

From Abraham to Exile and Return

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I Abraham: Faith in an Invisible God

Abraham is honoured as *Father in Faith* by Christians, Muslims and Jews. In Genesis 12, Abram is called to leave his home for an unknown land that God will show him, to be made a “great nation,” and a source of “blessing to all families of the earth” (vv 2-3). Abram follows the divine bidding and arrives with his wife Sarai in Canaan. Unlike other gods of the Near-East, the Deity who calls him is not identified with an idol. This unseen God reassures Abram, invites him to be free from fear and to trust in divine protection: “Fear not, Abram, I will be your shield” (Gen 15,1). Abram makes a covenant - a sacred and perpetually binding pact- with this God, and is promised a son, land for his tribe, the Hebrews, and descendants “as numerous as the stars (Gen 15, 5-6). The experience of *election* by God changes Abram and Sarai forever. Chosen from among all earth’s tribes, and bound to God with their people, their exalted dignity is reflected in the new names given them: *Abraham* (*father of many*), and his wife *Sarah* (*mother of nations*). When Abraham shows his willingness to sacrifice his only son in faithful response to God’s command, an angel is sent, telling him to spare the boy. The story clearly reveals Israel’s Covenant partner as a God who is to be trusted and loved in relationship, rather than fearfully placated through human sacrifice. Isaac and his son Jacob remain faithful to Abraham’s Covenant, binding this God to their people.

Suggested Reading:

- Abram’s Call: Genesis 12, 1-9
 - Abram’s Covenant with God: Gen 15
 - Abram and Sarai received new names; Circumcision of Abraham and all males of his tribe: Gen 17
 - Birth of Isaac: Gen 21
 - Abraham’s test: Gen 22
 - Jacob and Esau Gen 25, 19-34; 27, 1-29; 33, 1-17
 - Jacob’s Dream God’s promise Gen 28, 10-22
 - Jacob and the angel; renamed Israel Gen 32, 22-32
- *Faith is a relationship of loving trust and reliance on God; it calls us to be free from fear.*

II Exodus: God’s Covenant Faithfulness

Jacob’s favourite son Joseph is sold into slavery by his brothers and taken to Egypt. He becomes the Pharaoh’s highest government official. When famine threatens the Israelites, Joseph re-settles them in the Pharaoh’s kingdom, saving them from starvation. In time, the Israelites multiply and prosper; Joseph and Pharaoh die, and the resentful Egyptians force them into slavery. The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob hears the cry of His Covenant people in bondage, and sends Moses to bring about their release and return to the “land flowing with milk and honey” (Gen 3, 8; 13, 5). When Pharaoh refuses the Hebrews their freedom, Moses announces a series of divinely-loosed plagues culminating in the deaths of all firstborn Egyptians and animals. In a night of wailing and rejoicing, an angel of death strikes down the eldest offspring of every Egyptian household, *passing over* Hebrew homes marked by the blood of a slain spotless lamb.

The Israelites hastily eat a commemorative *passover* meal: roasted flesh of the slain lamb, bitter herbs (symbolizing their bitter years of slavery) and bread that has not had time to rise. Liberated by the gracious intervention of the God of the Covenant, they depart into the pre-dawn darkness, led by Moses.

Suggested Reading:

- Joseph sold into slavery: Gen 37
- Joseph re-united with his brothers: Gen 52-45
- Joseph re-settles his family in Egypt: Gen 47
- Enslavement of the Hebrew People: Ex 1
- Birth of Moses: Ex 2
- Call of Moses (Burning Bush Story): Ex 3
- 10 Plagues: Ex 7-11
- Passover, Passover Meal and departure from Egypt: Ex 12

- ***Faith moves us to cry out expectantly to God for freedom and justice. It enables us to look back in gratitude on God's saving deeds and to celebrate their sacred memory in gladness of heart and hope for the future.***

III Sinai: The Covenant Ratified

Moses shepherds the Israelites out of Egypt, led by a pillar of cloud by day, and column of fire by night. They pass through the Red Sea and into the Sinai desert where they must learn again to live by faith in the image-less God of the Covenant, after generations among Egypt's gods and their idols. They arrive at Mt. Sinai. Moses ascends and the Lord enjoins him to say to His people:

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on Eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant you shall be my own possession among all peoples ...”(Ex 19.4-5)

Moses goes down and relates God's command. The people respond: “All that the Lord has spoken, we will do” (Ex 19,8). At the foot of Mt. Sinai, the Covenant is ratified, and the *People of God* is born.

