

Abraham our Father

Lost in a Forest

I grew up in the Devon countryside. I remember vividly as a child at a friend's birthday party, setting out in our little group to explore a nearby forest. After a while I felt completely lost. All the paths looked the same. The trees loomed over us menacingly and I had no idea which way to go. I was worried. But my friend knew the forest.

"I don't know where I am exactly" she said "but that path is roughly in the right direction and we will soon find the main track."

Sure enough we were soon on a well worn track, and not long after that home for party tea. My friend didn't need to know every tree to navigate the forest, she just needed a broad idea of the terrain, and an unerring eye for the way home.

Often, even after years of Bible reading, Christians feel rather like I did in that forest. We feel lost in a jungle of Bible books, and obscure passages. The aim of this Bible overview is not to explore every tree, or even every pathway, but simply to plot the main highway which runs from Genesis to Revelation. Then, like my intrepid friend, we will find that we can confidently explore Scripture because we always know the way home.

Matthew's Bible Overview

In order to start to understand the Bible we will not start in the Old Testament but the New. The New Testament begins to pull together the sprawling and epic tale of Israel. It draws us towards its conclusion, sometimes in surprising ways, but always building on Old Testament foundations. The beginning of Matthew's gospel, for instance, sets out the Old Testament story in a particular, and on the surface it, rather boring way. He writes a genealogy (See Matthew 1:1-17)

Matthew clearly hadn't taken advice from his publishers about catching his readers attention! Rather he wants to communicate some important things. By telling the story as a genealogy he indicates that this is the story of a family, and in particular of a line of inheritance running down the generations from father to son. He divides his story into three equal parts, each with fourteen generations.¹ The four junction points - Abraham, David, the exile and Jesus - are all important. The reason for this structure becomes clear as Matthew's Gospel unfolds. Matthew

¹ Critics protest that in reality there were not fourteen generations in each section, and that Matthew has distorted the story for his own ends. Matthew has certainly been selective, but not in order to distort. After all any diligent reader would soon notice the discrepancy. Rather Matthew is taking advantage of the fact that the phrase "was the father of" could be used vaguely to imply general ancestry rather than strict paternity, and purposefully retelling the story to make his point. He is informing us of the underlying structure of a messy story, not giving us a strict record of fathers and sons.

understands the story of the Old Testament to be a story with the following structure

- Junction One - God makes promises to Abraham.
- Junction two - The promises are almost fulfilled in the days of King David, but David's sin prevents total fulfilment.
- Junction three - The promises are then almost lost in the days of the exile, but God's faithfulness prevents total loss.
- Junction four - The promises are finally fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Thus, for Matthew, Abraham is the key figure to understand. The promises that God makes to him shape the rest of the Old Testament, and also provide the foundation on which to understand Jesus. But is this just Matthew's perspective? We must look a little further.

Abraham in the Rest of the New Testament

A glance at the rest of the New Testament reveals that Abraham is a key figure. In Paul's letter to the Romans, after arguing at length that we are made right with God only through faith in Christ, he appeals to Abraham as his prime example (Romans 4)². Perhaps even more significantly in Galatians after he has explained both the death of Christ, and the centrality of faith in him, Paul explains

He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit. (Galatians 3:14)

Abraham is not only an example to us, Paul is here asserting that the Bible story revolves around a blessing given to Abraham which finally spread out to include the whole world. Luke similarly makes this point when he records both Mary's and Zechariah's praise at the miraculous events surrounding Jesus' birth. Mary says

⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
remembering to be merciful
⁵⁵ to Abraham and his descendants for ever,
even as he said to our fathers." (Luke 1:54-55)

And Zechariah says that God has remembered

the oath he swore to our father Abraham (Luke 1:73)

In Acts 3 when Peter explains the gospel, his crucial point is that Jesus is the fulfilment of prophecies concerning the covenant that God made with Abraham³. In addition to these explicit texts, we will see in future weeks that the story of Abraham is important for our understanding of many key passages in the New

² See also Hebrews 11:8-19, and James 2:18-26 where a slightly different point is made, but still relying on the foundational example of Abraham.

³ Acts 3:25-26.

Testament⁴. The rest of the New Testament endorses Matthew's understanding of the Bible story.

The Promises to Abraham

So what was Abraham promised? God speaks to him on a number of occasions recorded in Genesis 12:1-13, 13:14-18, 15:1-16, 17:1-22, 22:15-18. Although there are no doubt many ways to distil these promises I have found that a very fruitful summary comprises a fourfold division.

