

Patriarch Notes

The Abraham Narrative**Promises & Covenants**

In Genesis 12 God makes three promises to Abraham:

1. Land [Gen 12:1]
2. Kingship – a great name, a royal dynasty [Gen 12:2]
3. Global Blessing [Gen 12:3]

These three promises are later strengthened by three Covenant oaths:

1. Gen 15 – God promises that Abraham's future descendants will be delivered from bondage in a foreign nation and given the promised land
2. Gen 17 – Kings will come forth from Abraham
3. Gen 22 – All nations shall be blessed through Abraham's descendants

These three covenant oaths foreshadow:

1. The Exodus – Land [Gen 15]
2. The Davidic kingdom – Kingship – Name [Gen 17]
3. The New Covenant through Jesus Christ and His Church – Global Blessing [Gen 22]

God Extends His Promise [Gen 15]

Abram, at the age of 86, receives a promise from God – a great reward. When Abram reminds God that he has no heir, God makes a covenant with him. God affirms the covenant by passing through the pieces of sacrificed animals, promising to give Abram a son. God also promises that Abram will father innumerable descendants who will be delivered from bondage and receive the Promised Land. This promise foreshadows the Exodus.

Abram's Other Son [Gen 16]

Abram's wife, Sarai, is old and convinced will never have children of her own. She suggests that Abram take her Egyptian handmaid, Hagar, and have a son through her. After she conceives a son, Hagar, however, begins to look at the barren Sarai with contempt, thus sowing the seeds of discord. Ishmael, the child born of this union, later becomes the father of the Arabs.

Circumcision, Ishmael & Isaac [Gen 17-18]

God renames Abram, giving him the name, *Abraham*, meaning "father of a vast multitude" [Gen 17:5]. Sarai, too, is renamed, *Sarah* [Gen 17:15]. The Lord also makes it clear that Ishmael is not the chosen heir and that Abraham and Sarah will have a son in one year [Gen 18:10]. God also instructs Abraham to circumcise himself, all the males in his tribe, and all newborn males on the eighth day [Gen 17:10-14]. At this point Abraham is 99 years old. The elderly Abraham has three months to recover so his wife can conceive. By circumcising himself Abraham shows himself to be a man of great faith.

Interestingly, this announcement comes when Ishmael is thirteen years old. He will not be circumcised on the eighth day like the rest of Abraham's descendants but in his thirteenth year, as Egyptians males are. In other words, in God's sight, Ishmael is outside Abraham's covenant family; he is like the Egyptians.

Isaac and Ishmael [Gen 21]

As God promised, after one year Isaac is born. Once Isaac is weaned Abraham celebrates with a great feast. During the feast Sarah sees Ishmael “playing with Isaac.” The Hebrew implies that Ishmael is “harassing” or “persecuting” Isaac. Fearful that Ishmael may try to usurp her son, Sarah asks Abraham to banish Hagar and Ishmael. Abraham, however, is hesitant to do so until the Lord instructs him. God promises that Ishmael shall be the father of many descendants. Interestingly, the strife that began with Isaac and Ishmael continues today in their descendants – the Jews and the Arabs.

Abraham Offers Isaac [Gen 22]

After Ishmael is sent away, Abraham has only Isaac. But God puts Abraham to the ultimate test, telling him to sacrifice his long awaited son on Mt. Moriah. Abraham sets off with Isaac on the three-day journey to the appointed place. When they arrive Isaac carries the wood of the sacrifice up the mountain, and asks his father, “Where is the lamb for the burnt offering?” Abraham responds, “The Lord will provide himself the Lamb.” Just as Abraham is about to plunge the knife into his son, the Lord spares Isaac. God then reaffirms His covenant with Abraham, promising to bless all nations through his descendants. Abraham takes a ram from the thicket and offers it to the Lord in place of Isaac.

Adam refused to offer his life in love and humanity was cursed. Abraham willingly offered God his only son, Isaac, and through this act, humanity was blessed. In Abraham the curse of the fall is partially reversed.

