

Abraham to Moses

The Story So Far

So far we have begun to see that the whole Bible hinges around a story. It begins in the Garden of Eden in which God makes everything good, but through the man and woman's sin, everything is cursed. God then sets about reversing this curse through Abraham. Matthew 1:1-17 sketched out for us a schematic overview of the Bible in which a promise is made to Abraham, almost fulfilled in King David's reign, almost lost in the exile, and finally fulfilled in Jesus.

The promise to Abraham is fourfold. He is promised **land**, innumerable **offspring**, and the **enjoyment of God's presence** for him and his descendants, and also that this blessing will spread out to **all nations**.

But the path from promise to fulfilment is far from smooth. Even the story from Abraham to David has major twists and turns. In this section we will follow the story through the first few generations.

Isaac, Jacob, Joseph

Isaac is Abraham's only true heir and therefore the bearer of the promise. The wife he chooses is therefore very important¹, but even more important are his sons. Rebekah gives birth to twin sons, Esau and Jacob, and though Esau is born first, Jacob is immediately identified as a grasper². Through trickery Jacob indeed steals his brother's birthright, and becomes the inheritor of the promise. Jacob then flees the promised land. Is the promise of land about to be forgotten? At the border Jacob has a very important dream. He sees a ladder with angels ascending and descending on him³. And

There above it stood the Lord, and he said: "I am the Lord, the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac. I will give you and your descendants the land on which you are lying. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and you will spread out to the west and to the east, to the north and to the south. All peoples on earth will be blessed through you and your offspring. I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you." (Genesis 28:13-15)

All four elements of the promise to Abraham are reiterated. Isaac is promised the **land** on which his head rests, innumerable **offspring**, that he and his offspring will bless **all nations** and crucially that God will be with him wherever he goes. His

¹ See Genesis 24 where Abraham's confidence that God will provide the right wife is based on the promises God has already made to him about his offspring (Genesis 24:7).

² Genesis 25:26. Jacob comes out grasping his brother's heel, and is named thus because Jacob, means "he grasps."

³ The NIV suggests that "on it" refers to the ladder. They could be descending "on the ladder" but the more natural reading is that "on it/him" refers to what they are alighting on, not what they are climbing on. Since "ground" is feminine and this pronoun is masculine it cannot refer to that.

enjoyment of God's presence is not restricted to life in the land of promise⁴. God further assures Jacob that he will bring him back to the land of promise.

Away from the promised land Jacob's domestic affairs become distinctly complicated. He marries two wives, Leah, and her sister Rachel. He ends up having sons, not only by both these wives, but also by two concubines. Jacob finally returns to the promised land with twelve sons, several of whom have a potential claim as inheritors of the promise.

The four oldest sons are all born to Leah, the eldest of whom is Reuben. However Reuben falls into disfavour after he sleeps with his father's concubine⁵. The next two, Simeon and Levi, cause trouble for their father by their violent behaviour⁶ and are also in disgrace. The fourth son is Judah. However there are also two sons by Jacob's second wife. Though younger these two have the advantage of being sons of Rachel, the love of Jacob's life. The eldest of them is Joseph, whilst the next one is Benjamin⁷, who is also very much loved by his father. The question over the inheritance is unclear to say the least.

In Genesis 37 Joseph is given a royal robe by his father, indicating that he is the chosen son. In addition he has two dreams both of which seem to confirm that he will rule over his brothers. Far from accepting this, however, the brothers initially plan to murder Joseph, but instead kidnap him and sell him into slavery in Egypt. Perhaps Joseph's chances of inheriting are lost?

Genesis 38 follows Judah, another candidate for the inheritance. Judah, however, becomes embroiled in a nasty sex scandal and finally is forced to publicly admit his deep moral compromise⁸. However we are encouraged to note that Judah fathers twin boys and once again there is a question mark over who inherits⁹. Perhaps there is more to this story yet.

In Genesis 39, however, we return to Joseph and find that, even in a foreign land, God is with him as he was with Jacob¹⁰. Joseph prospers and rises to high power in

The Sons of Jacob
Ranked in Birth Order.

Sons by wife Leah

Reuben

Simeon

Levi

Judah

Sons by concubines

Dan

Naphtali

Gad

Asher

More sons by wife Leah

Issachar

Zebulun

Sons by wife Rachel

Joseph

Benjamin

⁴ John 1:51 alludes to this incident but instead of the angels descending on Jacob they descend on Jesus. Thus, just as Jacob was reassured that he was the conduit through which the promises to Abraham would be fulfilled, so Jesus now says that this is transferred to him. See D.A. Carson, 'The Gospel According to John' (Leicester: Apollos, 1991)

⁵ Genesis 35:22.

