

THE BIG JOURNEY

from Creation to New Creation



'The Finding of Moses' painted by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836 – 1912).

six ► God's Nation is Born

God's faithful servant

Abram's call

Last session ended with God's call to Abram. This call launched a whole new phase in God's plan of salvation for mankind.

God was making a fresh start. God was going to create a *new* humanity - a humanity released from Satan's bondage. And He was going to do that through Abram. Abram was a new Adam. Adam was the father of the human race that was now in bondage to Satan. Abram would be the father of God's new humanity (see especially Galatians 3.29).

In Genesis 12 we read: *"Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's*

house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed."(Genesis 12.1-3).

God first spoke to Abram when he and his family were living in Mesopotamia (Acts 7.2-3). Genesis 11.31 tells us that they lived in Ur, probably the ancient city by that name in southern Babylonia. Its remains are located at Tell el-Muqayyar in modern Iraq. It was a large and sophisticated urban centre.

God called Abram to separate himself from the pagan community in which he found himself - his country, his

clan and his immediate family. God severed this man from national allegiance, from the undertow of culture and society, and from the expectations of his family and friends - something He does in everyone who really wants to serve Him (see Jesus's comments in Mark 3.31-35 and parallels, Luke 14.25-26).

But by calling Abram out to leave for Canaan, God was not abandoning Abram's people in Mesopotamia. They, too, would one day be blessed. In fact, *all* the families of the Earth would find blessing through Abram (Genesis 12.3). But first God had to separate Abram to Himself and to His plans. God had to have first call on Abram's life. Then, and only then, would God make this man the means of blessing to the world.

Abram's background was idolatrous (see Joshua 24.2). The dominant cult in Ur was worship of the moon-god Nannar. This was probably just one of the gods that Abram's ancestors worshipped. We don't know exactly how God first made himself known to Abram, or what Abram knew about God. But he knew enough to trust God's goodness and integrity. He simply had to commit his life into God's hands, trusting that He knew best.

Abram *"obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going"* (Hebrews 11.8, NIV). In stepping out in obedience, Abram said, in effect: *"I don't know where you're leading me. But You know best. I hand over the reins of my life to you. I will do what You say."* Abram trusted God with the unexplained. He lived by faith, not by sight (compare 2 Corinthians 5.7).

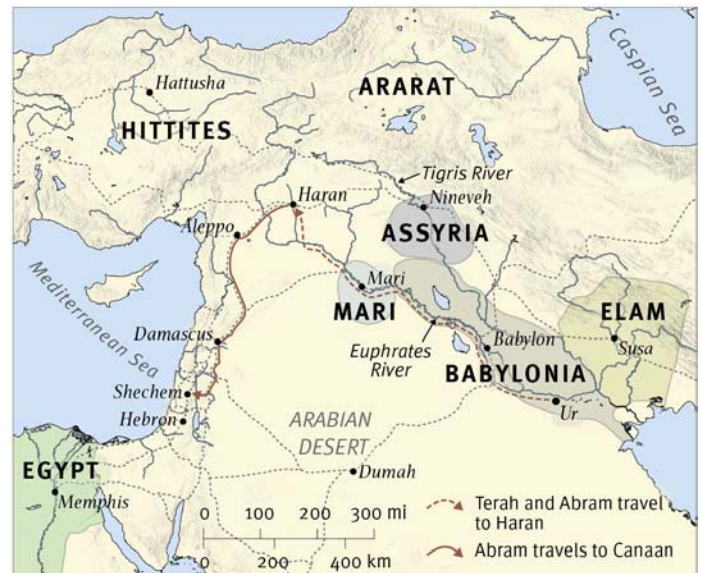


Abram and his family departing from Ur
A painting by William Hole R.S.A., R.E.

A new Adam

Abram was a new Adam. Adam failed to trust and obey God; and his relationship with God was broken. In contrast, Abram trusted and obeyed God, and he became God's friend (2 Chronicles 20.7, Isaiah 41.8, James 2.23).

From Genesis 11.31-32 we learn that (as well as his wife Sarai) Abram's father and his nephew Lot accompanied him on the first leg of the journey. Although it was Terah, as the father, who would have led the migration, it was God's call to Abram that initiated it.



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Abram's migration from Ur to Haran, and into Canaan.