The ancient Rabbis called this story the *Aqedah*, or the “binding” of Isaac. They explained that this story is just as much about Isaac self-offering as it is about Abraham’s faithfulness. They pointed out that Isaac was strong enough to carry the wood up the mountain. They concluded that he was a grown youth, easily capable of overcoming his elderly father. Therefore, Jewish tradition explained that Isaac foresaw what was about to take place but asked to be “bound” so that he would not be able to struggle against his father and crawl off the altar. The temple of Jerusalem was later built on Mt. Moriah [2 Chron 3:1], where the people of Israel offered sacrifices, thereby reminding God of his promises to Abraham. The need for these sacrifices ends once the Lord offers Himself as the true sacrificial Lamb.

The fathers understood this story as a foreshadowing of the sacrifice of the Father’s only beloved Son. Jesus offers Himself to the Father on Calvary, one of the mountain peaks of the range of mountains known as Moriah. Like Isaac, He carries the wood up the mountain, fully submitting to the Father’s will. Finally, Jesus rises from the dead on the third day, just as Abraham received his son back from the sentence of death on the third day.

Discussion Questions:

1. Discuss Abraham’s example of faith? In what ways is he an example to us?
2. When Abraham first heard that he was to have a son, he went into his servant Hagar and conceived a son. After Isaac was born strife ensued between the two sons until one was finally banished. Today their descendants are still at war. What lessons can we learn from all of this?
3. What are the three promises of Genesis 12? How do they relate to the covenant oaths sworn by God in Genesis 15, 17 and 22? How do these covenant promises foreshadow future events in salvation history?

The Isaac Narrative

The story of Isaac continues the same theme we encountered with his father, Abraham. This is hinted by the closing verses of the Abraham narrative: "After the death of Abraham God blessed his son, Isaac" [Gen 25:11]. But before the story of Isaac is developed, the story of Ishmael, the elder half-brother is summarized [Gen 25:12-18]. In Ishmael's descendants God's words find part, although not the central part, of their fulfillment.

The first real Isaac narrative follows in Gen 25:19-26. Gen 22 and 24 (among others) have already introduced us to Isaac, but in the structure of Genesis those chapters belong to Abraham narrative. Indeed, the Abraham narrative sets the stage for those that follow: the Isaac and Jacob narratives.

The report of the death of Abraham's father, Terah [Gen 11:32], and Abraham's subsequent prominence suggest that the Abraham narrative extends from Gen 12:1 - 25:11. And yet much of this narrative focuses on his sons, Isaac and Ishmael. In the same way, much of the Isaac narrative [Gen 25:19 - 35:29] is dominated by stories of Isaac's two sons, Esau and Jacob. We should expect these narratives to focus on the importance of the patriarchs' children since the nature of God's promises relate to their descendants.

The Isaac narrative begins [Gen 25:19-26] by relating the birth of Isaac's twin sons when he was 60 years old. We first read a brief summary of Isaac's life as well as some background to the twins' birth. And then, inexplicably, we are told of an event that occurred perhaps 20 years later. Adding to our modern-day confusion, in the next chapter we encounter incidents that seem to have taken place before the twins' birth. This seeming confusion actually emphasizes what we read in Gen 25:22-26;27-34, since these early verses actually describe how the blessing theme is developed in the Isaac narrative. It's also important for us to realize that the Genesis author was not concerned about writing the kind of chronological history with which we are familiar. On the contrary, his concern was theological in that he aimed to describe how God worked through the patriarchs to fulfill His plan for humanity.

Just as we saw in the Abraham narrative, the Isaac narrative begins with a word from the Lord (YHWH). But while the word to Abram (Gen 12) includes the promise that from him God will bring forth a great nation, the word to Isaac's wife, Rebekah, promises that she will be the mother of two nations [Gen 25:23].

The word to Abraham, though often imperiled, also received a double fulfillment, through Ishmael and Isaac, although the younger of the half-brothers would be preferred [Gen 17:21; 21:12]. We detect only a subtle suggestion of a rivalry between the two boys, despite the obvious tension between their mothers [Gen 16:4-5; 21:9-10].

Similarly, the Lord tells Rebekah that her younger son will be preferred and hints at future trouble between the twins [Gen 25:23]. When they are born we immediately see God's word beginning to be fulfilled [Gen 25:26]. The twins are very different [Gen 25:27-28] and when Esau in effect rejects his first-born rights [Gen 25:29-34], Jacob, the younger, supplants his elder brother.

