

God Chooses a Family

Genesis 11:10-50:26

Abram

As Noah predicted, the line of Shem was the focus of Yahweh's plan. Generations passed into centuries, wars flared here and there, the Babel debacle was dealt with, and inconspicuously a Shemite named Terah fathered three sons: Abram, Nahor, and Haran.

Terah was a herdsman near the prosperous and sophisticated city of Ur. It was a splendid site in Terah's youth, until a horde of barbarians called Guti conquered the region. They squandered Ur's wealth, let commerce and culture decline, and exploited the local population. Still, Terah managed to raise his three sons and get all of them married.

But eventually Terah decided he'd had enough of Ur and the Guti. (See map, page 342.) So he set off with his family for the land of Canaan, a thousand miles away. However, after covering six hundred miles, Terah called a halt in the town of Haran. Perhaps he'd heard that beyond Haran travel was thirsty, risky business, and both the customs and climate of Canaan would be hard for an old man to adjust to.

Haran, though, was more or less like Ur. Both towns were

watered by the Euphrates River so they didn't have to worry about rainfall, and in both towns the people worshiped the moon god Nannar and other astral deities. Terah's family were probably also moon worshipers. But there was also a family memory of a god named Yahweh. Back in Ur, Abram had had a strange encounter with Yahweh.

Was it a dream? A vision? An audible voice? It was a seven-fold promise out of the blue:

- ◆ "I will make you into a great nation."
- ◆ "I will bless you."
- ◆ "I will make your name great."
- ◆ "You will be a blessing [to others]."
- ◆ "I will bless those who bless you."
- ◆ "Whoever curses you I will curse."
- ◆ "All peoples on earth will be blessed through you"
(Genesis 12:2-3).

All peoples. Even now, as Yahweh focused on a single family, He had all earth's families on His heart. Most of them, from Peru to China, had forgotten He existed and went on with their lives as though no world-shattering promise had come to a herdsman in Iraq. But the Snake knew. From this one would come the Son of Eve.

Greatness! Fame! Protection! And all Yahweh told Abram to do (at this point) was go to Canaan.

To Canaan

Abram didn't actually manage to obey this instruction until Terah had died in Haran. By that time, Abram was seventy-five years old—but better late than never.

So after burying Terah, Abram set out on the four-hundred-mile trek. With him went his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, and all of the animals and hired or purchased workers Terah had acquired in Haran. They had to find a caravan driver who knew the ropes, for between Haran and Egypt water was available only at closely guarded wells and springs. The driver had to know where those wells were, what route would assure that the animals could reach

a well every evening, and how to negotiate payment for the water according to the local customs. At fifteen miles a day on foot, the trip would have taken about a month.

Eventually the family arrived at Shechem in the very center of Canaan. From one of the two hills nearby, Abram could have overlooked the whole country. There Yahweh appeared to him and added an eighth promise: "To your offspring I will give this land." This must have been the most staggering promise yet from Abram's point of view, especially since the land was already teeming with thousands of Canaanites.

They were a proud and unruly bunch. Each city was independent, and they constantly feuded over land and trading rights. Strangers planning to settle down among them were not always safe. So Abram led his caravan of family, servants, retainers, sheep, goats, and donkeys south to the rugged land near the semidesert Negev. This region sufficed for grazing, but not for growing crops, so only a few herdsman used it. Their life included watching for lions, jackals, and bears; calling wandering sheep; carrying young lambs and kids; milking and shearing; mending tents; and searching endlessly for grass and water.

Faith and Obedience

Yahweh's great plan focused on a ragged nomad in the middle of nowhere. Not even an especially honest nomad: early on Abram fled Canaan during a drought and actually told his wife to say she was his sister so that Egypt's ruler wouldn't kill him to take her for his harem. And anyway, Abram reasoned, it wasn't *exactly* a lie—Sarai was his *half* sister.

But Abram was strong raw material: he was fed up with the ritualized appeasement of vague and arbitrary gods, and was ready for a forthright give-and-take with a God with moral fiber. With a little coaching he could become the progenitor of a prime family through which he would bless the nations.

So Abram lived a hundred years after he left Haran, and Yahweh spent the first forty leading him through a course designed to teach him one basic lesson: *Trust and obey Me, no matter what the situation looks like.* The course went like this. On the one hand, Yahweh repeatedly got Abram out of messes and

turned everything he touched to gold. But on the other hand, He kept dangling that promise before Abram's nose—"Your offspring will be countless and will possess this land"—and never so much as let Sarai get pregnant or allow Abram to own even a bucketful of real estate. Three decades of this drove Abram crazy. But when he tried to handle matters himself, such as seeking a surrogate mother in Sarai's handmaid, he only ended up with a domestic nightmare. Slowly he learned that the only thing worse than waiting on Yahweh was not waiting on Yahweh.

