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From Abraham to Jacob: Promise and Fulfillment

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From Abraham to Jacob: Promise and Fulfillment

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Since the beginning of time, God has had a special relationship with humans. After the creation of the heavens and the earth, God bestowed the rule of the land and sea to His most favored creation, man. Although Adam and Eve sinned against God, He still bestowed favor on them. He banished them from the Garden of Eden for their sin but gave them clothing (Genesis 3:21). When Cain killed Abel, God banned Cain from the land of his parents but put a mark upon him that he not be killed (Gen. 4:11-16). Even when humanity reached the point of pure wickedness, God could not totally destroy His creation. He entreated Noah to build an ark on which the chosen animals and people of the land would live while the rest of creation perished. After the flood waters subsided, God made a covenant with Noah that "never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood" (Gen. 9:11-12). As a sign of this covenant with man and beast, God promised that if ever the clouds covered the sky, a rainbow would appear in the sky. Following His covenant with Noah, God called a man named Abram asking him to leave the city where he was living and go to the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:4-6). When Abram and his wife Sarah arrived in Canaan, God revealed to him what His purpose was. God had chosen Abram to be the keeper of His covenant with man. Abram was to become the father of all nations; his descendents would number the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:5-6). The custodians of this covenant would follow the blood line of Abram and Sarah to their son, Isaac, grandson, Jacob, and future generations. To mark this covenant, as God had marked the covenant with Noah, God commanded Abram to take all the males of his household and circumcise them. This act would be a sign to God that His covenant was being kept by man (Gen. 17:9-13). God also changed the names of his chosen ones from Abram to Abraham and Sarah to Sarah (Gen. 17:5, 17:15)."

From Abraham to Jacob:
Promise and Fulfillment

by

Linda Wert

In the Beginning

Since the beginning of time, God has had a special relationship with humans. After the creation of the heavens and the earth, God bestowed the rule of the land and sea to His most favored creation, man. Although Adam and Eve sinned against God, He still bestowed favor on them. He banished them from the Garden of Eden for their sin but gave them clothing (Genesis 3:21). When Cain killed Abel, God banned Cain from the land of his parents but put a mark upon him that he not be killed (Gen. 4:11-16). Even when humanity reached the point of pure wickedness, God could not totally destroy His creation. He entreated Noah to build an ark on which the chosen animals and people of the land would live while the rest of creation perished. After the flood waters subsided, God made a covenant with Noah that “never again shall all bodily creatures be destroyed by the waters of a flood” (Gen. 9:11-12). As a sign of this covenant with man and beast, God promised that if ever the clouds covered the sky, a rainbow would appear in the sky. Following His covenant with Noah, God called a man named Abram asking him to leave the city where he was living and go to the land of Canaan (Gen. 12:4-6). When Abram and his wife Sarai arrived in Canaan, God revealed to him what His purpose was. God had chosen Abram to be the keeper of His covenant with man. Abram was to become the father of all nations; his descendents would number the stars in the sky (Gen. 15:5-6). The custodians of this covenant would follow the blood line of Abram and Sarai to their son, Isaac, grandson, Jacob, and future generations. To mark this covenant, as God had marked the covenant with Noah, God commanded Abram to take all the males of his household and circumcise them. This act would be a sign to God that His covenant was

being kept by man (Gen. 17:9-13). God also changed the names of his chosen ones from Abram to Abraham and Sarai to Sarah (Gen. 17:5, 17:15).

Moving forward, in the following pages, we will explore the covenant between God and humanity, the first keepers of the covenant, and their lives.