The original theme of blessing resumes in Gen 26:

- † God appears, commands, and promises [Gen 26:2-5] just as He had done to Abraham [Gen 12:1-3]
- † Isaac erred [Gen 26:6-11] just as his father had [Gen 12:1-20; 20:1-18]

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- † Isaac also received blessings [Gen 26:12-14], as did Abraham [Gen 13:1-4]
- † Isaac was involved in strife [Gen 26:15-22], just as Abraham was [Gen 13:5-13; 21:25-32]
- † Isaac worshipped the Lord (YHWH) [Gen 26:23-25] as Abraham worshipped [Gen 13:14-18; 21:33]
- † Isaac was acknowledged by the nations [Gen 26:26-33] as was Abraham [Gen 14:19-20; 21:22-24]
- † Because God committed Himself to Abraham and because Abraham obeyed Him, the God of Abraham appears to Isaac [Gen 26:3,5,24]

One distinctive characteristic of the Isaac story relates to God's promise: *"I will be with you and bless you..."* [Gen 26:3] and *"Do not fear, for I am with you. I will bless you..."* [Gen 26:24]. It manifests itself in Abimelech's acknowledgement of Isaac: *"We clearly see that the Lord has been with you..."* [Gen 26:28], just as it had in Abimelech's acknowledgment of Abraham: *"God is with you in everything you do"* [Gen 21:22]. It appears again when discussing Jacob in the chapters that follow [Gen 26:15-20; 31:3,5,42; 35:3], and is a distinctive aspect of the promise and experience of God's blessing as described in the Isaac narrative. Not only is God with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, but others recognize His Presence as well.

After Gen 26 the relationship between the twin sons of Isaac dominates the Isaac narrative, just as God had revealed earlier [Gen 25:19-24]. In Gen 27 Isaac's blessing becomes the central focus, and the specific terms of the blessing [Gen 26:29] recall God's words to Abraham [Gen 12:2-3]. Many today seem appalled by Jacob's deceit as if surprised that the patriarchs were capable of sinfulness. The narrative hints that perhaps there is some justice for Jacob when he is on the receiving end of deceit in his later relationship with Laban. The narrative, however, isn't focused on drawing moral lessons. Its primary concern is to help us read the narrative in the context of Gen 25:23 and, therefore, recognize how God's word is fulfilled, sometimes in the most extraordinary ways.

Another theme of the Abraham narrative echoes here in the provision of a wife for Isaac's son, Jacob [Gen 27:46]. Indeed, set in the context of Jacob's diplomatic self-exile, his quest for a wife becomes the central concern of the rest of the Isaac narrative. Again, Jacob looks to the family of Nahor for a bride, and finds her in the household of Laban, the same man who had so graciously received Abraham's servant who sought a wife for Isaac. The finding of Rachel, however, is very different than the finding of Rebekah:

- † For Abraham it is inappropriate for his son, Isaac, to marry a Canaanite woman [Gen 24:3]. But Isaac acts under pressure from his wife and an apparent concern for domestic harmony [Gen 27:46; 28:1].
- † Isaac was not to leave the Promised Land, but Jacob does so to distance himself from his brother, Esau.
- † In obtaining a wife for Isaac, Abraham's servant follows the step-by-step instructions of God and His angel [Gen 24:7,12-21,27,50-52], but once Jacob leaves Canaan, God is not mentioned [Gen 29:1-30].

- † The union of Isaac and Rebekah proceeds smoothly, but Jacob is cheated royally by Laban. He must even suffer humiliation resulting from his own devious method of obtaining first-born rights [Gen 29:26].

Despite the troubles Jacob encounters on his long journey, God remains faithful. And Jacob, too, shows he understands the covenant. Before Jacob leaves home Isaac prays for him, asking that he be fruitful and inherit the land [Gen 28:3-4]. And before he leaves the land itself, he experiences God in a dream. Just as God had promised to Abraham and Isaac, so too does He promise Jacob that:

- † He will give Jacob the land;
- † Jacob's descendants will be very numerous;
- † Other nations will bless themselves by Jacob; and
- † God will be with Jacob wherever he goes.