Suggested Reading:

- Crossing the Red Sea: Ex 14
- Song of Miriam: Ex 15
- Manna and quail: Ex 16; Num 11
- Arrival at Sinai and Ratification of the Covenant: Ex 19

- ***Faith leads us to commitment. It is at the core of our identity as God's People.***

IV Ten Commandments: A Guide to Transform Pagan Culture

Through Moses, the people receive a religious and legal code, a re-defined priesthood, new religious symbols, feasts, rituals and guidelines for worship. Ten Commandments become the legal cornerstone of their collective identity, a safeguard against falling back into idolatry after more than 400 years in Egypt. To live by faith in this invisible God and follow God's commandments is to *choose life*. To forsake these for idols and Pagan ways leads to “evil and death” (see Deut 30, 15 ff; Lev 18, 5). It takes 40 years for faith in this invisible God to transform the Israelites' way of life, their language and hearts (see Deut 30, 14). Only then can they enter the Land of Promise.

Suggested Reading:

- Ten Commandments: Ex 20, Deut 5
 - New social laws for God's Covenant People: Ex 21-23
 - The Ark, its sanctuary, sacred altar, table and vessels, priestly rituals, vestments, Sabbath laws: Ex 25-30, 34-40; Deut 12-27; Book of Leviticus
 - Covenant again ratified and sealed with the blood of sacrificed bulls: Ex 24, 8 (an important reading for understanding significance of the cup Jesus blesses and shares as blood of "new and everlasting covenant" at Last Supper, see Mark 14, 24; Hebrews 9, 18-28)
 - The Golden Calf: Ex 32
 - Tent of the Ark of the Covenant: Ex 40; (Alluded to in John 1, 14: "The word became flesh and dwelt [literally, *tented*] among us" – for John, the humanity of Jesus is the new tent of the Ark of the Covenant, the divine dwelling place among God's people)
 - New Religious Feasts for God's people – Passover, Pentecost, Day of Atonement, Feast of Booths: Lev 23; see Lev 16, Num 28-29; Deut 16
 - Sabbatical and Jubilee Years: Lev 25, Deut 15
 - The New Levite Priesthood: Num 3
 - The Priestly Blessing (a useful blessing for paraliturgical celebrations): Num 6, 22-27
 - Rebellion and punishment of Korah: Numbers 16
 - Sin of Moses and Aron, exclusion from entering Promised Land: Num 20, 6-13
 - The bronze serpent: Num 21
 - Moses' views the Promised Land from Mt. Nebo: Deut 32, 48-52
 - Death and burial of Moses: Deut 34
- ***Faith calls us as communities to a journey of transformation that leads us to peace, justice and freedom in God.***

V New Life in the Promised Land

i) Joshua

Moses' successor Joshua leads God's people with the Ark of the Covenant through the waters of the Jordan and into the promised land of Canaan. Under their God's protection, the Israelites conquer Canaan's tribes and take possession of their territory. At the end of his life, Joshua gathers the 12 tribes of Israel to renew the Covenant. They re-commit themselves to the Lord and a short time later Joshua dies.