The People of the Covenant

When God formed his covenant, Abraham had difficulty understanding how the Lord was going to make his descendents cover the earth when his wife, Sarah, was barren. As was custom at the time, when a man's wife was barren, he would take on one of her female servants to perpetuate his family line. Sarah gave Abraham her servant, Hagar with whom he could have offspring. She did not understand that the will of God would provide for an heir. However, she took it upon herself to see that her husband have offspring, whether it was hers or not. Hagar bore him a son, Ishmael. However, God promised Abraham that though this child would not carry on the covenant, a child Sarah would bear would be his successor (Gen. 17:19-20). Although Sarah believed at the time that the best thing for her husband was to offer her servant to him, it proved to be a source of great tension and tribulation later. Sarah did not understand that God's promise would not go unfulfilled. She did not have to take her own action to provide Abraham with an heir, but in her humanity, she allows another woman into her husband's bed. This decision plagues her on many occasions, causing her to fear for her son's role.

Upon hearing the news that she would be able to bear a child for Abraham, Sarah became worried about the status that Ishmael held. He was the first born of her husband's children but her child would be the chosen son. Sarah's fears were unfounded

because of God's promise that Isaac would be the one who would continue the covenant. Ishmael was blessed by God but was not meant to carry on the covenant. According to Mills, Sarah and Abraham had to have a child together for the covenant to proceed because the child of a slave could not continue the covenant (Mills 28). Why is it impossible for a child of a slave to continue the covenant with God? At the time of Ishmael's birth, slaves were not held in very high regard. But Abraham treated Ishmael and his mother, Hagar, with respect and love.

Sarah, however, still had concerns with Hagar and Ishmael remaining in the house of Abraham. Sarah demanded that Abraham expel his mistress and son, which Abraham did without reproach. According to the Navarre Bible Pentateuch, Sarah exhibits the role of women in the Old Testament (Gavigan 113). Although at that time the role of women was wife and mother, this passage in Genesis indicates a position of authority especially in family dealings. Abraham concedes to this request of his wife even though it causes him great pain to banish his son.

It is unknown why God chose Abraham to be his messenger on earth. The call of Abraham by God originated with his father, Terah. Terah and his peoples were from Ur of the Chaldeans. Terah took his children, Abram and Nahor, and their wives, Sarai and Milcha, and his grandchild, Lot, to the land of Haran bound for Canaan (Gen. 11:31-32). However, before the assemblage reached Canaan, they settled in Haran, where Terah died. From Haran, God called Abraham (then Abram) to "Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you" (Gen. 12:1-2). The land that God led Abraham to was the same country where his father was attempting to take his family. We can make many assumptions about why Terah decided to take his

family out of Ur to a new and unfamiliar land. The book of Genesis does not divulge why Terah did this but we can make some inferences. Perhaps, like his son later, Terah was influenced by God to come to a new land. Or perhaps it was as simple as a need for fresh farmland. Whatever explanation we assign does not have any bearing on what happened to Abraham. He could have been called by God from anywhere on the earth.

Heeding the Call

Abraham followed the call of God from Haran to Canaan taking with him his family and his possessions. After reaching Canaan, but before settling anywhere in the land, the clan went for a time to Egypt because of famine in the Negeb. While in Egypt, Abraham instructed Sarah to pose as his sister for he was afraid the Egyptians would kill him for Sarah's beauty. Sarah agreed to this request because she loved her husband and did not want to see him harmed on her account. However, the pharaoh of Egypt noticed the beauty of Sarah and took her into his palace. The Lord then struck Pharaoh with plagues because of his courting of Sarah. Pharaoh went to Abraham begging forgiveness and asking why Abraham did not say that Sarah was his wife. Pharaoh sent them out of Egypt on their way to Canaan.

