

The Patriarchs, Moses and Prophets

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The Patriarchs, Moses and Prophets

The Lord said to Abram, “Go forth from your land, your relatives, and from your father’s house to a land I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and curse those who curse you. All the families of the earth will find blessing in you.”

(Gen. 12: 1-3 NABRE)

“I am God the Almighty. Walk in my presence and be blameless. Between you and me I will establish my covenant, and I will multiply you exceedingly. For my part, here is my covenant with you; you are to become the father of a multitude of nations. No longer will you be called Abram; your name will be Abraham, for I am making you father of a multitude of nations. ...I will maintain my covenant between me and you throughout the ages as an everlasting covenant, to be your God and the God of your descendants after you. I will give to you and your descendants after you the land in which you are residing as aliens, the whole land of Canaan, as a permanent possession; and I will be their God.”

(Gen. 17: 1-9)

“They answered and said to him, “Our father is Abraham.” Jesus said to them, “If you were Abraham’s children, you would be doing the works of Abraham.”

(John: 8:39)

INTRODUCTION

1. The book of Genesis begins as a book of universal history of mankind narrating God's creation of all things and bestowing all to our first parents. God had granted to Adam and Eve a nature that exceeded that of all other creatures; a sharing in the very image and likeness of Himself,¹ in a life of total friendship and union with His own Person, and possession of free will. However, in his **arrogance**,² man saw fit to follow his own desires and **disobey**³ the command given to him by God.⁴ God, in His infinite goodness and love, and yet with justice and generosity, decreed that mankind should be restored to His friendship by giving a promise of a redeemer. In the presence of Adam and Eve, God addressed the evil deceiver saying, *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; they will strike at your head, while you strike at their heel."*⁵ Christian tradition has not seen this passage as the ending of hostility between good and evil, but understood it as the first promise of a redeemer.⁶
2. As the human race expanded, its evil conduct provoked God to send a flood to wipe out all but righteous Noah and his family.⁷ After the flood, the world re-populated with his three sons, Ham, Shem and Japheth, and their wives. From them descended the nations of the civilized world; but the offenses of man provoked God to elect one family from the rest, Abraham and his wife Sarah, to reconcile mankind with God. It was now a fitting time for God to put into action all the necessary preparation for the fulfillment of the promise made to mankind after the disobedience of our first parents.⁸ His plan would be in need of the establishment of a "chosen people" as progenitors, with a process of development with direction, laws, and civil and religious government so as to evolve into a nation favorable to Himself in readiness for the coming of the Messiah.⁹
3. *"In careful planning and preparing the salvation of the whole human race the God of infinite love, by a special dispensation, chose for Himself a people to whom He would entrust His promises. First He entered into a covenant with Abraham and, through Moses, with the people of Israel..... He so manifested Himself through words and deeds as the one true and living God that Israel came to know by experience the ways of God with man. Then, too, when God himself spoke to them through the mouth of the prophets, Israel daily gained a deeper and clearer understanding of His ways and made them more widely known among the nations."*¹⁰

¹ Gen. 1:27 (NABRE) - In the image of God he created them.

² Gen 3:5 - You will be like gods.

³ Gen. 3:1-7

⁴ Gen. 2:16-17

⁵ Gen. 3:15

⁶ Gen 3:15 - The Protevangelium – the "first good news" of a redeemer.

⁷ Gen. 6:11-13, 17-18

⁸ Gen. 12:1-3

⁹ Mt 1:16 - Of her was born Jesus who is called the *Messiah*.