⁶ Genesis 34.

⁷ The name Benjamin, was given to him by Jacob (Genesis 35:18). It means "son of my right hand" which might indicate a favoured status for this boy, even though he is the youngest.

⁸ Genesis 28:26.

⁹ Genesis 28:27-30.

Egypt. Years later when his brothers arrive in search of food, Joseph takes advantage of the fact that they don't recognise him and tests them. He picks on Benjamin and threatens him. If the brothers now hate Benjamin, the other son of Rachel, as much as they hated him, they have the opportunity to abandon him. But Judah in particular will not abandon him. He pleads for Benjamin, even offering to place himself in slavery if Benjamin can go free¹¹. Thus Judah shows himself to be thoroughly penitent for his previous behaviour. Joseph is satisfied, and finally reveals his identity. Jacob goes to join Joseph, but only after God has assured him that the promises to Abraham still stand despite leaving the promised land¹². The whole family then takes up residence in Egypt.

However the question of inheritance has not yet been finally settled. Will it be Joseph, the eldest son of Rachel, and present ruler over his brothers? Or will it be penitent Judah, older than Joseph, and clearly the leader of the other brothers? On his death-bed Jacob pronounces his verdict in the form of a series of blessings. Reuben, Simeon and Levi are swiftly dismissed for their sins. But Judah receives a different word.

“Judah, your brothers will praise you;
your hand will be on the neck of your enemies;
your father's sons will bow down to you.
You are a lion's cub, O Judah;
you return from the prey, my son.
Like a lion he crouches and lies down,
like a lioness—who dares to rouse him?
The sceptre will not depart from Judah,
nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until he comes to whom it belongs
and the obedience of the nations is his.
(Genesis 49:8-10)

Judah will rule over his brothers, and a descendant of his will rule over the nations. Joseph receives high praise and is promised the blessings that his father enjoyed¹³, but the true inheritor of the promise is Judah¹⁴.

The book of Genesis ends with Jacob's and Joseph's deaths in Egypt. When Jacob dies they take his body back to the promised land and bury him in the only little bit of land which the family actually own¹⁵. When Joseph dies he reminds his brothers

¹⁰ Genesis 39:2.

¹¹ Genesis 44:18-34.

¹² Genesis 46:3-4.

¹³ Genesis 49:22-26.

¹⁴ Much of the subsequent political problems in Israel can be traced to Israel's reluctance to accept this prophecy. In particular when the kingdom was divided by Jeroboam's rebellion it is significant that Jeroboam was an Ephraimite (1 Kings 11:26). Joseph's tribe had become divided into two half-tribes named after his two sons Ephraim and Manasseh. Ephraim was the chosen son of Joseph (See Genesis 48) and so the leading tribe of Joseph was the tribe of Ephraim. Subsequently the whole breakaway northern region of Israel (which actually comprised ten tribes) was denominated by the one name Ephraim.

¹⁵ Genesis 50:1-14. Abraham bought the land to bury his wife Sarah. See Genesis 23.

of the promises to Abraham, and makes his sons swear that when the nation returns to the promised land their descendants will carry his bones back with them¹⁶. The promise has not been forgotten.

The Exodus

The book of Exodus begins with the Abraham's promise far from fulfilled. They are in Egypt, far from the promised land. Only seventy had gone down to Egypt so they were far from innumerable. There is no mention of God's presence, and, rather than Israel blessing the nations, the great nation of Egypt is actually oppressing Israel. But God is quietly at work. The Israelites "were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them"¹⁷. This not only alludes to the first mandate at creation to "be fruitful and ...fill the earth"¹⁸ it also reminds us of the renewal of that mandate in the promise to Abraham of innumerable offspring¹⁹. They are no yet innumerable, but they are heading that way.

Then a child is born. He is a Levite²⁰, not from the tribe of Judah, so he is not the One, but from the start he is a "fine child". He is named Moses. Moses however, tries an abortive liberation campaign and ends up exiled from his people having lost his faith. But then God steps in. He appears to Moses in a burning bush and immediately makes it plain who he is.