Suggested Reading:

- Joshua commissioned by Moses to lead God's People into Promised Land: Deut 31
- Joshua and Israelites cross the Jordan with Ark of the Covenant: Joshua 3-4
- Fall of Jericho under Joshua's leadership: Joshua 6
- Conquest and Division of Canaan: Josh 6-22
- Joshua and God's people renew Covenant, Joshua dies: Josh 24

ii) Judges

On lush terrain once occupied by other tribes and in cities they have not built, the Israelites' Covenant allegiance gradually wavers. Each time they wander from God, they are threatened with military siege from their enemies. When all seems lost, God raises up righteous military *Judges* such as Deborah, Gideon and Samson, who exhort their people to return to the steadfast love and shelter of their Covenant relationship with God. United under God's gracious protection and led by Judges, they push back their foes and resume a life of peace and prosperity in the land of promise. Again and again, as the Chosen People falter, a Judge comes forward to bring them back to refuge in the shelter of their Covenant relationship with God.

Suggested Reading:

- The Book of Judges in its entirety

- *Faith is a two-way relationship with God, who never forgets His people when their steps falter.*

VI The Monarchy

i) To be Ruled Like Other Nations

The age of prophets and kings begins when God's people tell the prophet Samuel they want to be governed like their neighbours, with a king to judge them. Samuel is divinely instructed to grant their request even though it is a rejection of God's sovereignty under the Judges. Despite promised conscription of sons and daughters to the royal army and household, tribute of finest produce and animals to the monarchy, the people insist on being ruled by a king, and Samuel anoints Saul for the task.

Suggested Reading:

- God's people demand a king: 1 Sam 8
- Samuel anoints Saul King: 1 Sam 9-10

ii) Prophets and Kings

Other prophets are raised up to remind kings to govern in faithfulness to the Covenant and its laws. They announce God's comfort to the poor and oppressed, denounce their exploitation and warn of its consequences. When Covenant faith guides the monarchy, God's people enjoy peace, unity and security. When the Covenant is forgotten, suffering, division, chaos and disaster follow. As Solomon consorts with Paganism, his kingdom's stability deteriorates until it splits into two realms: Israel and its capital Samaria in the north with ten tribes, Judah and its capital Jerusalem in the south with two. As subsequent rulers and aristocrats reject the prophets' call for justice and true faith in God, the occasional emergence of an upright king can but briefly stall the nation's descent toward destruction.

Suggested Reading:

- The prophet Samuel: 1 Sam 1-10
- King Saul: 1 Sam 9-31
- King David: 2 Sam 2 – 1 Kings 2
- King Solomon: 1 Kgs 1-11
- The Prophet Elijah: 1 Kgs 17 – 2 Kgs 2
- The Prophet Elishah: 1 Kgs 19-2 Kgs 13
- Monarchy and prophets in Israel and Judah: 1st and 2nd Kings; 1st and 2nd Chronicles

- *Faith listens to the voice of Truth. Power exercised without faith becomes a living lie serving its own interests, to the ruin of many.*

VII Exile

i) The Assyrian Invasion: Ten Lost Tribes

Prophetic messages of warning and comfort brought by 1st Isaiah, Jeremiah, Amos and Hosea does little to convert the privileged and ruling classes of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms. Their hearts have grown cold to the poor, the oppressed, the widows, orphans and strangers in their midst. Wealth and power have become their gods;

and many have turned to the pagan religious customs of their neighbours. No longer living by Covenant faith, they are destined for ruin. In 721 B.C. the Assyrians descend on the Northern Kingdom of Israel. Most members of her 10 tribes are deported and never heard from again. The few poor left behind in Samaria gradually begin to take on the pagan customs of the Assyrians, intermingling them with their own Jewish customs, to the contempt of Jerusalem and Judah in the south.