Because of this episode, one scholar has deemed Abraham "an unworthy husband" (Mills 43). Mills states that the way Abraham treated Sarah was not proper of a husband. He put her in harms way to save his own life. Perhaps he had not fully thought out what could happen to Sarah if someone found her attractive but if he thought he might be killed because of her beauty, he should have deduced that someone would try to take her. Abraham did save Sarah before anything improper could happen between her and the pharaoh. However, according to scripture, Abraham benefited from Sarah's

connection to Pharaoh: “On her account it went very well with Abram, and he received flocks and herds, male and female slaves, male and female asses, and camels” (Gen. 12:16-17). We cannot be sure of Abraham’s intentions in this matter but the scripture does not paint a very good picture for him. This situation can also be seen as only a story and not fact because the story is repeated in Genesis 20:1: “While he stayed in Gerar, he said of his wife, Sarah, ‘She is my sister’” (Gen. 20:2-3). However, this narrative takes place in Gerar with King Abimelech. We can infer that this story was created to convey that Abraham, although chosen by God to keep the covenant, is a simple man and not above other people. The stories are meant to portray the image of a normal man with less than good qualities and normal human faults and weaknesses. The story could be used to urge people who read the passage to understand that God chooses all people to follow him, no matter what imperfections they possess.

Upon leaving Egypt, Abraham and his family went back to the Negeb and then on to Bethel. There the family stayed until quarreling broke out between the herdsmen of Abraham and the herdsmen of Lot, his nephew. Lot and Abraham knew they could not occupy the same lands because of the vast amount of livestock and possessions they each had. Abraham stayed in Canaan and Lot and his people traveled across the plain of Jordan to Sodom.

The Family Continues

God’s choice of Abraham to be the father of a nation meant that his descendents would be chosen to continue the covenant. Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah, was deemed by God as the custodian of the covenant bestowed upon Abraham. From the beginning of his life, Isaac was subjected to the dictate of God. As a test of faith, God

told Abraham to take his only son to Moriah. He was to offer Isaac up to God as a holocaust. Abraham was obedient to God and took his only son to offer him as a sacrifice to God. As Abraham and Isaac walked to the site for the offering of the sacrifice and Abraham prepared the altar, an angel of the Lord called to him to spare his son. In the end, the heir to the covenant was saved. The faith shown by Abraham is undeniable.

It is difficult to understand why God would ask such a sacrifice, but the fact that Abraham was to kill his only son and that he was about to do so without apparently questioning God shows his undying trust in God's promise. Although Sarah had conceived and given birth to Isaac after being thought barren, Abraham had no way of knowing if he would have a successor had he offered Isaac as a sacrifice to God. His other son was Ishmael, but he was not the son of Sarah and not the one promised by God. However, to understand this story, we must first understand what was customary at the time of Abraham. It was customary among certain religions that the first born male of the family was to be sacrificed to the god, El. Because God had not revealed himself to Abraham like he does later to Moses, Abraham has no way of knowing that this god, El, is not his god. This could be why Abraham does not protest to God's request to sacrifice Isaac. Especially considering Abraham's great faith, who believed that God would give him a rightful heir even in Sarah's old age; and God provided. So why would He not provide another heir if Isaac were to be sacrificed as an offering to Him? This interpretation concludes that because the god, El was not the true god, an angel of God was sent to stop Abraham from committing the sacrifice and thus ending the genealogical line of the covenant.

Another interpretation, which I have discussed in Introduction to Judaism, of this passage, concludes that the “voice of God” that spoke to Abraham and instructed him to sacrifice Isaac was the voice of the devil. Abraham is made to think that it is God’s will and that Isaac is not meant to continue the covenant. Abraham obeys but at the last minute an angel of God tells Abraham not to kill Isaac. This accounts for the contradiction in the passage, which presumes that if God had truly called Abraham to kill Isaac, He would not have recanted his request. However, we can also infer that perhaps it was the will of God that Abraham be tested by the devil.

With the ordeal Abraham goes through on account of Isaac as a sacrifice, we see a continuing trend. He seems to be unwavering in his faith and trust in God through many trials. Not only does he agree to sacrifice his only heir (only heir sent by God) but he does this without question. Abraham silently obeys God. Often in Genesis, beginning with his move from his homeland to Canaan, to God’s promise of Sarah’s pregnancy, to the sparing of Isaac at the altar we are given a proof of this. Abraham also trusts that God will keep his covenant even though he never sees his descendants “number the stars” (Mills 31).

