

The Old Testament Part Four: Genesis Chapters 12-25

Abraham, Our Father in Faith

Every nation has its heroes—men and women who serve as rallying points for people’s sense of identity and destiny. European countries have their kings and queens and generals. America has George Washington and Abraham Lincoln.

National heroes are legendary in more than one sense. Not only is their *actual* history revered but legends grow up around them. For example, it is said that our well-loved Pope Francis leaves the Vatican at night to visit the poor.

Ancient Israel also had her heroes. Three of them were Abraham, Moses and King David. All three lived keenly in the memory of the people because of their central roles in Israel’s identity and history. All three were the objects of legends that underscored their greatness.

Chapters 12-50 of Genesis tell the stories of the founding fathers and mothers of Israel: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel and Joseph.

Abraham, our father in the faith

Because Abraham lived about a thousand years before any known documents were written about him, we must give generous allowance for legends that grew up around this historical figure. The authors of *Getting to Know the Bible* write: “*The legends that grew up around Abraham and are preserved in the Bible add to the core factual accounts by making clear what kind of a man Abraham was and how God gave him a foundational role in salvation history*” (pgs.25-26).

Abraham lived around 1800 B.C. He was born in the ancient city of Ur, now in the southeast of modern Iraq.

The one thing we are called to believe about Abraham is that he was a man of great faith in the God who revealed himself to him. “*Of all God’s people, Abraham had the least tangible evidence to believe that God would be faithful to his promises yet no one adhered to God more tenaciously than he did. Not only was Abraham the first to believe in the true God; the intensity of his faith placed him first among all believers*” (ibid p. 28).

Three great religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—hold Abraham up as their father in the faith.

In the rest of this article, I will focus on some of the key events in the Abraham story (chs 12-25). As you will see, Abraham does not become a man of great

faith overnight. His faith in God’s promise to make him the father of a great nation is tested many times.

The call of Abraham (12:1-14). Until Genesis 17, Abraham and Sarah have been called Abram and Sarai (more on this later).

Out of the blue, God calls to Abram, a man steeped in beliefs about many gods. This new God tells Abram to leave behind all that is familiar to him and to go to some unknown land (Canaan—which will become known as the Promised Land). God makes a threefold promise to Abram: he will receive a *land* he can call his own and become the father of a great *nation*, and his ancestors will become a *blessing* to all the communities of the earth—a promise that will be fulfilled with the coming of Jesus who will die for all people and seek to bring all people under the mantle of God’s love.

Abram’s faith response to God. When God calls to Abram, he could have said: “Which God are you?” or “Sorry, God, at 75 years of age, Sarai and I have just retired and have no interest in uprooting our lives and going to some unknown land.” But amazingly Abram doesn’t say that.

Genesis 12:4 tells: “*Abram went as God had directed him.*” With that and several more faith responses, Abram becomes the model believer for both Jews and Christians—the model of *obedient faith* (Heb 11:8-12). But as we stated above, Abram’s faith in God is tested many times.

The first test to keeping faith in this new God comes when a famine hits Abram’s new location. So Abram has to get the first bus to Egypt in search of food (see 12:10-20). In Egypt, Abram almost gets into big trouble for letting on that his beautiful wife is his sister.

In chapter 13 Abram and his nephew part ways. Abram is presented as the model of generosity, allowing the younger Lot to choose the area he wants for his livestock.

In chapter 15 Abram expresses anxiety about God’s promise to give him an heir and a land: “*O Lord God, what good will your gifts be if I keep on being childless...*” (Gn 15:2). Regarding the promise of land, Abram asks: “*How am I to know that I shall possess it?*” God reassures Abram that he will not only have a child, but that his descendants will be as numerous as the stars of the sky (Gn 15:5).

Covenant Ritual (15:7-12). Covenants are important in the Bible. A covenant is an agreement between two people or parties. In a religious context, a covenant is a binding of God to man and of man to God. The Sinai covenant is an agreement between God and the whole nation of Israel. The covenant ritual described in 15:7-12 is between God and Abram. In this covenant, animals are split in two and both parties entering a covenant (in this case, God and Abram) walk between the separated pieces of the animals. If one party fails to keep the terms of the covenant, they are doomed to share a fate like that of the split animals. This ritual is intended to ‘seal the deal’ or covenant between God and Abram.

