

THE STORY OF ABRAHAM & SARAH

Gen 1-11 is generally seen as the preface to the story of Israel & tells the lessons from the origins of humanity. Genesis then focuses on the history of one family that lived in northern Mesopotamia. Gen 11:27-32 gives the family tree for Abraham in such a way that his grandfather, father & brothers are all named after towns in the area near the old caravan city of Haran. This was a literary device used by ancient authors, called “eponymous” writing, & it helped to fix for the reader or listener the exact roots of the hero. The *eponym* is the person from whom a tribe or nation gets its name.

Gen 12-50 focus on four heroic ancestors: Abraham (12 chapters), Isaac (two), Jacob (nine) & Joseph (ten), although strictly speaking, Joseph should be understood as part of the history of Jacob.

The Setting of the Patriarchal Stories

The patriarchs lived *before* the period when Israel was in Egypt & so can be dated no later than the 14th cent. BCE. Although many elements in the tradition have been rewritten & updated over the centuries, the sources tried to preserve a description of the way people lived in the Middle Bronze Age i.e. in the period from the 22nd down to the 15th cent. BCE. While a minority of archaeologists & biblical scholars think that much of the material in these chapters is fiction – in the sense that it is a romantic projection back from later times of an ideal life of faith – the majority accept there are genuine *remembrances* of this early period that form the *core* of the tradition. Many details about travel, semi-nomadic life, marriage customs & inheritance rights mentioned in the narratives were well known in this period.

There is also evidence of a strong westward movement of Semitic peoples from Mesopotamia c.2100 BCE or earlier. These were known as Amorites (“Westerners”), & even if Abraham is not among them, it shows the likelihood that such travels as his were normal. There is some mixed archaeological evidence that the Negev desert, which is the scene of much of the Abraham & Isaac tradition, was settled c.2000 BCE, but largely deserted in later centuries. A good case could be made for a period of prosperity there between 2000-1800 BCE under the secure rule of the strong pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom in Egypt. Trade & travel such as reported in Gen 12:9 or 20:1 would be encouraged by such periods of stability. The Bible itself records that Israel spent

almost 400 years in Egypt between the arrival of Jacob & the time of the exodus (Gen 15:13; Ex 12:40). This would place Abraham even earlier, near the start of the second millennium.

The general description of Abraham's lifestyle suggests he was the chief of a wealthy clan whose livelihood depended mostly on raising small livestock such as sheep & goats. He seemed to have had semi-permanent roots near some large city, or at least within a definite area, but often moved with his flocks to new pastures according to the seasons of the year. His life was not that of the city dweller or villager, but he was never far from the major urban centres. Abraham settled near Hebron in the south, but he seems to live a semi-nomadic lifestyle. In good years, & in mild winters, the clan stayed near the permanent settlement, but in the dry summer season or in years of drought, they might wander far abroad in search of grazing food & land.

Their wide-ranging knowledge of the land, the safety of numbers in travel, & the likelihood that the clan had more members than herding required, supports the idea that trade was also a part of their livelihood. Some references to longer journeys of Abraham make this an attractive idea. He moves between Haran, Damascus, Shechem, Hebron & Egypt, all of which are on the caravan routes, all large cities or trading centres.

The patriarchal story opens in Mesopotamia & northern Syria, & throughout Genesis the clans maintain their ties back to their original homeland. Isaac & Jacob go back to marry wives from among their relatives in Haran. Also many of the customs & practices in the Abraham narratives have parallels in documents from the ruins of 14th & 15th cent. Nuzi in upper Mesopotamia. This, too, is no doubt part of the original memory of Israel's ancestors.

The Story of Abraham

The Abraham narratives run from Gen 12 to the middle of Gen 25 in a series of individual events that are often only vaguely linked to one another by the editors. See, for example, the change between Gen 12:9 & 12:10: "*Abraham went on & travelled toward the Negev, and there came a famine in the land.*" There is no indication whether the famine began immediately or years later, or even if it was the next incident in order. Below is an outline of the major incidents with the *blessings* emphasised by being placed to the left in italics:

1. *12:1-9* God calls & blesses Abraham & he moves west into Canaan.
2. *12:10-20* Abraham risks his blessing in Egypt by giving up Sarah.
3. *13:1-18* Abraham & Lot divide their territory & Abraham receives Palestine.
4. *14:1-24* Abraham shows himself a hero & blessed in warfare.
5. *15:1-20* God renews his promises & makes a covenant with Abraham.
6. *16:1-16* Abraham risks the promise of a son by taking Hagar to bear Ishmael.
7. *17:1-27* God renews his covenant & promise of a son, but commands Abraham to take on the sign of circumcision.
8. *18:1-15* God renews his promise to give a son to Sarah & Abraham.
9. *18:16-33* Abraham shows his blessing by interceding for Sodom & Gomorrah.
10. *19:1-38* Lot proves to be the only faithful person in Sodom: it is destroyed.
11. *20:1-18* Abraham risks the blessing to Sarah with the king of Gerar.
12. *21:1-21* God gives the blessing of a son, Isaac, & sends Ishmael away.
13. *21:22-34* Abraham makes a treaty with Abimelech & his people.
14. *22:1-24* Abraham sacrifices Isaac in obedience to God.
15. *23:1-20* Abraham lays claim to possession of the land by buying the cave of Macphelah to bury Sarah & himself.
16. *24:1-67* Abraham arranges a wife for Isaac to continue the blessing.
17. *25:1-18* Abraham's death & burial; Ishmael's descendants; the blessing passes to Isaac.