Isaac and the Covenant

Isaac grew in the favor of God and served his father well. When he became of age, Abraham sent out a servant to the city of Nahor to find a bride for Isaac. Abraham did not want his son to marry a Canaanite but instead a woman from his homeland (Gen. 24:2-5). The servant had been “shown” a woman for Isaac who was the daughter of Abraham’s nephew. When he saw Rebekah with a water jar, the servant immediately knew that she was the one for Isaac. Rebekah’s family gave her to the servant to take her

to Abraham and Isaac. Some time after the marriage of Isaac to Rebekah, Abraham died. After Abraham's death, God blessed Isaac and renewed the covenant with him. Although Isaac is the chosen descendant to continue the covenant, he is subjected to the same temptations as his father. In Genesis 26:1, Isaac is in a similar situation as Abraham in which he poses as the brother of Rebekah instead of her husband. Isaac also claims that he will be killed for being married to Rebekah because she is so beautiful and the king would want to have her. The story, just as Abraham's, conveys that Isaac is also just a man, who has imperfections. We can question what motivates these men to have the same fear of dying because of the beauty of their wives. Was it a common occurrence for leaders to kill men for their beautiful wives? In the situations with both Abraham and Isaac, we can assume that pharaohs and kings of the time had more than one wife and many female servants. Why would these two men assume that their wives would be noticed by the most powerful men of the land? Were these women truly so beautiful that their husbands' lives were at risk? Perhaps this is also an embellishment of the story to make it more desirable to read. Later generations who would hear these stories and then later, read them, would be more apt to listen to the stories if they are embellished.

Once again, the lineage was threatened when it was discovered that Rebekah was sterile. Isaac pleaded with God to allow her to bear children. This can be considered Isaac's test from God. He is faced with the ceasing of his family line and, unlike his father, Isaac does not have any other children by another woman who could continue the covenant. However, God heard his plea and Rebekah became pregnant with twins. Jacob and Esau began as rivals in the womb even before their birth. Esau, the older of the two, was a hunter and outdoorsman. Jacob, on the other hand, was the crafty one.

Because Esau was the elder, he was the heir to Isaac and the covenant; however Jacob in his craftiness bargained with Esau for the birthright in exchange for sustenance (Gen. 25:19-34). In another cunning act Jacob was able to fool his father into blessing him as his heir. Jacob disguised himself as Esau to dupe his father, who knew Esau was the first born. Isaac was elderly and Jacob was deceptive and covered himself in animal skins to simulate the hair that Esau had on his arms. Isaac was deceived and granted a blessing on Jacob, "Let peoples serve you, and nations pay you homage; be master of you brothers, and may your mother's sons bow down to you. Cursed be those who curse you and blessed be those who bless you" (Gen. 27:29-30).

Even though Jacob had deceived his father, Isaac did not go back on his blessing. Jacob would be the chosen one to continue the covenant with God. With the blessing of his father, Jacob leaves his family to find a wife. During his journey, Jacob stopped to camp for the night in a place called Luz. During the night, Jacob dreamt of a stairway that the messengers of God were climbing up and down. The Lord appeared to him saying He was the God of Abraham and the God of Isaac; "Know that I am with you; I will protect you wherever you go, and bring you back to this land. I will never leave you until I have done what I promised you" (Gen. 28:15-16). When Jacob awoke, he set up a memorial and renamed the place Bethel and vowed to return all things to God (Gen. 28:20-22).

Jacob's dream can and is interpreted as God's way of sanctifying His covenant with Jacob after Isaac blessed him. In this passage of Genesis, one can infer that even though Esau was first born and, according to birthright, the next to receive the covenant, God's purpose was to have Jacob be keeper of the covenant. Although Jacob received

the covenant in a deceitful manner, God still sanctified the covenant. It can also be implied that because of his covenant with God, Jacob became less deceitful. It can also be inferred that, after all Jacob's years of being devious, he is deceived by his uncle, Laban.