- Land
- Offspring
- Enjoying the presence of God
- For all nations

Abraham is promised **land**. God says to him

“I am the Lord, who brought you out of Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land to take possession of it.” (Genesis 15:7, see also Gen 12:1 13:15, 15:16, 17:8)

This theme becomes a dominant part of the Old Testament story.

He is also promised innumerable **offspring**.

He 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.” (Genesis 15:5 see also Gen 12:2, 13:6, 17:2-6, 22:17)

As the story unfolds it becomes clear that this promise of innumerable offspring is to be borne in each subsequent generation by one inheritor of the promise, hence the pivotal importance of the near sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. A dominant underlying theme of the Old Testament is the repeated question “who will inherit the promise in this generation?” Coupled with this is the related question “will this promise-bearer be the One through whom all the promises to Abraham are fulfilled?” We can therefore divide this element of the promise into the “many” and “the One”⁵.

Abraham himself **enjoys the presence of God** and this is promised to his descendants.

“I will establish my covenant as an everlasting covenant between me and you and your descendants after you for the generations to come, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you... I will be their God.” (Genesis 17:7-8)

⁴ See particularly John 8:31-9, Acts 7:1-8, Romans 9:7-9, Hebrews 6:13-18, and also see ‘Abraham’ in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken et al. (Downers Grove, Ill. ; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1998): p. 3, T.D. Alexander, ‘Abraham (Abram)’ in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000).

⁵ The word “offspring” both in English and Greek can imply one or many. Paul points out this ambiguity in Galatians 3:16 and suggests it was purposeful, in the mind of God, in order to anticipate both the many offspring and the “one offspring” Jesus Christ.

The idea of God living amongst his people as their God is vital in understanding the Bible.

Finally God promises that the blessing he intends for Abraham's descendants will spread out to **all nations**.

“Through your offspring all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me.” (Genesis 22:18)

The world is to be blessed with Abraham's blessings.

The Central Message of the Bible

The promises to Abraham encapsulate for us the central message of the Bible. The promise of land alerts us to the fact that God's promises are not merely ethereal and spiritual, they are about solid physical reality. Expanding this promise to Abraham, Jesus promised that the meek would inherit, *the earth*⁶ and the prophets and the New Testament promise that our final hope is not to be disembodied spirits but resurrected physical people in a new heaven and a new earth⁷.

The promise of *innumerable offspring* develops into the glorious reality of a worldwide community of love, service and faithful witness which is God's church⁸. Beyond that too, it stretches into eternity where the new creation will be populated by a great number no-one can count finally living as a fully transformed joyful community in the New Jerusalem⁹.

The promise of a *enjoying the presence of God* touches our deepest need which is to know and delight in God. It is this relationship which transforms us¹⁰ and it is this relationship which will one day be the sum and completion of all our happiness¹¹.

And the promise that *all nations* can enjoy this strips the gospel of any narrow cultural or national baggage and gives us all equal access to this solid, communal and God-entranced blessing¹².

And all of this is achieved for us by the life, death and resurrection of “one offspring” Jesus Christ¹³, and mediated to us now by the Spirit¹⁴ while we wait for the completion of God's plan.

⁶ Matthew 5:5, cf *the land* in Joshua 1:6, 1 Chronicles 16:18, Psalm 37:9, 11, 22, Isaiah 57:13.

⁷ Isaiah 65:17, 2 Peter 3:13, Revelation 21:1.

⁸ Matthew 16:18, Ephesians 2:11-22, 1 Peter 2:9.

⁹ Revelation 7:9, Revelation 21:2.

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 3:18, 4:6.

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 13:12, Revelation 21:22-23, 22:5. For a passionate exposition of the centrality of this theme in Scripture see John Piper, *God Is the Gospel : Meditations on God's Love as the Gift of Himself* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2005)

¹² Romans 5:2, Ephesians 2:18, Revelation 21:24, 22:2.

¹³ Galatians 3:16, Revelation 22:16.

¹⁴ Ephesians 1:13-14, Romans 8:9-17.

What Abraham is promised is the germ of the glorious and complete riches which the New Testament describes as the good news – the gospel.

What about Adam?

This is all very exciting but doesn't the story begin in the Garden of Eden, long before Abraham? Shouldn't Adam be the central figure who shapes the rest of the story?

