

GENESIS—Seed of the Bible
 Session Seven: Not *Another* New Beginning?

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ANYONE READING CAREFULLY through Genesis will come to realise very quickly that the twelfth chapter introduces a new aspect. So far we have been looking into *primeval* history; now we begin the journey into *patriarchal* history. The first eleven chapters of Genesis are really the foundation on which the remainder of the Old Testament rests.

These first chapters cover a period of more than [at the very least] two thousand years, whereas this second part of the book—covering barely four hundred years—contains no less than thirty-nine chapters. Which means that more than three quarters of the book are occupied with the lives of Abram and the first three generations of his descendants.

The story of Abraham and his family is of the utmost importance to us. One of the key issues lies in the promise made to him concerning his “seed”. In thinking of this we need to recall that the “seed of the woman” would be Satan’s nemesis, and as we have gone through human history so far we have seen how each new beginning has been instrumental in safeguarding that precious “seed”. But this great new start brings before us the key element in God’s purpose for the salvation of mankind.

One of the main purposes of Genesis is to reveal to us the origin and beginnings of the Nation of Israel, and in the first eleven chapters we are shown the different steps by which Israel became a separate and Divinely chosen nation. In Genesis 10 and 11 the entire human race is before us, but from Genesis 12 onwards attention is directed to one man and his descendants. The family of Abraham will grow and prosper until it becomes a nation—God’s Chosen People—and that nation’s throne will eventually be the throne of the King-Redeemer.



WE HAVE NOT ATTEMPTED an in-depth study of Genesis in this series. Rather, it has been our concern to look at its general theme as the Book of Beginnings. That being the case, we shall take a brief look at the Patriarchs, the key figures who formed the family which was to develop into The Nation.

At the beginning of this second part of Genesis we come not only to a new division and an important theological covenant, but most of all to a great and godly man—Abraham. Nearly a quarter of the book is devoted to this man’s life. Over 40 Old Testament references are made to Abraham.

The New Testament also acknowledges the significance of the life and character of Abraham. There are nearly 75 references to him in the New Testament. **Paul** chose Abraham as the finest example of a man who is justified before God by faith apart from works (Romans 4). **James** referred to Abraham as a man who demonstrated his faith to men by his works (James 2. 21-23). The writer to the **Hebrews** pointed to Abraham as an illustration of a man who walked by faith, devoting more space to him than any other individual in chapter eleven (Hebrews 11. 8-19). In **Galatians** chapter 3 Paul wrote that Christians are the ‘sons of Abraham’ by faith, and therefore, rightful heirs to the blessings promised him (Galatians 3. 7, 9).

The city which Abram was told to leave was great, and the home he left behind seems to have been less than godly. So far as we can tell Terah was an idolater, like those of his days [Joshua 24. 2] Little wonder God commanded Abram to leave his father’s house!

IT IS GENERALLY BELIEVED that this family left Ur in Mesopotamia to go to Canaan under Abram's direction. Yet this does not appear to be the case. In Genesis 11 we are told that "*Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there*" [Genesis 11. 31]. Terah, the patriarch of the tribe, appears as the leader of this movement.

In this memorable journey the divine and the human are seen to co-operate and interact. This is the case of all the great movements of God. Natural causes, and even selfish human motives, are taken up into the divine plan. So God uses the avarice of Laban [chapter 31] to bring Jacob back again into Canaan; the envy of Joseph's brethren to plant Israel in Egypt, [Genesis 45. 8] and the tyrannical cruelty of Pharaoh [Exodus] to bring them to their Covenant home.

But Abram was ready for this. He may have been the one who suggested the move. Because God had already called him to undertake the emigration:

The LORD had said to Abram, "Go from your country, your people and your father's household 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 NIV

Abram's father died at Haran, and soon after Abram undertook to complete his interrupted journey.

When they arrived in the land the Lord came to him again:

Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. Abram travelled through the land as far as the site of the great tree of Moreh at Shechem. At that time the Canaanites were in the land. The LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built an altar there to the LORD, who had appeared to him. From there he went on toward the hills east of Bethel and pitched his tent, with Bethel on the west and Ai on the east. There he built an altar to the LORD and called on the name of the LORD. Then Abram set out and continued toward the Negev.

—Genesis 12:4-9 NIV

THE INSPIRED WRITER has already told us that "*Sarai was childless because she was not able to conceive*" [Genesis 11. 30]. Why did he not object when told "*I will make you into a great nation*" [Genesis 12.2]? Perhaps this was the awakening of the faith that would make him great. Yet that faith was to be tested over and over.