Based on this promise, Jacob commits himself to God [Gen 28:20-22], and even the difficult years with Laban bring about the fulfillment of God's will.

If we find degrees of moral ambiguity in some of Abraham's acts [Gen 12:10-13; 16:2-4; 23:1-18], there is little, if any, ambiguity about the deceit and theft revealed in the Jacob stories. But again, the narrative is not really concerned with moral judgments but reveals instead how the activities of humans become the means by which God fulfilled his purpose and plan. Jacob's makes some rather boastful assertions [Gen 31:9-13,42], but they are true enough. God has dealt graciously with him, and he has enough [Gen 33:11]. God also protects him from the wrath of Laban, his father-in-law, and turns Laban into his covenant brother [Gen 31:17-55].

But in escaping from Laban, Jacob must still face his brother, Esau. Despite the encouragement not to be afraid, that God will protect him, Jacob's fear of Laban is replaced by a fear of Esau [Gen 32:7, 11]. Here we find Jacob appealing [Gen 32:9-12] to the blessing God gave him when he left the land years before and God's command to return. Land and descendants are again the focus. When God manifests Himself [Gen 32:26,29], Jacob insists on a blessing and receives it.

Surprisingly, at least to Jacob, he finds Esau gracious and welcoming, thus ensuring the Lord's commitment to Jacob is fulfilled. And yet despite his changed name – Israel – Jacob remains the trickster, but this too is a means through which God prospers him. Jacob not only buys his piece of land at Shechem [Gen 33:18-20], but also finds the reason and means to beat the locals (the Shechemites) at their own game and to dispossess them of all they own [Gen 34:23,27-29].

As the Isaac narrative draws to a close, God calls Jacob back to Bethel, where he builds and altar to the One who had appeared to him there in his time of need, and had kept His promise to remain with him [Gen 35:1-3]. Again we are told of Jacob's new name – Israel – and of the blessing of land and descendants [Gen 35:9-12]. Like his father [Gen 25:9], Isaac dies and his two sons bury him [Gen 35:29].

Compared to the Abraham narrative, the Isaac narrative is more tightly structured and less episodic. There is more irony, fewer heroes, and more villains. And yet we find God reaffirming his promises to Abraham's son and grandson. He will bless Abraham with descendants and land, and to make him a means of blessing to others. Despite the behavior of those He chose, God kept to His plan. This theme runs through the entire narrative and holds it together.

The Jacob Narrative

That the Isaac narrative, like the Abraham narrative, focuses on the theme of God's blessing, leads us to look for the same theme in the Jacob narrative. In this we are not disappointed, although Jacob's story is certainly distinct.

Like the Isaac narrative, that of Jacob focuses less on Jacob and more on one of his sons. We still consider it Jacob's narrative because it both opens and closes with Jacob as the key player. Only toward the end [Gen 50:22-26] does Joseph ultimately supplant his father, Jacob.

Echoing Isaac's narrative [Gen 25:12-18], Jacob's narrative begins with a brief account of the elder brother, Esau [Gen 36], as a means of concluding the previous narrative. We are told that Esau gives the land to Jacob [Gen 36:6-7] and that, unlike his previous exile in Haran and his future stay in Egypt, "*Jacob settled in the land where his father had sojourned, the land of Canaan*" [Gen 37:1].

Jacob's narrative continues in a most surprising way, although we encounter a few similarities with the beginning of Isaac's narrative. Isaac's narrative begins with God's revelation to his wife, Rebekah [Gen 25:19-21], setting the stage for all that follows [Gen 25:22-34]. Similarly, Jacob's narrative opens in a way that leads us to the story to come. Joseph has a dream [Gen 37:5-11] in which much of that which follows is revealed.

Jacob and his family respond just as we might expect [Gen 37:8-11], and yet the narrative implies that Jacob recognizes God's hand in the dream. (See Rebekah's response to the word she receives about Jacob [Gen 25:28].) Jacob. After being deceived about his sons treatment of Joseph [Gen 37:31-35], seems more sympathetic, but the narrative focuses on Jacob's handling of the dream's key theme.