Certainly the New Testament does treat Adam as a central figure. When Luke traces the genealogy of Jesus, he traces his ancestors back beyond Abraham to the first man¹⁵. Similarly in Romans 5:12-21 Jesus is described as the one who reversed the curse which Adam brought¹⁶. There is no doubt that the overarching story in the Bible is the story which runs from Adam and Eve caring for the Garden of Eden in Genesis 1-3 to the new garden city populated by people every tribe and nation and presided over by the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb in Revelation 21-22. We will see, however, that the promises to Abraham give clarity and shape to this story. Indeed when God says to Abraham "I give you this land" he is consciously echoing the blessings of the Garden of Eden. Through Abraham God is going to restore what was lost in Eden.

Eden's Blessings and Abraham's Promises

In Genesis 1 God creates all things. His creation is described six times as "good" and finally as "very good"¹⁷. The first man and woman are created in the image of God to rule over and care for God's good creation.

The categories we have derived from the promises to Abraham provide an extremely useful tool in analysing the blessings described in Genesis 1 & 2.

Land. The man and woman are created to spread out into the whole earth¹⁸ but they are given in particular the Garden of Eden as their special home¹⁹. This is an idyllic fruitful place, with gold, aromatic resin and onyx in the vicinity. The land is good.

Offspring. The man and the woman are told to "be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth"²⁰. Thus the original blessing involved the prospect of many offspring.

¹⁵ Luke 3:23-37.

¹⁶ See also 1 Corinthians 15:21-22, 45. For a helpful introduction to Adam in the Bible see 'Adam' in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken et al. (Downers Grove, Ill. ; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1998): p.9 For Adam in Pauline theology see N. T. Wright, 'Adam, Israel and the Messiah' in *The Climax of the Covenant : Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991): pp18-40 Also several other chapters in the book.

¹⁷ "Good" in Genesis 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25. "Very good" in Genesis 1:31.

¹⁸ Genesis 1:23.

¹⁹ Genesis 2:8-17.

²⁰ Genesis 1:28.

Enjoying God's presence. God's relationship with his human beings is mentioned several times. In Genesis 1:28 God blesses them and speaks to them. In the description of the creation of the man in Genesis 2:7 God is said to have "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life". All creatures have the breath of life²¹, but the man uniquely received this by a face to face act. In Genesis 3:8 God is described as "walking in the garden in the cool of the day" indicating that this was God's habit as he and they enjoyed a natural uninhibited relationship.

For all nations. The first man and woman are the ancestors of all the nations. Their blessing is the beginning of blessing for everyone.

This fourfold division provides a helpful and comprehensive analysis of all the good things that God gave the first man and the first woman. However, must now look at how Genesis 3 describes things going wrong.

Eden's Curse and Abraham's Promises

The story is as simple as it is tragic. God gave one minor restriction to the man and the woman: they could not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil²². However, the serpent persuaded them to disobey even this minor restriction, and in consequence a curse came on them and the whole of creation. Once again we can analyse what has gone wrong using the four Abrahamic categories.

Land. God says to Adam "cursed is the ground/land/world²³ because of you"²⁴. This is the culmination of all that has gone wrong. Importantly, though, the curse is not total. Originally mankind was given all the plants as food²⁵. Now, though the labour to produce food will be toilsome, nevertheless they will still eat the plants of the field²⁶. The curse has marred the goodness of the earth, but not totally destroyed it. Nor has God's original intention been thwarted.

Offspring. Similarly, when God addresses the woman he says "I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing". The curse has now marred the process of producing many descendant, but there is still the firm affirmation that "you will give birth to children"²⁷. God's instruction to fill the earth still stands. Indeed in Genesis 3:15 the curse on the serpent, which symbolises the Devil, anticipates the final victory of one descendant of the woman, when it says "he will crush your head

²¹ Genesis 1:30, 6:17.

²² Genesis 2:16-17.

²³ The Hebrew word *ḏā-māh* can mean soil, or a local area or the whole earth. Genesis 12:3 uses this latter meaning when God declares "all peoples on earth [*ḏā-māh*] will be blessed through you", echoing Genesis 3:17 as we will see later.

²⁴ Genesis 3:17.

²⁵ Genesis 1:29.

²⁶ Genesis 3:19.

²⁷ Genesis 3:16.

and you will strike his heel”²⁸. The battle is on, but though Satan will cause damage, the offspring will deal the fatal head wound to our enemy.

Enjoying God’s presence. After God has finished speaking to the man and the woman he banishes them from the Garden. This is a further example of their cursed relationship with the land, but it also symbolises a lost relationship with God, who met with them in the Garden. In Genesis 4 the story develops further, as Cain murders Abel and the curse spreads. Cain’s punishment is to be a restless wanderer on the earth, but his key concern is his loss of relationship with God.