¹⁰ Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Chap. 4: 14

PATRIARCHS, ABRAHAM, ISAAC AND JACOB

4. Among the descendants of Noah, God had chosen Abraham because of his unique righteousness and obedience¹¹ so as to become the first progenitor of His people, and, as the first of the three major patriarchs, is looked upon as the “starting point” of the Old Testament religion. Man, since the day of Abraham, is apt to speak of God as the “God of Abraham.”¹² We do not find Abraham referring to any other divinity his ancestors worshipped in the same manner.
5. The word “Patriarch” as applied to the biblical personages comes from the Scriptures where it is used as a religious or civil leader. In the more restricted sense and common usage, it is applied to the three progenitors of the Jewish people, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.
6. Abraham is credited to have faith, trust and obedience to God and in God in all things. This trust in God is evident by his obedience to God’s command to leave Haran (modern day Iraq) and to journey 1,000 miles with his family into the unknown country of Canaan. His obedience was further shown principally when he was willing to sacrifice his only begotten son from Sarah, Isaac, at God’s command.¹³
7. It is not clear or recorded what was Abraham’s understanding of the Divine. Just as in Noah and his descendants, there was an inherent belief of a supreme being beyond the natural order of life, be it a multiplicity of such beings who controlled the different aspect of nature, or one among that multiplicity as the ‘god of gods.’ The resolution of the question for early man was not apt to be of importance except that there was order in nature, supported by an unseen and unknown force. For Abraham, he responded to the urging of that power as an acceptance of good.
8. It was through Abraham’s descendants that the Jewish nation would evolve a people who would receive the Covenant of the Lord, and of his descendants would be the Messiah. God wants to raise up Israel as a nation obedient to Him so that Israel will be a light to all the nations. This promise is renewed in Abraham’s issue, Isaac to whom God gives His assent, *“I am the God of your father Abraham; fear not, for I am with you. I will bless you and multiply your descendants for the sake of Abraham, my servant.”*
9. The promise is further renewed with Isaac’s son, Jacob, *“I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father, and the God of Isaac: the land on which you are lying I will give to you and your descendants.. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth.... In you and your descendants all the families of the earth will find blessing. I am with you and 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.”*¹⁴ Jacob is renamed Israel by God,¹⁵ meaning “striver with God” and hence the nation of God’s chosen

¹¹ Gen. 12:4 - Abram went as the Lord directed him.

¹² Ex. 3:6 - I am *the God of your father*, he continued, *the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.*

¹³ Gen. 22:1-19

¹⁴ Gen. 28:13

¹⁵ Gen. 35:10

people is called “Israelites.”

10. St. Paul, in his “Letter to the Hebrews” as found in the New Testament, speaks of the patriarchs as, *“All these died in faith. They did not receive what was promised but saw it and greeted it from afar and acknowledged themselves to be strangers and aliens on earth, for those who speak thus show that they are seeking a homeland.... But now they desire a better homeland, a heavenly one.”*¹⁶

MOSES AND THE EXODUS

11. Jacob (Israel) had 12 sons who settled in Egypt with their families while Joseph, his second youngest son, was governor of the country under the rule of Pharaoh. Over the 400 years of their stay in Egypt, the 12 sons and their descendants each evolved and became identified as separate “tribes.” It was by Israel’s design and prediction that the tribe of Judah be blessed with the “scepter” of the promise, and to “abide with it until the coming of Him to whom it belongs,” a prediction to be echoed centuries later in the words spoken by angel Gabriel at the annunciation to Mary, “And he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever.”¹⁷ Eventually the stay of the Israelites in Egypt became one of oppression and slavery.
12. Moses, a member of the tribe of Levi, having been raised in the household of the pharaoh, was learned in matters of civil administration and direction. God called upon him to return to Egypt from his self-imposed exile in the land of Midian¹⁸ and to appeal for the release of the Israelites from their servitude to the Egyptians.¹⁹ With obedience, faith in God, and with personal fortitude and persistence, he was able, with God’s intervention, to fulfill his mission and to undertake their travel to the Promised Land.
13. From the events of the exodus from Egypt during those 40 years wandering in the desert, Israel evolved into a nation of people with a confirmed relationship with the God of their fathers. The “Law”²⁰ given them by God through Moses at Mt. Sinai constitutes a moral, civil and ritual legislation by which they were to become a holy people in whom the promise of a savior would be actualized.
14. Though the people committed apostasy by worshipping a Golden Calf²¹ while Moses was receiving the Law directly from God, and were continuously grumbling of their hardships in the desert, God forgave their shortcomings lest there would be an abrogation of the Promise. God’s omnipotence and loving care brought about the formation of His people as His “inheritance.” He Himself is to rule over them; their leaders, patriarchs, prophets and kings are to be merely His official representatives.
15. Moses, though not necessarily significant as a patriarch, certainly played a large part as an intermediary in revealing God to His people, instructing them of the nature and