"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob."²¹

He is the same God who made promises to Abraham, and reaffirmed them through the generations. Now he renews his relationship with his people – "I have come down"²² - and begins to fulfil his promise to bring them back to the promised land²³.

Moses and the Character of God

At this point God announces and explains his name - Yahweh²⁴ - and in doing so describes his character. The name Yahweh, is related to the Hebrew word for "I am", and so the significance of God's name becomes somewhat enigmatic. God is saying "I just 'AM' and that should be enough for you." However the rest of the Old Testament begins to flesh out the significance of this name. It points to a God who is always the same, who is always in control, and who is always working out

¹⁶ Genesis 50:24-25. Moses actually honours this oath in Exodus 13:19.

¹⁷ Exodus 1:7, cf Genesis 47 :27

¹⁸ Genesis 1:28.

¹⁹ Genesis 15:5.

²⁰ Exodus 2:1.

²¹ Exodus 3:6.

²² Exodus 3:8.

²³ Exodus 3:8. This had been specifically promised to Abraham in Genesis 15:13-15.

²⁴ Exodus 3:1-14.

his purposes according to his unchanging plan. In Exodus 34 Moses gets a further glimpse of God's character, and therefore what drives his eternal plan. God reveals his 'back' to Moses saying

“The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children and their children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation.” (Exodus 34:6-7)

God here reveals his compassion, his grace, his love and particularly his faithfulness²⁵. But he is also a God of justice. How he can be both faithful to his promises to Abraham, but also faithful to his own justice which demands punishment and exile, is the central conundrum of the Old Testament and the central discovery of the New.

Frequently throughout the Old Testament God's 'covenant name', Yahweh, is used specifically to remind us of Exodus 3 and 34, and to affirm God's unstoppable determination to fulfil his promises despite Israel's sin.

For the sake of Jacob my servant, of Israel my chosen, I summon you by name and bestow on you a title of honour, though you do not acknowledge me.
I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. (Isaiah 45:4-5)

The Exodus and the Promises to Abraham

As God sets out to liberate his people and set them on the path back to the promised land, the fourfold promise to Abraham is very much in mind.

Land. God repeatedly affirms that his motivation in delivering them from Egypt is partly to fulfil his promise to settle them in the promised land²⁶.

Offspring. Moses is from the wrong tribe to be the One who will fulfil Abraham's promise. However God is increasing the numbers in Israel. We have already seen that the Israelites in Moses' day were "exceedingly numerous"²⁷ and it is the fact that the Israelites are numerous, which threatens Pharaoh so that he attempts some brutal population control²⁸. When Israel is finally liberated we are told that there were about six hundred thousand men, plus women and children²⁹. They are not yet innumerable but they are growing.

²⁵ See e.g. 2 Chronicles 30:9, Nehemiah 9:17, Psalm 86:15, 103:8, 11:4, 145:8, Joel 2:13, Jonah 4:2. John 1:1-18 alludes to many themes in Exodus, but in particular Jesus is described as "full of grace and truth" (v17). This is a direct allusion to this passage in which 'grace' comes encapsulate all that is said about God's love and mercy, and 'truth' describes his faithfulness. The appearance of Jesus, therefore, eclipses this revelation of God's character. Jesus shows us God in ways the Moses never could.

²⁶ Exodus 3:17, 6:4, 8, 12:25, 13:5, 11, 23:23, 31, 32:13, 33:1.

²⁷ Exodus 1:7.

²⁸ Exodus 1:9, 15-22.

²⁹ Exodus 12:37.

Enjoying God's presence. The book of Exodus is all about knowing God³⁰. From Moses' first meeting with God in the burning bush³¹ to the moment when the glory of the Lord fills the tabernacle³² everything is focused on Israel's discovery, or perhaps rediscovery, of God. Pharaoh is defeated so that Israel, Egypt and the world will know that God is the Lord³³. Israel is guided and protected by the visible presence of God in fire and cloud³⁴. Israel's great hymn of praise after deliverance is about the uniqueness and power of their God³⁵. The second half of Exodus revolves around God's provision of manna and quail so that they will "know that it was the Lord who brought you out of Egypt"³⁶, various trials in which they question "is the Lord among us or not?"³⁷, the meeting between Moses and God at Sinai in which the law is given³⁸ and particularly the building of the tabernacle in which God meets with Moses, and through which God dwells near his people³⁹. The plans for the tabernacle are a richly symbolic representation of a new creation with God dwelling at the heart.⁴⁰ By the end of Exodus their relationship with God is dramatically deeper and richer.