Cain said to the Lord, “My punishment is more than I can bear. Today you are driving me from the land, and I will be hidden from your presence”
(Genesis 4:13-14)

Once again however, God affirms that all is not lost. He puts a mark on Cain, signifying his continuing care and protection. From then on Cain lived away from the Lord’s presence but still under his care²⁹.

For all nations. Adam and Eve are the ancestors of all nations, so through them all nations receive mankind’s curse. But the continuing promise of children and the signs of God’s blessing amongst all their descendants³⁰, indicates that God has not totally written off any nation. One day all nations will be blessed.

Eden in the Rest of the Old Testament

The idea of the restoration of Eden continues throughout the Bible³¹. Abraham’s promise of land echoes the original gift of the garden. This idea is echoed in the law³² whilst Moses’ warning of expulsion from the Promised Land echoes Adam and Eve’s expulsion from Eden³³. In addition the tabernacle is designed to recall Eden. The lampstand which lights the Holy Place is in the form of a tree (of life?)³⁴. The curtain which protects the Holy Place is embroidered with cherubim,

²⁸ Genesis 3:15. See Gordon J. Wenham, ‘Genesis 1-15’ in *Word biblical commentary ; v.1* (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1987) for discussion of this verse.

²⁹ Genesis 4:16.

³⁰ Cain and his descendants build the first city. In the rest of Scripture cities become a major focus of human depravity but also of hope. See Jacques Ellul, *The Meaning of the City* (Grand Rapids,; Eerdmans, 1970) Also ‘City’ in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, ed. Leland Ryken et al. (Downers Grove, Ill. ; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1998): p 150 In addition they produce musical instruments and bronze and iron tools (Genesis 4:21-22) which develop the theme of blessing and creativity hinted at in Genesis 2:11-12.

³¹ A very stimulating book which explores the theme of land as a restoration of Eden throughout the Bible is Walter Brueggemann, *The Land : Place as Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Overtures to Biblical Theology; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977) See also E. A. Martens, ‘God’s Design : A Focus on Old Testament Theology’ (2nd ed edn; Grand Rapids, Michigan/Leicester: Baker Book House/Apollos, 1994): 320

³² See for instance Deuteronomy 7:13-15, 8:6-9.

³³ E.g. Deuteronomy 32.

³⁴ Exodus 25:31-40

which originally guarded the entrance to Eden³⁵. Onyx was mentioned in Eden and it turns up again on the ephod of the high priest³⁶.

The prophets extend the idea of a restored Garden of Eden to the whole earth and finally to miraculous “new heavens and new earth”³⁷, whilst Daniel sees “one like a son of man” who is given dominion over the whole earth, as a new Adam³⁸.

All of this lays the foundation for the New Testament in which Jesus is the new Adam who reverses the curse of Eden, and paves the way for our ultimate hope which is a new and eternal creation which again has the tree of life at its centre³⁹.

The story of the Bible therefore, is the story of a very good creation cursed by mankind’s sin. God then sets about restoring his creation. He promises restoration to Abraham, initially for only one nation, but finally this restoration project will spread out through Jesus to the whole of creation for all eternity. The dimensions of that restoration can be summarised under the four headings of “land”, “offspring”, “enjoying God’s presence”, and “all nations”.

Exercise

Examine the story from Genesis 4-11 picking out the developments of this fourfold theme, and particularly noticing the moments when hopes for a recovery of Eden’s blessings are raised and dashed.

Questions

1. Does the fourfold synthesis of the promises to Abraham miss something vital in what God says to him?
2. What important elements of the whole Biblical story are missed out by this fourfold synthesis?
3. From your present knowledge how do you think the New Testament develops the fourfold promise to Abraham?
4. What aspects of the story of creation and fall in Genesis 1-3 are missed if we use the filter of land, offspring, relationship with God, for all nations?
5. The ideas of blessing and curse are prominent in Genesis 1-3. How do these concepts get developed in the rest of Scripture? Consider particularly Genesis 12:1-3, Exodus 7-11, Deuteronomy 27-28, Isaiah 53, Matthew 27:45-50, Galatians 3:10-14, Revelation 22:3.
6. How does the curse of death in Genesis 3:19 fit into this story? Why is the story of Enoch (Genesis 5:21-24) mentioned?

³⁵ Exodus 26:1, cf Genesis 3:24.

³⁶ Exodus 25:7, cf Genesis 2:12.

³⁷ See e.g. Isaiah 2:4, 11:6-9, 35:6-10, 51:1-3, 65:17-25. Ezekiel 47-48.

³⁸ Daniel 7.

³⁹ Revelation 22:2.