Chapter 16: Abram has a lapse in faith

It has been ten years since God promised the 75-year old Abram that he will be the father of a great nation, yet he and Sarai are still childless. While God is dallying, Sarai comes up with her own plan to have an heir. She suggests that Abram take Sarai’s slave woman, Hagar, as his proxy wife and have a child with her. Abram goes along with the suggestion. This is common practice back then. A child born in this way would legally belong to the couple and be considered a legitimate heir unless the childless wife subsequently bears a male child.

While Sarai’s plan seems like a good way to resolve a big problem, it leads to serious marital issues in the home. Hagar starts to look at her mistress with disdain (16:4). Then Sarai lashes out at Abram and makes him the villain (16:5). Abram is seemingly weak in character as he allows Sarai to abuse Hagar. The result: Hagar flees into the desert. The loss of trust in God leads to a big mess.

Chapter 17: Abram receives a new name

“God said to Abram: ‘My covenant with you is this: you are to become the father of a host of nations. No longer shall you be called Abram; your name shall be Abraham, for I am making you the father of a multitude of nations. I will render you exceedingly fertile; I will make nations of you; kings shall stem from you.’” (vv 4-6).

At this stage in the narrative, Abram is 99 years old and has most likely lost all hope that God will fulfill his promise of giving him and Sarai a child. As far as they are concerned, Ishmael will be their heir. Suddenly, God appears and renews his commitment to make Abram the father of a host of nations (17:4). Then God changes Abram’s name to Abraham, which means “host of a multitude of nations.” In the Bible, a change in name signifies a change in one’s

relationship with God. Abraham’s new name is a sign of his covenant relationship with God. In this chapter Sarai’s name is changed to Sarah.

Circumcision (17:9-14). At the time the book of Genesis is taking shape (latter part of the sixth century B.C.), Israel has lost its land and temple. In this historical context, the ancient ritual of circumcision becomes a *distinguishing mark* of one’s identity and a sign of one’s covenant with God. It is an external sign that one belonged to the chosen people of Israel.

Chapter 18: Heavenly visitors; Abraham bargains with God

Genesis 18:1-15 gives us a beautiful story of hospitality during which heavenly visitors announce that the fulfillment of a child is less than one year away. When Sarah hears this, she laughs. The memory of her laughter is preserved in the name they will give their son, Isaac, which means “laughter.”

18:16-33 is the wonderful story of Abraham bargaining with God on behalf of innocent people in the sinful city of Sodom and Gomorrah. Abraham knows God is just, but in this situation, he challenges God to also be merciful. As we read this story, we might ask ourselves: “Have we ever argued with God or tried to bargain with God about some situation in our lives?”

Chapter 19: A horrific event

In the opening verses of this chapter, Lot (Abraham’s nephew), shows hospitality to two heavenly visitors. Later in the evening, some of the townsmen arrive at Lot’s door and demand that he send the two men out so that “they may have intimacies with them” (v.5). Then Lot does something that is nothing less than reprehensible to our modern sensibilities. Rather than handing over his two guests to the mob, he offers them his two virgin daughters. Scholars tell us that the ancient audience would not have been scandalized by Lot’s behavior since the law of hospitality—which protected one’s guests at all costs—took precedence over the sexual violation of even the women in one’s own household. It also shows the lowly stature of daughters in this ancient society. When the mob threatens to break into Lot’s home, his heavenly guests intervene and strike the attackers blind.

The rest of the chapter tells the story of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah during which Lot’s wife becomes a pillar of salt for looking back.

Chapter 21: Isaac is born; Hagar and Ishmael are sent away

In his commentary on Genesis, John Gibson introduces this story with these words: *It is a story of*

the highest artistry. But this does not mean that it is an enjoyable story or even a nice one. It is in fact neither of these. It opens with laughter, but very quickly it moves on to tears and there it ends with seemingly only a little belated kindness on God's part to alleviate its overwhelming sadness."