Abram travelled along the 'fertile crescent' from Ur in Mesopotamia north-west to Haran in Syria (see the map on this page). He settled there until his father's death. Finally, he and Lot left Haran and continued the journey to Canaan. Whether Abram was slow to obey God's call to Canaan, or (in Derek Kidner's words) he was *"biding God's time until the family ties could be honourably loosened"*, we're not told. Perhaps God had spoken afresh to him, repeating the call to Canaan. If so, Genesis 12.1-3 may, in fact, record God's words to him on that occasion.

God prepares His servants

In this session, we'll see God training and preparing individual people to serve Him. God brings us 'up close and personal' to Abraham, Jacob and Moses. These men had their flaws, but we'll see how God worked in their lives through His word to them and through their circumstances.

God's promises to Abram

God's promise to Abram recorded in Genesis 12.1-3 was only the first - He reinforced and expanded on this promise a number of times over many years: (1) Genesis 12.7; (2) Genesis 13.14-17; (3) Genesis 15.1-21; (4) Genesis 17.1-21; (5) Genesis 18.9-15; (6) Genesis 21.12; (7) Genesis 22.15-18. Remember that Abram was a new Adam. Accordingly, God's promises to Abraham reflect God's original commission to Adam

► A paradise

God placed Adam in a garden. God sent Abram to another 'garden'. He sent him to Canaan, a land like a new Garden of Eden (Genesis 12.1, 17.8, see Deuteronomy 8.7-9 and 11.10-12). He promised Abram that He would give this land to him and his offspring (Genesis 13.14-15, 15.18-21, 17.8).

God also showed Abram that his descendants would go down into Egypt; God would rescue them and give them the Canaanites' land (Genesis 15.13-14, 16, 18-20).



Image © heatkernel / Eliot : Flickr.com (CC BY 2.0)
A view of the Promised Land - Mount Tabor.

Paradise - the final fulfilment

One day, the offspring of Abram – God's people (see Galatians 3.29) – will rule with Christ over a new paradise. They'll live in the new Heaven and Earth. Truly, Abram was *"heir of the world"* (Romans 4.13). This is nothing less than the reversal of the judgment brought about by the Fall. Mankind was expelled from the Garden. One day we shall return.

► A people

God commanded Adam and Eve to be fruitful and multiply (Genesis 1.28); God promised Abram that *he* would be fruitful and multiply. He was going to father a great nation (Genesis 12.2). God first fulfilled this promise in the form of the nation of Israel. Later, God promised that Abram would be *"the father of a multitude of nations"* (Genesis 17.4).

Over the years, God fleshed out how He would begin to fulfil this promise. Despite their age, Abram would beget a son through his wife Sarai. God said to Abram: *"I will bless her, and moreover, I will give you a son by her. I will bless her, and she shall become nations; kings of peoples shall come from her."* (Genesis 17.16). Abram was to name this son Isaac (Genesis 17.19).

Abram did indeed father many nations – first and foremost Israel, but also the Ishmaelites through Hagar (see Genesis 17.20, 21.13, 25.12-18), the Midianites (among others) through Keturah (Genesis 25.1-4), and the Edomites through Isaac and Rebekah (see Genesis 25.23, 36.1-43).

A people - the New Testament fulfilment

But Abram, whom God renamed Abraham (Genesis 17.5) didn't father just earthly nations. There were other offspring in view, too. In Galatians 3.15, we read *"the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring"*.

Paul is referring back to passages (perhaps especially Genesis 13.15 and 17.8) where God makes promises to Abraham and his *"offspring"*. The Hebrew word for *"offspring"* there is *zera'*. Like our English word 'offspring', *zera'* can mean a single offspring or a mass of offspring.

God had a single Offspring in mind. In Galatians 3.16, we read about *"Abraham and his offspring"*. This *"offspring"* is a single person – Christ (Galatians 3.16).

But God also had a mass of offspring in mind. Christ is the unique *"offspring"*. But all those who belong to Christ – and this must ultimately include both the Old Testament and New Testament believers – are also *"Abraham's offspring"* (Galatians 3.29). God's redeemed people are *"a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages"* (Revelation 7.9).

► A blessing

God blessed Adam and Eve (Genesis 1.28); God promised that He would bless Abram (Genesis 12.2, 22.17). And Abram would himself *be* a blessing (Genesis 12.2); through him all the families of the Earth would be blessed (Genesis 12.3, 18.18, Galatians 3.8 and see Genesis 22.18).

