth (Genesis 28:12). This shows that the God of his fathers, the LORD (Yahweh), is not a local deity but he was with Jacob on the way. It is a ladder of mercy down from heaven rather than achievement up to heaven (cf. Tower of Babel).

In Haran, Jacob met a beautiful girl, Rachel, daughter of his Uncle Laban, whom Laban said he could marry after he had worked for his uncle for seven years. However, Laban tricked Jacob into marrying Leah, the elder daughter, before Rachel, for whom he had to work a further seven years. There is clearly a similarity with Jacob's earlier deceitful actions but this time he was the victim rather than the perpetrator. Jacob became a father of children through Leah and the servants Bilhah and Zilpah but Rachel had no children until much later when Joseph was born.

Jacob, who continued to shepherd his uncle's flocks, exacted his revenge by striking a deal with his uncle, whereby he would be allowed to keep all the speckled or spotted goats and all the black sheep in Laban's flocks and herds. By this method he acquired great wealth, though ultimately all he had was a gift from God. However, his uncle became angry and jealous of his Jacob's wealth to such an extent that God directed Jacob to return to the land of his fathers promising to be with him (Genesis 31:3), a valuable promise indeed for Jacob knew that if he returned to the land of his fathers he would meet Esau.

The last mention of Esau was hardly positive. "Esau held a grudge against Jacob because of the blessing his father had given him. He said to himself, "The days of mourning for my father are near; then I will kill my brother Jacob" (Genesis 27:41). Not surprisingly, Jacob made his own plans to save himself and his family from Esau's wrath, preparing a large gift for his brother, but he was not prepared for the wrestling match at Jabbok.

Throughout, even before his birth, Jacob's life was characterised by struggle – with his brother (Esau), with his father (Isaac), with his father-in-law (Laban) and finally with God. The climax of the story of his wrestling through the night with the 'man of God' is Jacob's reply at daybreak, "I will not let you go unless you bless me" (Genesis 32:26). Again, Jacob was unprepared for what happened next, as the 'man' asked Jacob his name. This time there was no opportunity for deception, Jacob had no choice other than to declare the truth – he was seeking God's blessing, not with the pretence of being Esau but facing up to who he really was, 'Jacob'.

After this wrestling, Jacob, who had lied to his father about his name, is blessed with a new name 'Israel' and his twelve sons become the heads of the twelve tribes of the new nation. After a friendly greeting from Esau, Jacob moved on to Bethel to worship, settling in the region of Hebron. Jacob's descendants called themselves by his name, Israel. As the chosen people they had the privilege of striving with God.

4. Joseph

Leader in Egypt

Reading: Genesis 37:3-11; 23-33; 39:1-2, 6b-8a, 10-12; 16-21a; 41:1a, 8-30, 39-40, 57; 42:1-3, 43:26-28

All the sons of Jacob (Israel) are the chosen people but the eleventh of the twelve sons of Jacob was Joseph. Unlike his father (Jacob), grandfather (Isaac) and great-grandfather (Abraham), angels never appeared to Joseph and God never spoke directly to him. God is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in a special way but the story of Joseph is different, explaining the link between the patriarchs and the children of Israel enslaved in Egypt and revealing God's unfolding plan.

Joseph, the firstborn of the beloved Rachel, who died at the birth of her second son, Benjamin, was his father's favourite and he became a spoilt boy who was given a special coat of many colours, perhaps more accurately a long-sleeved coat indicating a responsibility as foreman, an unusual role for a younger son and clue to the jealousy of his brothers. Eventually Joseph's jealous brothers had planned to kill him but at the intervention of Reuben the brothers first threw him into a cistern and then sold him to Ishmaelite merchants who, in turn, sold him to Potiphar, an Egyptian, as a household servant. The unwelcome attentions of Potiphar's wife resulted in Joseph's imprisonment.

In prison, Joseph interpreted the dreams of the baker and the butler and hoped that the butler (more accurately cup-bearer), when restored, would use his influence to set him free but only some time later, when Pharaoh had extraordinary dreams did the cup-bearer remember Joseph. By being able to interpret the dreams, Joseph rose to high office in Egypt. In the story we learn that, though God is with him, Joseph experiences temptation, prejudice and suffering but also can draw on the strength and courage which God gives. His familiar life-story is a reminder of the promise that in everything God works for good for those who love him.

The punch-line of the musical, *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat*, 'Anyone from anywhere can make it if you get a lucky break,' is a gross misunderstanding of the story. In actual fact, the story is not about luck but the unfolding of God's purposes. The real punch-line of the story is revealed by Joseph himself when he says to his brothers,

But God sent me ahead of you to preserve for you a remnant on earth and
to save your lives by a great deliverance.