After Sarah gives birth to Isaac, she becomes afraid that Ishmael's presence will be a threat to Isaac. After all, Ishmael is the first-born son. When Abraham shows a willingness to fight for Ishmael, God tells him to heed Sarah's demands to have Hagar and Ishmael thrown out of their home. What are we to make of Sarah's behavior in verse 10? Scripture scholar Edward Owens writes: "*The modern reader must take care not to judge Sarah too harshly. The ancient Near East had slavery as an institution, and Sarah was appropriately protecting her 'territory' and vested interests. She was, after all, Abraham's primary wife.*"

We may even wonder why God concedes to the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael from their home. In this episode, divine *election* takes center stage: God chooses Isaac, not Ishmael. Yet Ishmael will become the father of a great nation (v.18).

Chapter 22: Abraham is to put to the ultimate test

"This story is one of the great masterpieces of narrative writing in the Bible. We are drawn from the very beginning of the story and held in suspense until an angel intervenes. We are left to imagine Abraham's inner thoughts as he makes the fifty-mile trip to Mount Moriah. We feel the silence as father and son walk together, coming closer with each step to that moment of ultimate decision." (Collegeville Study Bible, p.60)

The story is centered on Abraham's great faith and obedience to God and not on the horror of God's command. Will Abraham be able to place on the altar the child of promise, his whole future? The answer is 'yes'—he is ready and willing. He who pleaded with God to spare the innocent in Sodom (18:17-32) does not plead here to spare his own son. Here, obedience to the divine command is uppermost.

Walter Brueggeman, in his book on *Genesis* (pp 185-194), says: "*This text is nestled between a God who tests (22:1) and a God who provides (22:8-13). In the beginning of the narrative, God puts Abraham to the ultimate test—to hand over to him the one on whom his whole future hinges. It means going back to barrenness and, at the same time, trusting somehow that God knows what he is doing and will provide—even if it means raising Isaac from the dead.*"

A key question this text raises is: Does God really test us in this way? In the biblical books ahead, we will see that testing was rather common in Israel's history. God tested Israel to see if she would remain faithful to him or would rather look to other gods as well (Ex 20:20, Deut 8:16; 13:3; 33:8). All too often, we only want a God who *provides* and not a God who *tests*. Three concluding remarks:

- God is opposed to human sacrifice, a common practice in those times.
- The early Church Fathers saw the sacrifice of Isaac as a type or foreshadowing of the sacrifice of Christ, i.e., the father offered his only son and the son carried the wood for the sacrifice, just as Christ carried his cross to Calvary.
- On a spiritual level, we might say that going up the hill, Isaac belonged to Abraham; coming down, he belonged to God.

Chapter 24: Abraham finds a wife for Isaac

In chapter 23, Sarah dies and Abraham finds a burial place for her in the land of Canaan.

Having found a burial place for Sarah, Abraham has only one obligation left to fulfill, namely, to find a suitable wife for Isaac. Even though Abraham has settled permanently in Canaan, he is still a foreigner amongst a pagan people. He does not want Isaac to marry a local girl and perhaps adopt her pagan ways, but rather a woman from his own people in Mesopotamia.

The chapter opens with Abraham having his trusted servant swear that he will only search for a wife for Isaac within Abraham's family. As the servant arrives at Abraham's native place (Haran), he prays that God will show him the right woman for Isaac (24:12). He creates a plan to help him discern God's choice. Almost immediately, Rebekah appears who seems to be the one that he is looking for. She turns out to be the granddaughter of Nahor, Abraham's brother.

When Rebekah and Isaac meet, it is a story of love at first sight, a marriage made in heaven (24:62-67).

In chapter 25, Abraham, after remarrying, dies and is buried with his wife Sarah.

God speaking and man responding is a central theme of biblical spirituality. This call/response theme starts with Abraham and continues through the pages of Scripture.