Blessing – the New Testament fulfilment

What exactly was this blessing? Soon after the Day of Pentecost, Peter preached to the crowd in the Temple: *"You are the sons of the . . . covenant that God made with your fathers, saying to Abraham, 'And in your offspring shall all the families of the earth be blessed.' God, having raised up his servant, sent him to you first, to bless you by turning every one of you from your wickedness."* (Acts 3.25-26). Peter announced that Abraham's blessing was God's gift of repentance from sin and turning away from wickedness.

Paul adds to this. He defines Abraham's blessing in these words: *"so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith."* (Galatians 3.14). The blessing is the gift of God's Spirit (see Galatians 3.2, John 7.38-39, Acts 2.33) – God Himself making His home in us by His Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 3.16, 6.19).

The blessing of Abraham is nothing less than eternal *life* – a life of fellowship with God and the peace and joy and fulfilment that this relationship brings.

Building altars, not cities

The people of Babel built themselves a city with a tower that (if it was an ancient ziggurat) would have been crowned with a temple. But Abram never built a city; he lived in tents (Hebrews 11.9). Instead, we find him building altars (Genesis 12.7, 12.8, 13.18, 22.9).



Bedouins and their tents in the Holy Land (an early photograph probably taken between about 1890-1900). Abraham, too, lived in tents: *"By faith [Abraham] went to live in the land of promise, . . . living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God."* (Hebrews 11.9-10).

Abram's eyes weren't fixed on a city of man's making and built for man's glory. Instead *"he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God"* (Hebrews 11.10, see Revelation 21.2,9-27, and compare Galatians 4.26).

Strangers and pilgrims

Abram, in fact, never did inherit the earthly land that God promised him. At the end of his life, all he possessed was a cemetery (Genesis 23.1-20). And even that he had to buy with his own money! God's commentary is: *"These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth"* (Hebrews 11.13, and see also Hebrews 11.39-40).

Meeting with Melchizedek

In Genesis 14 we find Abram in alliance with the Amorite Mamre and his two brothers (Genesis 14.13).

Abram's nephew, Lot, now lived in Sodom. He and Abram's families had had to split up, because the land could not now support all their flocks and herds. But Lot *"saw that the Jordan Valley was well watered everywhere like the garden of the Lord, like the land of Egypt"* (Genesis 13.10). He chose to settle there, and ended up in Sodom. Lot was a *"righteous"* man (2 Peter 2.7). But he placed 'the good life' above commitment to God.

When the king of Sodom and his allies were defeated in battle by a rival confederation of tribal kings (Genesis 14.1-12), Lot and his goods were captured. So Abram and his Amorite partners rallied to Lot's defence and routed the kings who had seized Lot (Genesis 14.14-16).

Then Abram met two kings - the king of Sodom, and Melchizedek the king of Salem. Melchizedek was priest of the true God. We meet him again in the Psalms (Psalm 110.4) and in Hebrews (Hebrews 5.5-10, 6.20-7.25). He ruled over Salem. This city seems certain to have been the city later called Jerusalem - God's holy city and the earthly counterpart of the very city Abram was looking forward to, the city *"whose designer and builder is God"* (Hebrews 11.10). This mysterious priestly king Melchizedek prefigures our High Priest and King, Jesus.

The kings of Sodom and Salem both offered things to Abram. The king of Sodom offered Abram the spoils of war. Tim Keller comments: *"Had Abram accepted this great wealth from Sodom, it would have put him at least in a situation such that others could claim that his people's prosperity was based on military conquest and plunder, rather than on the support of God."*

Melchizedek didn't offer material wealth, like the king of Sodom did. He offered bread and wine. This seems to have been more than just refreshment. If you ate with someone in those ancient times it meant that you were in relationship with them. Douglas Stuart tells us: *"In the ancient world (and many places in the modern world) people would not eat together if they were not somehow allies or family."* Abram, the man of faith, refused the king of Sodom's booty. Instead, he chose fellowship with God's priest - and so with God Himself.

After this step of faith (note - *after*, not before!), God tells Abram: *"Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great."* (Genesis 15.1).

By engaging in a military strike in alliance with local kings, Abram was now vulnerable to military retaliation. In that world of tribal alliance and counter-alliance, God Himself would be Abram's shield of defence; *He* would protect him. And *He* would reward him. God would supply all his needs - he didn't need the king of Sodom's riches.