And in his better moments, even though he ranted about the raw deal he was getting, Abram was convinced deep down that he could trust Yahweh. The evidence of his Friend's character outweighed that of the "laws" of nature. After all, who made the laws? This quality of faith was what Yahweh was striving for, the one criterion for the kind of friendship He longed to have with His human inventions.

So Yahweh let Abram and Sarai endure thirty years of silence with only rare promises to hang onto. Why wasn't He quicker? Because love trusts. Love waits because it knows the beloved's character. Yahweh didn't want to be loved because He always showed up on cue to grant wishes. He wanted to be trusted in the dark.

Then suddenly, after a thirteen-year silence, Yahweh appeared in some kind of physical form on Abram's doorstep. Over lunch, as though they were old buddies who hadn't seen each other for awhile, He announced that Sarai would have a son the following year. He put a letter from His own name (the Hebrew "H") into Abram's and renamed him Abraham, "father of many." He renamed Sarai as Sarah—"princess"—mother of nations and kings. (Renaming was an ancient way of claiming authority over someone, as well as a way of declaring something essential about the person.) To Abraham's male descendants He gave an unforgettable mark of loyalty: circumcision. It symbolized a self-cursing oath: "If I am not faithful to Yahweh, may He cut off me and my offspring as I have cut off my foreskin." And to top it all off, He named the long-promised son Isaac ("he laughs"). Giving sons to ninety-year-old women in answer to thirty years

of prayer was Yahweh's idea of a joke—albeit a happy joke for Abraham and Sarah.

Final Exam

Abraham's final test came when Isaac had grown to adolescence. One day Yahweh ordered him to take Isaac to a certain mountain, slit his throat, and burn the body. What? But "Trust Me" had been engraved into Abraham's gut. The one nonnegotiable fact on which he had bet his life was that Yahweh would keep His promises, even if it meant raising Isaac from the dead. So Abraham didn't have to lie awake at night worrying, or try to put the ugly order out of his mind. He simply obeyed. When Isaac asked him why they weren't bringing an animal to sacrifice, Abraham was able to reply that God Himself would provide it. He didn't know how, but he knew his Friend.

And Isaac trusted his father and his God. He didn't resist when Abraham tied him and laid him on the altar. And at the last instant, when Abraham was about to plunge the knife into his son's throat, an angel stopped him. Abraham had demonstrated that nothing—not even his beloved son or his dreams of greatness—meant more to him than Yahweh. So because they were not idols, he could keep both son and dreams.

Still, Abraham went to his grave with no evidence that Yahweh would fulfill His promises—other than Isaac himself. He still had one childless son and owned nothing but a field for a family burial plot (for which he paid an exorbitant sum). Yet he died content.

Isaac

Considering all the agony Abraham went through to get Isaac, you might think the Bible would say a lot about him. But it doesn't. Isaac's role in Yahweh's plan was to raise his sons to be like his dad.

Isaac and Rebekah more or less relived Abraham and Sarah's life. Isaac became extremely rich; Rebekah was barren; Isaac even lied to a powerful prince that Rebekah was his sister, for fear that the man might kill him to take her. Where have we heard that one before?

Jacob's Transformation

When at last Rebekah became pregnant with twins, Yahweh selected the one who would be born second, the younger one, to carry on the plan.¹ Rivals from the start, the twins even came out of the womb competing to see who would be born first. Because the younger appeared grasping the older's heel, he was named Jacob, "heel-grasper." The name suggested a man who would hold fast to his goals and duties, but it also implied "deceiver," "supplanter." Jacob was the true son and grandson of men who had lied more than once to save their own necks.

So while Abraham's training in trust was a matter of endless waiting, Yahweh had to put Jacob through an obstacle course to fairly beat out of him his bent to use guile to get what Yahweh would give by grace.

Jacob was barely a teenager when he had to flee home to escape his brother Esau's wrath; he had swindled Esau out of the firstborn's rights (a double portion of the inheritance, leadership of the family, and the father's blessing). He was scared as he began hiking northward five hundred miles from Isaac's camp in Beersheba to his relatives' place in Haran. In those days, a person was a fool to travel without a caravan of food, water, and companions to discourage robbers. Jacob had neither a map nor a guide. And like most people of his day, he probably believed that his father's God had power only in a particular locality—in this case, Canaan. Jacob had great confidence in his wits, but he was out of his depth.