¹⁶ Heb. 11:13

¹⁷ Cath. Comm. On Sacred Scripture

¹⁸ Ex. 2:15

¹⁹ Ex. 3:1-17

²⁰ Ex. 34:1-26

²¹ Ex. 32:1-6

Person of God, and reaffirming His relationship with His people and of the Promise. The religion of the Israelites does not begin with Moses and/or the Law, rather is based upon God's own words, "I am the God of your fathers Abraham, Isaac and Jacob."²²

PROPHETS

16. The function of a prophet is not primarily to foretell the future, but rather to instruct and reprove the people in God's name. If the people do not heed the message of the prophet, the consequences could easily be foreseen and predicted. The Old Testament prophet was an intermediary between God and the people. He received from God the message God wanted communicated, and then he himself handed it on. He was God's mouthpiece. This essential function of the prophet is clearly shown in the relation that God established between Moses and Aaron. When Moses protested his inability to carry out the mission to free the Israelites from Egypt, on the grounds of the defect of speech, God ordered Moses to put the divine words into Aaron's mouth for him to speak in his stead.²³
17. God had forbidden Israel all kinds of oracles that were in vogue among the pagans. He always abominated those who had recourse to divination, magic or trusted in charms, consulted soothsayers or wizards. With the absence of such oracles, the chosen people were indeed more than compensated by a gift, the gift of prophecy and the prophetic office. The prophet was an interpreter and a supernaturally enlightened herald sent by God to communicate His will and design to His people. He had to develop and maintain the knowledge of the Law among the Chosen People, lead them back when they strayed, and gradually prepare the way for the new kingdom of God, which the Messiah was to establish on earth.
18. In the days of the prophet Samuel (11th century B.C.), prophecy became a permanent institution. Samuel was a new but lesser Moses, whose Divine mission was to restore code, and to supervise the beginning of the royalty that was to rule Israel. After Samuel, the first prophets so called, are Nathan and Gad. They assisted King David by their counsel and confronted him with energetic protests.
19. The Books of Kings and Paralipomenon²⁴ mention a number of other "men of the spirit" exercising their ministry in Israel and in Judah. The two greatest Old Testament figures of prophecy between Samuel and Isaiah are Elias and Eliseus²⁵. Belief in the true God was again endangered and Israel's faith was tottering, as it divided worship between God and the pagan god, Baal. At that moment, Elias appeared like a mysterious giant, and by his preaching and his miracles led Israel back to the one, true God. There are four Greater Prophets, whose works are of considerable length; Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel and Daniel, and 12 Minor Prophets. The prophetic institution ceased to exist in the time of the Maccabees. Religious

²² Ex. 3:16

²³ Ex. 4:14-15

²⁴ Old Testament Books of the Chronicles - Two books of the Bible containing a summary of sacred history from Adam to the end of the Babylonian Captivity.

²⁵ Elisha, the pupil of Elijah, and also his successor c. 851 B.C.

revelation and the moral code expressed in Scripture were full and clear. The people were being instructed by zealous and learned scribes, rabbis and doctors of the Law. There was a feeling that the promises were about to be fulfilled. It was fitting for God to allow an interval to elapse between the prophet of the Old Covenant and Jesus Christ, who was to be the crown and consummation of their prophecies.