The first test came early. Having travelled the land now covenanted to him by God, Abraham has to face the fact of famine. Famine in the land of promise! First trial of faith. So on to Egypt— and with it the second trial of faith: his wife's beauty becomes a threat, and Abraham undertakes his first "manipulation" of events by means of a half-truth: "Tell Pharaoh you are my sister". Later he will accede to his wife's advice and take her amid as a surrogate mother so his "seed" will be fruitful!

Yet at his final test, he proves faith is fully formed by willingly taking his son, the true "seed" to the mountain to slay him in obedience to God. Abraham is clearly the pattern man of faith. Again and again, in the New Testament, he is held up in our view as the example of how God works in the life of a man to fulfil his promises of grace. He is obviously chief of all the heroes of faith recorded in Hebrews 11, and in addition to the Christian faith, two of the great religions of the earth hold him in high esteem.

THE FULFILMENT OF GOD'S PROMISE to Abraham was Isaac, the second of the Patriarchs. Yet what a contrast there is in the two. Whereas Abraham was a man who reached out, "lived big", Isaac is the very opposite. He even had his wife chosen for him at his father's instigation and by his father's servant!

Abraham was now a very old man. The LORD had made him rich, and he was successful in everything he did. One day, Abraham called in his most trusted servant and said to him, "Solemnly promise me in the name of the LORD, who rules heaven and earth, that you won't choose a wife for my son Isaac from the people here in the land of Canaan. Instead, go back to the land where I was born and find a wife for him from among my relatives." But the servant asked, "What if the young woman I choose refuses to leave home and come here with me? Should I send Isaac there to look for a wife?" "No!" Abraham answered. "Don't ever do that, no matter what.

— Genesis 24:1-6 CEV

The whole of his life shows him as a "grey man"—colourless and dominated by his father, his wife and his sons. Could this be the result of the trauma he suffered at the mountain-altar?

The greatness of Isaac lies in three things.

First, he was the child of the promise. Second, he was the son of his father. Third, he was the father of his son.

His life had really been surrendered to God on the altar!

IN THE LATER HISTORY of the Nation, God is spoken of as "*The God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob*". After Abraham, "Friend of God", the great man of faith and following Isaac, the man surrendered to the will of God comes Jacob, the crook who became a prince!

Subterfuge, fraud and deception: these were the hallmarks of his early life. Mind you, in some ways this was a case of history repeating itself: grandfather Abraham had been equally capable of scheming and deceiving! How thrilling his life must have seemed in contrast with dear old Dad ... placid, pliant and persuadable! The old man's influence must have been great.

That Jacob was a man of personality and character must be obvious, but his strengths and personality must be shaped by God. And the tool most used by the Almighty in this man's case was—experience.

In trying to "help God's purpose along" he deceived his father; swindled his brother and was forced to flee for his life back to Ur the city where Abraham had said under no circumstance must Isaac be taken back there.

Here he meets with the man whose family traits he had inherited, his uncle Laban. Here he has difficulties in getting the right woman to wed—shades of his father perhaps? Here he is cheated, yet prospers.

Yet one day—here—he recognises his place is in the Land of Promise.

So off he sets, and on the journey thinks his strategy through—he will embarrass his ireful brother with gifts and a great show of love. He'll send a vanguard to pave the way [and warn him if it's too dangerous to proceed with his return home. And in sending the rest of the entourage on, and remaining alone for the night to make space for himself he meets with God. God who wrestles with him, vanquishes him, "marks" him, and completely changes him. This change is signed with a new name: from Jacob to Israel.

And although he cannot know it, this new name he has received will one day be the name owned, loved and respected by the Nation which will yet be born!

THE LAST GREAT NAME in Genesis is Joseph; yet he seems never to be recognised as one of the Patriarchs. Nevertheless, he stands as one of the “greats” of all time. His story takes place when the Family is being transformed into the Nation. He is the catalyst to bring the Family to Egypt where they will become the Nation that learns about bondage, tyranny—and redemption.

Joseph’s story ends the early history of the “seed”. Yet his story preserves the hope of the future:

Joseph lived in Egypt with his brothers until he died at the age of one hundred and ten. Joseph lived long enough to see Ephraim's children and grandchildren. He also lived to see the children of Manasseh's son Machir, and he welcomed them into his family. Before Joseph died, he told his brothers, "I won't live much longer. But God will take care of you and lead you out of Egypt to the land he promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Now promise me that you will take my body with you when God leads you to that land." So Joseph died in Egypt at the age of one hundred and ten; his body was embalmed and put in a coffin.

— Genesis 50:22-26 CEV