Suggested Reading:

- Prophecies directed at Northern Kingdom of Israel: Amos, Hosea
- Prophecies directed at Assyrian capital Nineveh for wickedness to God's people: Nahum
- Prophecies directed at Judah: Isaiah 1-39 (1st Isaiah), Jeremiah, Micah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah
- 1st Isaiah – Judah and Jeremiah, Amos Hosea 2-25

ii) **The Babylonian Invasion: Destruction of a Nation**

Believing themselves immune from disaster, the people of Judah turn a deaf ear to Isaiah and Jeremiah. In 597, the Babylonians invade the Southern Kingdom, taking away its king, soldiers, skilled workers and leaving only the poor behind. Ten years later, they surround Jerusalem and after a 9 month siege, break through its walls. Most of its inhabitants have died of starvation or disease. Those who cannot escape are taken prisoner and carried away to Babylon. The Temple is looted and destroyed with the entire holy city.

Suggested Reading:

- Prophecies directed at Judah: Isaiah 1-39 (1st Isaiah), Jeremiah, Micah, Habakkuk, Zephaniah
- Nebucadnezzar King of Babylon's first siege of Jerusalem, Capture of Royal family, looting of Temple, deportation of soldiers and artisans: 2 Kgs 24
- Nebucadnezzar's second siege, destruction of Jerusalem and Temple, second deportation of Jews: 2 Kgs 25; 2 Chron 36, 13-21; Jeremiah 52, 3b-11
- Foretelling of a New Covenant written as people's hearts: Jer 31, 31-34

iii) **Birth of a Faithful Remnant**

Unfaithfulness to the Covenant has brought devastation to God's people: Now captives in a foreign land, they are bereft of territory, monarchy and Temple that had outwardly identified them as a people. Those who are weak in faith and without hope, embrace the Babylonian way of life. Others, comprising a *faithful remnant* begin to gather on the sabbath to hear God's word proclaimed and preached, giving rise to the *synagogue*. Anxious to preserve the heart of their identity, Scribes begin to record God's word in writing.

Suggested Reading:

- Words of hope and comfort to exiles in Babylon: Is 40-55 (Second Isaiah)
- Prophecies directed at exiles of Judah and Gentile Nations: Ezekiel
- Prophecies directed at Edom for assisting Babylonians in destroying Jerusalem: Obadiah
- Book of Lamentations: A lament for destroyed Jerusalem and Temples and penitential prayer for divine mercy and restoration.
- Stories of courage and message of hope and deliverance for exiles: Daniel

iv) **The Remnant Returns**

In 531 BC, the Persians overrun Babylon after 50 years of captivity. The faithful remnant begins its return to Judah, and comes to be known as "Jews" (Judeans). Assembled by the Scribe Ezra in Jerusalem, they listen to God's Law, some weeping

openly, and like their forebears at the foot of Mt. Sinai, re-commit themselves to the Covenant. The governor Nehemiah supervises the re-building of Jerusalem's walls. When crops fail, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah call the Jews to put their faith before all other priorities, by rebuilding the Temple and *then* their houses, in order that God's Covenant blessings on their harvests might follow. The people comply, and slowly out of the ruins of devastation, a purified and renewed People of God is re-born.

Suggested Reading:

- Cyrus King of Persia defeats Babylon, decrees release of God's people and re-building of Temple in Jerusalem: 2 Chron 36, 22ff; Ezra 1; see Ezra 3-6.
- Prophecies of (Judgement) Day of the Lord, call for repentance, coming restoration of Judah and Jerusalem: Joel
- Prophecies of Haggai and Zechariah: Ezra 4; Zech 1-8; Haggai
- Nehemiah appointed as Governor, rebuilding Jerusalem's walls: Nehemiah 2-6
- Ezra reads Law and people weep: Neh 8
- Ezra restores observance of the Law among returned exiles: Ezra 7-8; Neh 10-13
- Ezra leads corporate confession of sin, collective oath to follow God's Law: Neh 9-10; dissolution of mixed marriages: Ezra 9-10

Faith cannot be separated from life. Without mercy for the weak, vulnerable and needy it becomes hardness of heart toward God and neighbour. A people whose faith is without mercy will suffer division and enslavement to their own gods of wealth and power. Genuine faith, even when brutally tested, remains firm and free. In the fire of suffering, it is refined and its passion re-kindled.