

**UNIT 1 - INTRODUCING THE OLD TESTAMENT****LESSON 3****THE PATRIARCHS**

From the broad canvas of the beginnings of world history, we turn to the beginnings of redemption. God's redemptive purposes for mankind were to be concentrated on a single nation, and the beginnings of that nation must now be traced. In the stories of the Patriarchs, ("Fathers" or "rulers of a family or tribe", in this case, referring specifically to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph), we find the anticipation of the nation Israel, through God's promises to Abraham and their later repetition to the other patriarchs.

In the 19th century, some scholars expressed doubts about whether the Patriarchs had ever lived, and about the reliability of the stories concerning them in Genesis. In the present century, archaeologists have made discoveries which support the picture Genesis gives of life in the Patriarchal era. Particularly interesting are the Nuzu tablets, which were discovered in 1925 at Nuzu in Northern Iraq. These tablets date from the 15th century B.C. In them, we find recorded many domestic incidents similar to those in Genesis. One tablet reveals that at Nuzu, childless people could adopt a son as their heir, but if a natural son was born to them, after the adoption, the latter became the heir (cf. Genesis 15). The childless Sarah's action in giving her handmaid Hagar, to Abraham as a second wife (Genesis 16), is reflected in another tablet. Relationships between Esau and Jacob, and Laban and Jacob, are also illuminated by these tablets. For additional reading, consult the article "Archaeology" in the New Bible Dictionary. Also John Bright, "The History of Israel" page 63.

The Christian is prepared to accept the Biblical record as trustworthy. What the above evidence does, is to give support to the text of Genesis by showing that the domestic incidents recorded concerning the Patriarchs, fit naturally into the period about 2,000 to 1,500 B.C. In no sense does archaeology "prove" the Bible, but it shows that there is little reason to doubt the historical accuracy of what Genesis records concerning the Patriarchs.

While archaeology may help us to understand something of Patriarchal history, we must recognise that it cannot help us with the major interest about the Patriarchs - their relationships with God. Genesis is not secular history; it is the record of God's dealings with mankind.

Chapters 12-50 of Genesis divide into three main sections:

1. Incidents concerning Abraham (12 - 25:18).
2. Incidents concerning Jacob (25:19 - 36:43).
3. Incidents concerning Joseph (37 - 50).

We notice from this that there is little interest in Isaac. He appears only as a bridge between Abraham and Jacob, and although God's promised line continues through Isaac, there is little interest in him for his own sake. We will now examine each of these divisions in a bit more detail.

**INCIDENTS CONCERNING ABRAHAM** : 12 - 25:18 (Read these in one sitting).

Abraham's call (12:1-9)

Abraham in Egypt (12:10-20)

Abraham and Lot separate (13:1-18)

Abraham's victory over four kings and meeting with Melchizedek (14:1-24)

God's Covenant with Abraham (15:1-21)

The Birth of Ishmael (16:1-16)

The Covenant with Abraham and the institution of circumcision (17:1-14,23-27)

The promise of a son (17:15-22; 18:1-15)

Abraham's intercession for Sodom (18:16-23)

The destruction of Sodom and rescue of Lot (19:1-38) Abraham and Abimelech (20:1-18)

The Birth of Isaac and expulsion of Ishmael (21:1-21)

The covenant between Abraham, and Abimelech (21:22-34)

The sacrifice of Isaac (22:1-24)

The death and burial of Sarah (23:1-20)

Isaac and Rebekah (24:1-67)

Abraham's Death and Burial (25:1-18)

**PRINCIPLES FROM THE STORY OF ABRAHAM**

1. God takes the initiative: Genesis 12

Abraham was possibly oblivious to God, but God broke through to him. This is also called the doctrine of Election. God chooses a person, not because of the worthiness of the chosen person, but because of HIS love.

2. Use of Covenant: Genesis 15:9-21; 17:1-14

The essential features of any covenant are that:

- i) It is an agreement which brings people into relationships with one another.
- ii) It involves mutual duties and responsibilities (e.g. marriage).



In these covenants, Abraham's responsibility is to believe God and "walk before me and be blameless" (Genesis 17:1). Circumcision is also part of the covenant (Genesis 17:11).

God's main promise is to give Abraham land and many descendants.