The smoking torch

Once Abram is securely settled in Canaan, God solemnly confirms His promises to him by a ceremony that seems rather strange to us (Genesis 15.9-21).

This was a covenant ceremony. Making a covenant in Biblical times was a serious business; it would typically be ratified by sacrificing an animal. God told Abram to make a 'corridor of death' by laying out animal sacrifices in two rows (Jeremiah 34.18-19 describes a similar ceremony). This ceremony inaugurated a covenant. By it, God formally bound Himself in covenant relationship with Abram.

Both parties to the covenant would normally walk down

such a corridor between the sacrifices, to show they were committed to keeping the covenant. What they were saying is this: “*May I be like these slain animals, if I should ever break this covenant*”.

But Abram never walked down the corridor with God - God lulled him to sleep. Abram, fallible mortal as he was, could never guarantee to keep his part of this covenant with God. So God alone passed between the sacrifices. He manifested Himself as “*a smoking firepot and a flaming torch*” (reminding us of the pillar of smoke and fire by which God revealed His presence to His people in the wilderness).

God wanted to make quite certain this covenant could never be broken by mankind's weakness or sin. God alone took upon Himself the curse of death if this covenant should ever be broken. Tim Keller explains: “*When God does not call Abram through the pieces, it is tantamount to his saying: ‘I will not only pay the penalty if I fail to do my part, but I will pay the penalty if you fail to do your part.’*”

Pointing forward to Jesus

By traversing the sacrificial corridor alone, God took upon Himself to die should *either* party break the covenant. Of course, God never did break it. But Abram's offspring certainly did.

Sandra Richter asks: “when we . . . recall that the God of Abram never failed in his promise but the children of Abraham certainly did, we need to ask the question, whose flesh was torn to pay the price for this broken covenant? Now our attention is fully arrested. For indeed it was the God-man, Jesus Christ—the representative of humanity and the embodiment of Yahweh—whose flesh was torn to appease the broken stipulations of the oaths taken. And here in the opening chapters of the Bible, the echoes of the gospel can be heard.”



An early photograph of Hebron, taken around 1890 to 1900. It was at Hebron that Abraham transacted the purchase of the cave of Machpelah and surrounding land as a burial place (Genesis 23.1-20). The cave itself must have been close by that ancient city. Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah and Jacob were all buried there. In the present city of Hebron stands a large building called the Cave of the Patriarchs or the Cave of Machpelah (known by Muslims as the Sanctuary of Abraham or Ibrahim Mosque), built over what's traditionally believed to be the cave of Machpelah. And about two miles north of Hebron is Ramet el Khalil. This may be the location of Mamre, where Abraham seems to have settled for considerable periods of time (Genesis 13.18, 14.13, 18.1), and where Isaac lived (Genesis 35.27).

Circumcision

Years later, God gave Abram a permanent sign of this covenant. He appeared to Abram and said “*I am God Almighty; walk before me, and be blameless, that I may make my covenant between me and you, and may multiply you greatly.*” (Genesis 17.1).

To ‘walk with God’ is a significant phrase. Genesis 3.8 suggests that God used to walk with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. Enoch and Noah both “*walked with God*” (Genesis 5.24, 6.9). Now, Abram was to “*walk before*” God. In other words, Abram was to live before God – to live in His presence, in moment-by-moment trust and obedience.

Abram fell on his face. God again made promises to him (Genesis 17.2-21). He would be “*the father of a multitude of nations*”; “*kings*” would come from him. Specifically, He promised that his wife would have a son – a son that he was to call Isaac, with whom God would establish His covenant. And more specifically, God promised that this son would be born in a year's time! God promised to be his God and the God of his descendants. And God promised him and his offspring “*all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession*”. He also promised to bless Ishmael and make him into a great nation.

God commanded Abram and the males in his household, to be circumcised (Genesis 17.9-14). Circumcision was “*a sign of the covenant*” between God and Abram and his household. It was a sign that they were in covenant relationship with God. They were to remain faithful to their covenant Lord. They were to trust Him to fulfil all that He had promised under that covenant.