Jacob and Laban

When Jacob reached Haran, he fell in love with Rachel, Laban's second daughter. Laban promised that after seven years of labor, Jacob could marry Rachel. However, Laban cheated Jacob by giving him Leah, his eldest daughter as his bride. Once Jacob realized he had been misled, he demanded to have Rachel as his bride as well. Laban agreed to give both his daughters to Jacob in return for seven more years of service.

After the end of the seven years, Jacob and his two wives had started a substantial family. However, Jacob desired to return to his homeland. Although Jacob makes no claims as to why he wants to leave Haran, supposition can be made about why Jacob would want to return to Canaan. Speculations have been made as to why Jacob would decide to go back after fourteen years. In Genesis, as supported in the *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, it is indicated that Laban had a change in attitude toward Jacob that may have incited the move (Brown 32). Another speculation for the move is divine intervention (Brown 32). Jacob had been visited by an "angel of God" in a dream before, telling him of his relationship with God and the covenant; perhaps he was visited again. Either way, Jacob, his wives, and children leave Haran to return to the place of his birth, Canaan. On the journey, Jacob and Laban once again have an entanglement. When Jacob took his family and left Haran, he failed to tell his father-in-law. This enraged Laban

because he had recently found out about Jacob's breeding practices with the sheep herd. Laban went after Jacob seeking retribution for this weakened flock. However, before Laban reached Jacob, he had a dream in which God warned him not to harm Jacob: "Take care not to threaten Jacob with any harm" (Gen. 31:24-25). This again can be viewed as God solidifying his choice of Jacob as covenant keeper. Laban did not harm Jacob and eventually allowed him to go on his way. On the flight from Haran, Jacob stopped at a place for the night. In the night, Jacob took his wives, family, and possessions, across the Jabbok River. Then Jacob was left alone. During the night, Jacob wrestled with a mysterious man until the break of day. Jacob fought hard and the man could not win, so he struck Jacob in the hip causing a permanent limp. The man then blessed Jacob saying, "You shall no longer be spoken of as Jacob, but as Israel, because you have contended with divine and human beings and have prevailed" (Gen. 32:29-30). Thus began the people Israel, which is how the Jewish people are referred to today.

The obvious interpretation of this passage is that Jacob wrestled with God, or a messenger of God, who was sent to test Jacob. It is also clear that anyone who is entrusted with the covenant will be tested in some way by God. Just like his father and grandfather before him, Jacob is no exception to being tested. This is understandable considering the magnitude of responsibility involved in the keeping of the covenant. However, Jacob's test is somewhat different from the tests of Abraham and Isaac. Whether Jacob really wrestled with someone or if it was a perception, he was still injured by the experience. This served as a symbol to him for the rest of his life. The comment made by the man in the above quote sparks some inquiry. Jacob has wrestled with divine

and human beings, indicates Jacob's struggle with God and with Laban and Esau (Brown 34).

In the End

The covenant between God and Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob has continued throughout the generations of Israel. This promise formed a nation of people whose has kept the covenant for thousands of years. Although Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were chosen by God, they were simple people just like their descendents. Even in the simplicity of humanity, the covenant with God stood. The keepers of the covenant overcame many obstacles to fulfill the promise of a new nation. Abraham followed God through the command to sacrifice Isaac. Abraham and Isaac both felt the pain of their wives sterility but kept faith that the family line would continue. Jacob overcame a struggle with God that left him crippled for the rest of his life. Each of the chosen wives also overcame trials involving poor choice and infertility. Even with these problems, the covenant continued. The covenant continues to evolve and flourish with each new generation of "keepers" from the tribes of Israel. From a Christian perspective, we can appreciate the covenant that God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob because of the self-sacrifice of the Jesus event which we can now understand (as Christians) as the embodiment of the evolving covenant.

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