The person of Abraham emerges suddenly & dramatically from the long list of persons in Gen 11 when God addresses him out of nowhere in Gen 12:1: "*Go*

out from your land & your clan & your father's house to a land that I will show you." This marks the start of a new development in God's plan. The world as a whole is no longer the stage of action, but one small corner of it. The biblical picture of Abraham is told as a *journey* – Abraham moves through Canaan, stopping at major places in the mountain country, Shechem, Hebron & Beer-sheba, moving down into the southern Negev desert area, travelling even to Egypt. He appears with a large number of followers & many flocks & herds & he occasionally does trade (Gen 15:2), but we learn very little about any business dealings or even about his relationships with his Canaanite neighbours. The whole story of Abraham is presented to us in a way that stresses two major themes: (1) God made a *promise* to Abraham which will control all the events narrated in the Pentateuch, but which already begins to unfold in Abraham's own life-time; (2) God *blessed* Abraham & made him his specially chosen friend because Abraham was faithful to God.

These two themes are found mixed together throughout the story. They reflect the original outline of the J source, but have been expanded by the additions from E & P. (See the separate notes on the Composition of the Pentateuch).

Promise & Covenant

The Abraham cycle links the promise of land & a son to a series of covenants, or formal agreements, between Yahweh & Abraham. In Gen 12 & 15, they are free gifts of God, very much like the royal grants of kings to favourite courtiers. In Gen 17, it uses the language of mutual obligation treaties more typical of the Sinai covenant in Ex 19-24. To stress the importance of this theme, God announces his promise in the very first scene (Gen 12:2-3):

I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you & make your name great so that you will become a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, & curse those who curse you. & all the peoples of the earth shall bless themselves in you.

The sense of the promise in this passage is very broad. Abraham will become a great nation, implying great numbers & large territory, & other nations will be subject to this nation's fortunes so that they will pray for blessing as Abraham had been blessed. It is made concrete & specific in later statements by God:

Gen 12:7 *"To your descendants I will give this land."*

Gen 13:15 “*All the land which you see I will give to you & your seed forever.*”

Gen 15:5 “*Look at the heavens & count the stars if you can. So shall your descendants be.*”

Gen 17:4 “*You shall be the father of a multitude of nations.*”

Gen 18:18 “*Abraham shall surely become a great & powerful nation, & all the nations of the earth will be blessed through him.*”

All these promises are given to Abraham in theophany, which literally means an “appearance of God,” an overwhelming personal experience of God’s presence that affects the whole direction & quality of a person’s life. Let’s look at two of these scenes in detail, one from the older J & E epic, & the second from P.

Gen 15:1-21 contains many very primitive details, including the cutting of the animals in two & passing fire through them to consume them as an offering to God. There is a similar ceremony in the Mari letters of the 18th cent. BCE in Mesopotamia:

I sent that message to Bina-Ishtar, & she replied as follows: “I have killed that ass with Qarni-Lim, & thus I spoke to Qarni-Lim under the oath of the gods: ‘If you despise Zimri-Lim & his armies, I will turn to the side of your adversaries.’”

But the early part of Gen 15 is heavily theological with its reflections on the promises made to Abraham. Source critics have detected the hand of J in the frequent use of the name Yahweh, but also of E in mention of the Amorites in v.16, the theme of “*fear not*” in v.1 & the hints that Abraham is a *prophetic* figure in the use of the formula, “*the word of the Lord came to Abraham,*” in vv.1 & 4. There are other signs that this is not just an old tradition handed down. V.13 refers to the full period of Israelite residence in Egypt as 400 years, & so comes from the hands of the J or E editors themselves. In its present form, the chapter expands the promise from a hope for an heir to a further promise of land, & stresses the *total act* of faith that Abraham made in this promise that would not be fulfilled until centuries after his death. The detailed covenant scene confirms what God’s word & Abraham’s faith in that word have already sealed. Indeed the very words of God’s promise in vv.5 & 18 are repeated by Moses to God on Mount Sinai in Ex 32:13. Thus the whole of Gen 15 becomes a *prediction & preparation* for the Sinai covenant. The words of God are not

meant as a fake prophecy, but are basically due to the story-telling technique of J, which favours incidents that *foreshadow* the events of the exodus & after. By means of such hints, he ties the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob & Joseph to the later traditions of the exodus, Sinai & life in the promised land.