THE KINGDOM OF ISRAEL

20. The Old Testament takes us through God's efforts and directions over time to get His chosen people to be faithful to Him and follow His guidance. He freed the Israelites from oppression to slavery in Egypt, led them to the Promise Land, and gave them judges and prophets to guide them. The Israelites demanded a king like the pagan nations around them and God allowed them to have Saul as the first King of Israel. King Saul was followed by David around the year 1,000 BC who made Jerusalem the capital and brought together the twelve tribes that formed the kingdom of Israel. David was followed by Solomon who further consolidated the twelve tribes and built a Temple for the Israelites to worship God.²⁶
21. Upon Solomon's death in 933 B.C., the kingdom split in two. In the South were the two tribes named Judah and Benjamin with Jerusalem as the capital, and the temple. In the North were the other 10 tribes that formed Israel with Samaria as the capital. Israel in the North was not faithful to the Davidic Dynasty and began to follow some of the Canaanite religions and deities.
22. When they worshipped pagan deities, the Kingdom became divided with Judah in the South (two tribes) and Israel in the North (10 tribes). In the First Book of Kings we read that God allowed the kingdom to be divided because, "*They have forsaken me and have bowed down to Astarte, goddess of the Sidonians, Chemosh, god of Moab, and Milcom, god of the Ammonites. They have not walked in my ways or done what is right in my eyes, according to my statutes and my ordinances, as David his father did.*"²⁷
23. Around the year 722 BC, the Northern Kingdom of Israel was destroyed by the Assyrians and scattered among other countries to the North of Israel leaving just a remnant behind in the Northern Kingdom. The leader of Assyria then brought in 5 kings from other nations and mixed them in with the remnant of Israel. The Jewish religion and customs were adulterated with the customs and religions of their captors. This group of people became the Samaritans.
24. The Southern Kingdom Judah was captured around the year 608 B.C. and most of the people were deported to Babylon where they remained in exile for approximately 70 years until the Persian king Cyrus freed them and allowed them to return to their homeland, Palestine.²⁸

²⁶ Charpentier, E. (1993) *How to read the Old Testament* (p. 22) New York, NY: (The Crossroad Publishing Company

²⁷ 1 Kings 11:33

²⁸ Charpentier, E. (1993). *How to Read the Old Testament* (pp. 22-23). New York, NY: The Crossroad Publishing Company

BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

25. The Babylonian Captivity was a time of forced detention of the people of the Southern Kingdom in Babylonia following the conquest of the Kingdom of Judah around 608 B.C. and lasted until 538 B.C., a period of 70 years. The exile finally ended when the Persian conqueror of Babylon, Cyrus the Great, gave the Jews permission to return to Palestine. Several deportations took place; not all Jews chose to leave, some returned to their homeland and others dispersed to other lands, thus constituting the first of numerous Jewish communities living permanently in the Diaspora.²⁹
26. God used Babylon as His agent of judgment against Israel for their sin of idolatry and rebellion against Him. The Babylonian Captivity had one significant impact on the nation of Israel when it returned to the land. Israel would never again be corrupted by idolatry and the false gods of the surrounding nations. A revival among the Jews took place after the return and the rebuilding of the temple; the nation would once again return to their God who had delivered them from their enemies. This historical event demonstrates God's faithfulness to His people, His judgment of sin, and the surety of His promises.

KEY POINTS

- ❖ God called Abraham to make of him a great nation, a chosen people, through whom salvation would come into the world.
- ❖ The Law, together with the teaching of the Prophets prepared the world for the Gospel.
- ❖ Through the Prophets, God prepared the Covenant People to look forward to the coming of the Messiah.
- ❖ God, despite man's continued disobedience, provided over the centuries, providential care for those he created, ever demonstrating His faithfulness and love.

²⁹ Diaspora was the name given to the countries (outside of Palestine) through which the Jews were dispersed.