3. Inseparable Relationship between Belief and Obedience

4. Redemption is by God exercising His Might

This is not very clear yet, but there is the beginning of the concept of God's might (which will become most apparent with Jesus' resurrection). An example of God's might in the Abraham stories is the birth of Isaac.

**INCIDENTS CONCERNING JACOB** : 25:19-36:43 (Read these in one sitting)

The Birth of Esau and Jacob and Sale of the Birthright (25:19-34)

Incidents in Isaac's life (26:1-35)

Jacob defrauds Esau of the Blessing (27:1-45)

Jacob's journey and dream at Bethel (27:46 - 28:22)

Jacob's Marriage to Leah and Rachel (29:1-30)

The Birth of Jacob's children (29:31 - 30:24)

Jacob acquires wealth (30:25-43)

Jacob's departure (31:1-55)

Jacob prepares to meet Esau (32:1-21)

God wrestles with Jacob (31:22-32)

Jacob meets Esau (33:1-20)

The conquest of Schechem (34:1-31)

Jacob's return to Bethel (35:1-29)

Esau's descendants (36:1-43)

In Genesis 27:1-45, the words of the dying father were as binding as a modern day will.

**PRINCIPLES FROM THE STORY OF JACOB**

1. Strengthening of the Principle of Election

God takes the initiative. Jacob was called even before he was born (Genesis 25:23). The character of Jacob highlights the principle; he was cunning, deceitful etc, but God's choice was not an accident. God's salvation is by grace only, not by merit.



## 2. Covenant must be renewed

This was for both Isaac (Genesis 26:1-5) and Jacob (Genesis 28:10f). The covenant must be received, as well as given (Genesis 28:20f).

There are some moral problems with these stories, for instance, Jacob had several wives - two sisters and their two maids. However, we must not judge the beginning by the end. God had to start with people where they were and reveal himself and his righteousness gradually over thousands of years.

He progressively revealed himself as:

- a) a God
- b) the God to be worshipped
- c) the only God

### **INCIDENTS CONCERNING JOSEPH** : 37-50 (Read this in one sitting)

Joseph's brothers sell him (37:1-36)

Judah and Tamar (38:1-30) (An interlude in the main narrative)

Joseph and Potiphar's wife (39:1-23)

The dreams of the Egyptian Officials (40:1-23)

Joseph at Pharaoh's court (41:1-57)

First journey of Joseph's brothers to Egypt (42:1-38)

Second journey to Egypt (43:1-34)

The final test (44:1-34)

The reconciliation (45:1-28)

Jacob goes to Egypt (46:1-47:12)

Joseph as Administrator (47:13-27)

Jacob's last acts: Blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh (47:28-48:22)

The Blessing of Jacob (49:1-27)

Jacob's death: Joseph's last acts (49:28 50:26)

### **PRINCIPLES FROM THE STORY OF JOSEPH**

1. This story is an explanation of how the covenant family came to be in Egypt (from which the Exodus later took place).
2. There is a development in the revelation of the sovereignty of God. God is able to bring His will to pass, despite working with people who are fully responsible for their actions., It is a



mystery. God is not limited to good people. He is able to work through all people; e.g., the brothers' treatment of Joseph was evil and of their own doing, yet God worked through their wickedness. Joseph recognised this (Genesis 45:4-9).

3. Further development of the idea of faith. Faith is trust in God and loyalty to Him at all costs. Joseph must trust God, despite treacherous brothers; Potiphar's wife and the butler's ingratitude. Faith is tested through adversity and made strong through it.
4. On-going saga of the sinfulness of humans. Yet despite this, God is saving them.

### **QUESTIONS**

#### **Question 1:**

Who were the Patriarchs and other than the Biblical record, how do we know people like them lived?

#### **Question 2:**

Read Genesis 22:1-24. What do you think its purpose is as a record of God's dealing with Abraham?

#### **Question 3:**

What are some principles we can learn from the stories of Abraham?

#### **Question 4:**

Read Genesis 27:46 - 28:22. What do you think is this passage's purpose as a record of God's dealings with Jacob?

#### **Question 5:**

Briefly summarise the ways in which Joseph suffered? Why do you think God allowed this?

### **QUESTION FOR GROUP STUDY**

What have you learned about God in Lesson 3 that can be applied to you in the 20th century?