On his first night out, Yahweh appeared to him at a spot called Bethel and repeated the covenant promises He made to Abraham and Isaac. Land and descendants meant little to teenage Jacob, but he clung to one assurance: "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go, and I will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you" (Genesis 28:15). Here was a God who claimed power anywhere in the world! Jacob made a deal with Yahweh: You take care of me, and I'll worship you. It was not quite the arrangement Yahweh had with Abraham, but it would do as a beginning.

The Wrestler

It took Yahweh twenty years to break Jacob. It took an uncle who was a worse cheater than he was and two wives who treated him like a stud stallion to fuel their childbearing competition. It took twenty years of backbreaking work and endless bickering in his burgeoning tents. He became as rich as his dad and supported two wives, two concubines (slave semiwives), thirteen children, and a lot of servants. He thought he owed his success to his own cleverness, even though Yahweh really deserved the credit. Yet in the end Jacob's uncle was mad enough at his good fortune to seize his family, so he tried to run again.

But this time his uncle caught up with him, and even Jacob could see that only divine intervention, not his own cunning, saved his skin. He also finally faced the fact that running from broken relationships was futile. So although he was heading to Bethel and would pass nowhere near Esau's land southeast of Canaan, Jacob sent a message to his brother that he was returning and wanted to be reconciled.

Jacob spent the night before their meeting alone, having it out with Yahweh. He wasn't so much concerned that Esau was coming with four hundred armed men who might slaughter his family. For the first time, he didn't want something from God, he wanted God. In the night a man appeared to him and wrestled with him until dawn. In the morning, his hip was injured so that he limped, and he had a new name: Israel, "he struggles with God." Like a proud stallion, Jacob had been broken to God's hand over twenty years of wrestling. Though he limped from the struggle, he was transformed. No more "Jacob the deceiver," cunning as a serpent; he was now a true son of the promise.

Sibling Rivalry

So Jacob-Israel² settled down in Canaan and became a responsible patriarch over a large household and thriving livestock business. Everything was going smoothly except that his twelve sons were a delinquent gang, capable of inflicting revenge on a whole town when one citizen raped their sister. Yahweh had slated Jacob's sons to father the twelve tribes of Israel, the bearers of His plan, and they needed more of Yahweh's discipline than Abraham,

Isaac, and Jacob put together.

To mold the brothers for this role, Yahweh selected for special treatment number eleven, the adolescent Joseph, whose ten older siblings detested him for two reasons. First, he was Jacob's pet. Second, he dreamed about his family bowing down to him as their master. So one day the ten sold Joseph as a slave to some merchants traveling to Egypt, then went home weeping that a wild animal ate him.

As Joseph's dreams attested, Yahweh had grand intentions for him, but the road to greatness in Yahweh's service is rarely without its potholes. As a slave, Joseph rose to become the household manager for the captain of the Egyptian pharaoh's guard. Then for insulting the captain's wife by resisting her sexual advances, Joseph found himself in Pharaoh's dungeon charged with attempted rape.

By contrast, consider Joseph's brothers back in Canaan. Reuben, the eldest, was disinherited for seducing one of his dad's concubines. Son number four, Judah, had two of his sons killed by Yahweh for their depravity, but Judah blamed their widow, Tamar. He refused to marry his one remaining son to her, even though custom demanded it, and condemned her to childless widowhood. Desperate, she disguised herself as a prostitute and waited along a road she knew Judah was traveling. He hired her services and in pledge of payment gave her his staff and signature seal. When he got home, he tried to send payment, but no one had ever heard of this prostitute. But three months later, Tamar turned up pregnant, and when brought out to be executed for adultery, she virtually threw the staff and seal in Judah's face. Ashamed, he took her back into his house and took responsibility for her. She bore twin sons, Perez and Zerah, who became Judah's sole heirs.

Yet while Reuben and Judah dallied, Joseph languished in Pharaoh's jail until word reached Pharaoh that a certain Hebrew rotting in his prison was a master of dream interpretation. In the time it took Yahweh to give Joseph the meaning of Pharaoh's latest dream and a strategy for handling the agricultural disaster it portended, Joseph went from dungeon rat to prime minister.

Seven years later, famine hit the whole Middle East. But news spread that Egypt had grain because the prime minister

had been stockpiling it. People began to stream from everywhere to buy food.