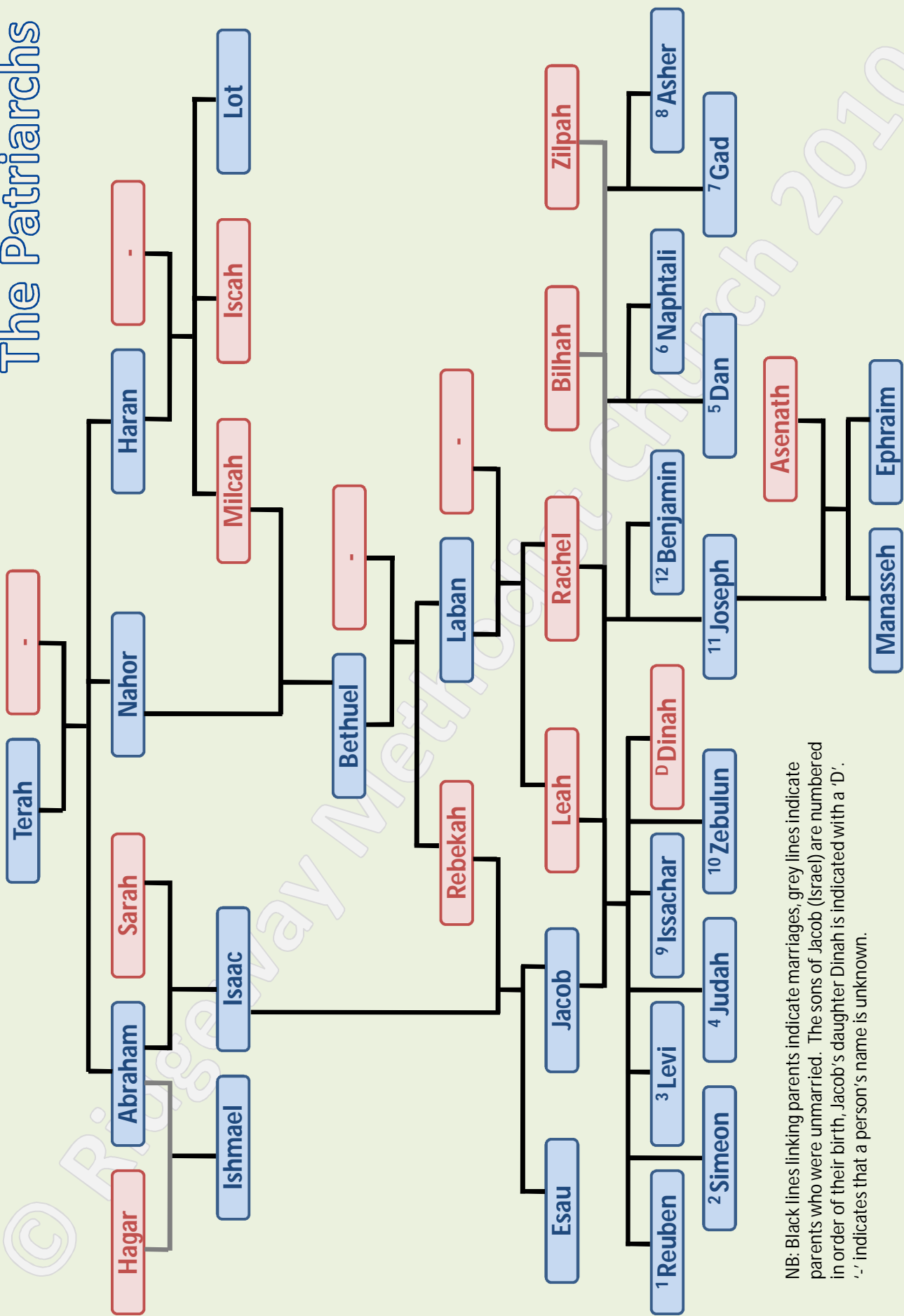
(Genesis 45:7)

Joseph showed a willingness to see God's will in the opportunities that were offered and patiently waited for God's will to be fulfilled. The delay in the Israelites settling in Canaan was part of God's plan, for the sin of the Amorites (a term that sometimes means a particular tribe and sometimes the pagan Canaanites in general) was not yet so bad as to forfeit both the right to their land and their lives (Genesis 15:16).

The story of Joseph is a remarkable character study. Although he was rather tactless in telling his brothers that his dreams indicated his future greatness, nothing said about Joseph is bad. As his life spins in a downward spiral, there is no resentment, no complaining, or questioning of God. On the other hand, when he is exalted to a position of high authority, his character continues to be flawless. The only person in the Bible who is like this is Jesus.

In the life of Joseph we have a human story of a man who sank to rock bottom only to climb right up to the top; we have a story of God's unfolding purposes in a man's life, using it to save his people, but we also have a story of an exemplary man, who because of his righteousness rises to his position and consistently attributes his success to God, and so pre-figures or foreshadows Jesus.

The Patriarchs



NB: Black lines linking parents indicate marriages, grey lines indicate parents who were unmarried. The sons of Jacob (Israel) are numbered in order of their birth, Jacob's daughter Dinah is indicated with a 'D'. '-' indicates that a person's name is unknown.