The second major covenant scene comes from the hand of P in ch.17. God appears once more & renews his covenant with Abraham. This time there are no colourful ceremonies, nor is there any dialogue between God & Abraham. God speaks solemnly as El Shaddai, the God of majesty, & echoes in v.6 the theme of blessing from Gen 1:

I will make you a father of many nations. I will make you very fruitful; I will bring nations out of you, & kings shall descend from you. I will establish my covenant between you & me & your descendants after you for all generations as an everlasting covenant to be your God & the God of your descendants after you. (Gen 17:5-7)

God's words stress that the covenant will last through the times of the kings & never leave Israel. This, too, is the view of P, who wrote with a long view of history. Living in the time of exile, P offers the reassurance that the covenant remains in effect despite changing fortunes & even loss of the land. The author goes on in the rest of ch.17 to explain how the rite of circumcision will be a sign of the covenant. P is thus able to present a way of keeping the covenant that does not require an independent state to live in or even temple buildings to worship in. We know that the practice of circumcision was very important to Judaism after the Babylonian exile of the 6th cent. as a sign of membership in the community. P in this chapter manages to bring together the promise & covenant themes from a later perspective than J but one which stresses the same message: what God did for Abraham was only a foretaste of what he would do even more completely later.

Abraham the Faithful

God freely offers Abraham the promise of an heir who will found a great nation & the promise of land, but God can only bring these about if Abraham & Sarah trust enough. This is the second major theme of the Abraham stories: his *faithfulness* to God's promise. It is summed up in Gen 15:6 "*Abraham believed the Lord, who credited it to him as righteousness.*" But Abraham is not a perfect person without any flaws. In chs 12 & 20 he tries to save his own life by giving up his wife Sarah & thus risking the promise of a son. In ch.16 he is uncertain

enough to take a slave girl in order to gain a son. In ch.17, he doubts the angel who tells him that Sarah will bear a child. But these are rare moments in a life that is open to God's direction. For one thing, Abraham always worships Yahweh wherever he stops on his travels – at Bethel (ch.12), at Hebron (ch.13), at Jeru(Salem) (ch.14). He always accepts God's command to move on, & often has face to face experiences of God (chs 15, 17, 18). In a moment of great sorrow, he obeys God & sends off his son Ishmael to a new life to prevent any threat to Isaac (ch.21).

In all things Abraham proves devoted to God's commands. But the ultimate test comes when God seems to demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac back to him (ch.22). This is the high point of the Abraham story, & the authors maintain a high sense of drama & artistic skill in narrating the horrifying moment. Abraham is weighed down so greatly that he cannot bear to tell Isaac the truth, & Isaac in turn is so trusting in his father that he never suspects what is happening. The boy asks naturally curious questions, & the grieving Abraham can barely answer. He preserves the privacy of the terrible last moments by sending the servants off. Just when all seems lost, God stops his hand & provides an animal to sacrifice instead. This story often shocks modern readers. They wonder how God could ask such a thing. Perhaps the biblical authors themselves believed Abraham could never go through with the act. But they wanted to make a point for all later Israel. It was not uncommon in the ancient world for parents to sacrifice a son in times of great need or illness to try to appease the gods. The Bible gives several examples, from Jephthah in Judges 11 to Manasseh in the 7th cent. (2 Kings 21). All of these are looked upon with horror, & the story of Isaac certainly shows how Yahweh forbade any human sacrifice – he did not want human flesh but *would* accept animals as an offering instead, although he *most* wanted faith & trust.

This whole story sums up perfectly the character of Abraham as the person of faith. In Islamic traditions he is still called *khalil Allah*, “the friend of God.” Even in the NT, St. Paul cites Abraham as a model of faith (Rom 4:1-25; Gal 3:6-9). Abraham becomes the example for all Christians who believe in God's promise yet have never been part of the Jewish people. Heb 11 says Abraham believed in the promise without ever seeing it fulfilled so that Christians have become the receivers of the promise in Christ the true Son. Such NT passages, written in controversy against a Judaism that believed all of the essentials of faith were already revealed in the Torah, tried to get beyond the law of Moses

by holding that the true promise could *only be fulfilled* in the coming of Jesus. For the Christian, Abraham had faith without any aid of the law to guide him, & so his faith was greater than those under the law. Such opposition between Abraham & Moses would be offensive to any believing Jew & does not do justice to a full Christian understanding of the OT. The patriarchal stories of Abraham were preserved by the Jews themselves as a true promise & prelude to the deeper covenant & promise of Mount Sinai, & can be read in no other way, certainly not as in opposition to Moses. What lies behind the NT's strong statements against the Torah as the way of justification before God is opposition to an attitude, found in some 1st cent. Jewish teachers, that legal observance can replace a personal faith & reliance on Yahweh's larger demands for love & obedience. But this same opposition to legalism pervades the prophets & psalms in the OT & many Pharisees in Jesus' time. For prophet, Pharisee & Christian, the true covenant is indeed typified by Abraham himself: a personal faith & trust in God above everything else in life.

The above notes are based on the following:

Lawrence Boadt, *Reading the Old Testament*, Paulist Press, NY/Mahwah NJ, 1984 (pp.133-144)

Gordon Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament*. Vol.1 The Pentateuch, SPCK, London, 2003 (pp.37-45; 165-171)