Jacob dispatched his ten older sons, but inexplicably, the prime minister had them jailed as spies. (Joseph had recognized them immediately, but it never dawned on them that this thirty-eight-year-old, clean-shaven Egyptian lord might be the obnoxious teenager they sold some twenty years earlier.) After three days he released all but one and declared that until they brought to Egypt the youngest brother whom they claimed to have, brother Simeon would rot in Pharaoh's jail.

The nine were aghast. They knew their God well enough to recognize His hand somewhere in all of this, punishing their cruelty to Joseph. And Jacob was beside himself when they returned without yet another of his sons. He wouldn't hear of sending his youngest, Benjamin, to Egypt. But when the grain ran out and the children began to cry, he gave in. Reuben and Judah pledged their lives if they didn't bring both Simeon and Benjamin home safely.

Upon their return Joseph played some more mind games with them until they were convinced that Yahweh was destroying them for betraying their brother. When it was obvious that all of them had cracked under pressure, Joseph burst into tears and told them the whole story. It took several reassurances before they grasped that he was not about to execute them for their past malice. But Joseph had come to see that although they were responsible for their freely chosen crime, Yahweh had used it to save the whole Middle East from a desolating famine and especially to protect His chosen family from extinction.

Out of gratitude to Joseph, Pharaoh invited his whole family to come and live in some of Egypt's best land. Yahweh told Jacob to go. It so happened that the Egyptians considered herdsmen disgusting, so Pharaoh selected the fertile but out-of-the-way region of Goshen for Jacob's clan to settle in. There would be no temptation to intermingle with the Egyptians and lose their family traditions.

Into the Future

On his deathbed, Jacob's mind was on the all-important divine promises. He made Joseph promise to bury him with Abraham

and Isaac in Canaan, as a sign of faith that the land would one day be theirs. He also pronounced prophetic fatherly blessings upon each of his sons, as well as upon Joseph's two sons. In these blessings, he declared how the family inheritance would be distributed and foresaw what would happen in future centuries as his sons' families became tribes of the great nation God had promised.

First was the matter of the firstborn. Reuben had forfeited the eldest son's rights. His tribe, therefore, would never fulfill its hope of greatness, and Reuben himself would inherit neither the headship of the family nor the double portion of property.

Simeon and Levi, the next two eldest, had instigated the massacre to avenge their raped sister. Therefore, Jacob passed them over for the firstborn's rights and said their tribes would be scattered among their brothers' tribes.

The fourth eldest was Judah. He received the right of headship. Jacob declared that Judah would be the ruling tribe of Israel "until he comes to whom it [the scepter of kingship] belongs" (Genesis 49:10). Whatever that meant. Did Jacob and sons think of the Son of Eve? Surely the Serpent did.

The next six sons received their blessings in their turns — all double-edged, foreseeing both their greatness and their weakness. Then came Joseph, the eldest son of Jacob's favorite wife. To him Jacob bequeathed the firstborn's double portion. He adopted Joseph's two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, and gave each a full inheritance equal to that of Joseph's brothers. Ironically, Ephraim was the younger of the two, but Jacob saw from Yahweh that what he himself had stolen from Esau, Yahweh was giving to Ephraim with no need for human scheming.

Joseph ruled in Egypt about another sixty years after Jacob's death, raised his grandchildren, and kept his heart on the covenant between his father and his God. His last words to his family reassured them that Yahweh would one day bring them home to Canaan to take possession of it. Trusting in that conviction, he asked to be put in a coffin but not buried until the family could return to bury him with his ancestors in their promised home.

NOTES

1. It was not out of cruelty that Yahweh kept setting aside whole populations and choosing others who were in no way superior. On the contrary, by grooming the chosen branch in each generation (Abraham, then Isaac instead of Ishmael, then Jacob instead of Esau), Yahweh planned ultimately to bring blessing and deliverance to all the other peoples. To make the point that the nonchosen branches of the family are not forgotten, Genesis always includes short genealogies for them.

Yahweh was also underscoring the fact that He had the right to choose whomever He wished, and that He thought little of human criteria. He had selected an insignificant nomadic family — not sophisticated aristocrats or philosophers — out of all the families of the earth. He had closed Sarah's womb and then opened it when she was ninety. And now He selected Isaac's younger son when the human custom was to honor the firstborn.

2. The man Israel became the founding father of a nation by the same name. It was common practice in the Middle East for tribes or nations to be named after a noteworthy patriarch. Jacob's brother Esau, nicknamed Edom ("red"), gave his name to a nation southeast of Israel. Two nations east of Israel, Ammon and Moab, were named after two great-grandnephews of Abraham.