Immediately after the dream we encounter a situation [Gen 37:12-36] that seems to contradict the dream's promise. But as the narrative progresses [Gen 37-47] we discover that the promise revealed in Joseph's dream is actually fulfilled. This fulfillment happens despite and because of the suffering and humiliation Joseph experienced. It began with his brothers' resentment, and continued by a woman who loved him, by a master who misjudged him, and by a steward who forgot him. This theme is expressed in the patterned sequences of the story, which forms an extended narrative unparalleled in Genesis and with few equals elsewhere in the Old Testament.

Although Joseph is at the center of the story, it remains Jacob's narrative. This is reflected in the transition of attention to Judah in Gen 38. Joseph, whom Jacob believes to be dead, is temporarily out of the picture. And because Reuben, Simeon, and Levi have disgraced themselves [Gen 34;35:22], Judah assumes the role of Jacob's senior son. In keeping with the overall theme of Genesis, marriage, children, and descendants dominate Judah's story. Gen 38 concludes with the birth of Judah's twin sons, with the younger once again displacing the elder [Gen 38:27-30]. This pattern also affects Judah who disqualifies himself from his leadership role by marrying a Canaanite woman and by soliciting and having relations with an apparent prostitute, who happens to be his daughter-in-law in disguise. In the realm of marriage and sex, Judah behaves less like Joseph [Gen 39] and more like Reuben and the people of Shechem who provoked Simeon's and Levi's sin.

In Gen 39 we are told three times that Joseph met with success because God was with him [Gen 39:2,3,23]. This, of course, harkens back to God's assurances and promises relating to both Ishmael and Isaac [Gen 21]. We are then told that because of Joseph God blesses his master, Potiphar [Gen 39:5]. Even though Joseph must undergo many

more trials, he ultimately becomes a blessing to the Pharaoh himself, and to all of Egypt [Gen 40-41].

Because of Joseph's high position in Egypt, the Pharaoh's success means Joseph's success (and vice versa). This is vividly demonstrated when his brothers arrive in Egypt and bow before him, causing Joseph to recall the two dreams that began the narrative [Gen 42:9]. But his triumph is not yet understood. Why has God raised a seemingly arrogant Joseph to such a high position? So what was His purpose? It is Joseph himself who answers these questions as he reveals who he is to his brothers. They hadn't caused all that followed their treachery. No, God Himself used their actions to further His plan to provide for the needs of Jacob's entire family [Gen 45:5-8].

God now speaks to Jacob in a vision and tells him to join Joseph in Egypt. It is there that God will make Jacob – Israel – into a great nation, and from there God will return Israel to the Promised Land [Gen 46:2-4]. Although Abram's journey to Egypt and Jacob's to Mesopotamia might have resulted from sinful human initiatives, Jacob follows God's command and journeys to Egypt. In Egypt Jacob blesses Pharaoh [Gen 47:7,10] and the promise of fruitfulness is kept.

As Jacob nears death he recalls God's blessing and gives his blessing to Joseph's sons. And just as he, the younger, had received the elder son's blessing, Jacob gives this greater blessing to Ephraim, the younger son, rather than to Manasseh, the elder [Gen 48:1-20]. He also extends to Joseph -- now considered his own senior son in accordance with Joseph's dream -- the promise that God will be with him and bring him back to the land of his fathers. He also passes on his own personal possession in the land of Shechem [Gen 48:21-22].

In a prolonged deathbed scene, Jacob extends blessing to all his sons [Gen 49:28], but includes specific blessings for Joseph [Gen 49:25-26]. Jacob then dies and returns to the land [Gen 50:12-13]. Genesis closes with Joseph's affirmation that all we have read was a part of God's plan to ensure His people survive despite their sins. Joseph also passes on the promise of the land to "the sons of Israel" [Gen 50:24-26].

Reading the patriarchal narratives one obvious theme links them all. It is a theme explicitly revealed in God's word of promise, the promise of blessing, land, increase, and influence. God's own words are the key that explains the stories in the entire patriarchal narrative; for the stories illustrate the theme. They show us how God overcame the obstacles placed in His path, obstacles created by human circumstances, by those who received His promises, and by those whom they encountered on their journey of faith.