For all nations. At the beginning of Exodus a darker dimension to God's determination to bless all nations emerges. It was already present in the days of Abraham when God said "whoever curses you I will curse"⁴¹ but in Egypt that warning becomes a reality. The truth is that nations which oppress God's people, and all people who oppose him, face this curse, which unfolds terrifyingly in Exodus 7-12. The final two parts of the curse are darkness and the death of all firstborn boys. They are chosen because they represent the future of the family. There is no hope for anyone, from whatever nation, who opposes the living God⁴².

³⁰ This is the introductory statement in Desmond Alexander's excellent introduction to Exodus. See T. Desmond Alexander, 'From Paradise to the Promised Land : An Introduction to the Pentateuch' (2nd edn; Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002): xxi, 339

³¹ Exodus 3:1-4:17.

³² Exodus 40:34-38.

³³ Exodus 6:7, 7:5, 17, 8:10, 22, 9:29, 10:2, 11:7, 14:4, 14:18.

³⁴ Exodus 13:2-22.

³⁵ Exodus 15:1-21.

³⁶ Exodus 16 esp. v6.

³⁷ See e.g. Exodus 17:7.

³⁸ Exodus 19-24. The central purpose of the law is to prescribe standards of behaviour which will enable God to continue to dwell amongst his people. This is clear, for instance, when Israel sin by making the golden calf. Clearly for Moses the central problem is their potential loss of relationship with God. See Exodus 33.

³⁹ Exodus 25-40.

⁴⁰ See P. E. Enns, 'Exodus (Book)' in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000)

⁴¹ Genesis 12:3.

⁴² We will see that it is no coincidence that darkness comes over the land when Jesus is on the cross (Matthew 27:45 et par). The curse which fell on Egypt, is falling on Jesus, as God's firstborn dies.

Indeed it is made very clear that Israel herself cannot escape the plague on the firstborn without special provision. Every Israelite family has to sacrifice a perfect lamb, eat it, and smear its blood on the doorposts and lintels of their house. In this way they will be passed over by the Lord⁴³.

Of course this sacrifice of Passover anticipates in fascinating ways the sacrificial death of Jesus. In John 1:29, John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the true 'lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world'. What each of those lambs did for one Israelite family, Jesus will do for all nations.

Exodus itself is also full of hope for the nations. Alongside the Israelites who are saved we are told that "many other people went up with them"⁴⁴. Beyond that when Israel receives the law she is given a high calling.

"Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.' These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites." (Exodus 19:5-6)

To be a priest is to stand between God and man; having unique access to God, but also mediating the presence and blessings of God to mankind. The whole nation of Israel was to be a kingdom of priests. Her access to God was for the blessing of all nations.

Thus God liberates his people in order to his fulfil his fourfold promise to Abraham. By the end of the book of Exodus, they are not in the promised land, but they are liberated from Egypt. They are not innumerable, but they are numerous. They have had some crises in their relationship with God, but his glory now fills the tabernacle. One nation has been defeated, but there are only a few stragglers from the nations being blessed amongst them. There is much more of the story to unfold yet.

Exercise

Examine the instructions for the tabernacle and consider what spiritual messages the tabernacle is intended to convey⁴⁵. Consider what it means that John tells us that Jesus "tabernacled" amongst for while (John 1:14). How does the tabernacle anticipate Jesus?

Questions

1. Why do you suppose that so much attention is given to the story of Jacob in Genesis? Does this fit with an emphasis on tracing the promises to Abraham?
2. "Exodus is about knowing God through personal experience" T. D. Alexander. How far is this true and what does it miss out?

⁴³ Exodus 12.

⁴⁴ Exodus 12:38.

⁴⁵ You may find Vern S. Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1991) useful although it can be rather speculative at times.

3. Why is the Passover so important? What lessons does it teach us about enjoying God's promises?
4. In Exodus 15 God is described as a great warrior. How does the theme of God as warrior develop through the rest of the Old and New Testaments⁴⁶?
5. Israel was to be a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:5-6). How does this theme develop through the rest of the Bible?

⁴⁶ You want to look at Leland Ryken et al., 'Divine Warrior' in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, Ill. ; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1998): p. 210 or the fuller account in Tremper Longman III & Daniel Reid, *God Is a Warrior* (Studies in Biblical Theology; Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995)