Circumcision and the offspring

But why did God choose this (to us, rather strange) rite of circumcision as the sign of His covenant? Everything God promised – the great nation, the possession of the land and the blessing of the world - depended on *Abram and Sarai having a child*. Appropriately, circumcision involves the removal of a piece of flesh from the part of a man's body essential for siring a child.

The connection between circumcision and fathering a child is clear. And that seems confirmed by the emphasis on the promise of *offspring* at this point. Abram would be “*the father of a multitude of nations*”, and his wife would bear a son, to be called Isaac, through whom this promise of fruitfulness would be fulfilled.

By now Abram was 99 years old. From a human point of view, he was impotent – “*as good as dead*” as Paul puts it (Romans 4.19). And Sarai was barren, and well past the age of childbearing. Abram was incapable of bringing God's promise about. If God didn't enable him and Sarai to have a son, it would never happen. Abram had to depend on God completely.

And Abram did trust God. He was “*fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised.*” (Romans 4.21). Abram “*believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness*” (Romans 4.3). And so he “*received the sign*”

of circumcision as a seal of the righteousness that he had by faith . . .” (Romans 4.11).

Abram trusted God to fulfil all His covenant promises to him. So God first bound Himself to Abram by the covenant described in Genesis 15.9-21. Now God was giving Abram a *sign* of that covenant. Circumcision was a sign that he was in covenant with God. And it was a sign to remind Abram and his offspring that God's covenant promises would be fulfilled, not by Abram's natural powers, but through God's miraculous intervention.

A new name, a new start, a new identity

This act of circumcision was a highly significant new step for Abram and his household. And so circumcision is associated with a 'new start'.

Every baby boy among God's people was to be circumcised on the 8th day (Genesis 21.4, Acts 7.8, Leviticus 12.3, and see Luke 1.57-66, 2.21, Philippians 3.5). 'Eight' is a number associated with a new beginning in the Bible. For example, eight people survived the Flood (1 Peter 3.20, 2 Peter 2.5). These eight people constituted a new mankind starting afresh in a newly cleansed world.

And it was a new start for Abraham and Sarah *physically*. He was *"as good as dead"*; Sarai was barren and past childbearing. God gave them new life. He rejuvenated their power to conceive and bear a child.

At this point, too, God gave Abram and Sarai new names – Abraham and Sarah. Circumcision was the occasion when a baby was given their names, too – John the Baptist and Jesus were named at their circumcision (Luke 1.57-66, 2.21). The new name signifies a new status – it declared that the one circumcised was now in covenant with God, under His authority.

And the new name meant a new identity. In Jewish tradition, according to one writer, "when a boy is first born he is a child of Adam. Only after circumcision does he become a child of Abraham, and thus a participant in God's covenant. In other words, circumcision symbolizes a death and a rebirth - a child of Adam dies and is *reborn as an Israelite*."

Circumcision also involved bloodshed – it was a token sacrifice. It was as if the person was from now on to be offered to God as a living sacrifice.

Circumcision and the heart

God didn't want mere physical circumcision, though (compare Jeremiah 9.25-26). God wanted circumcised hearts and ears, too (compare Acts 7.51). He wanted hearts that were submissive and obedient to God (see Deuteronomy 10.16); He wanted people who loved God with all their heart and soul (Deuteronomy 30.6). He wanted people who listened to Him (compare Jeremiah 6.10). Circumcision symbolises death to self-will and self-reliance; it signifies a new life of loyalty to God and reliance on Him.

Circumcision, of course, is performed on the most private part of the male body. Perhaps this, too, pictured

something. Perhaps it showed that God wanted the innermost part of the person – the heart – to be circumcised (see Romans 2.29).

From every tribe and nation

Notice that God said that *"both he who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money shall surely be circumcised"* (Genesis 17.13). Those bought with money were part of God's covenant people, yet they were not related to Abraham. This is very significant. From the beginning, God's people were not a single ethnic group. The thing that bound them together as a nation was their covenant relationship with God, not their ethnic origin.

From this time forward through the Old Testament age, immigrants and purchased slaves could be circumcised, become 'one of the family' and eat the Passover (Exodus 12.43-45, 48-49). God has always wanted people *"from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages"* to be His people. That principle – so foundational to the Church's present gospel mission (see Matthew 28.18-20) began way back in the Old Testament.

"The righteous shall live by faith"

► Faith

Abraham's faith is pivotal to the whole Bible story. Here was a new Adam. He did what the first Adam refused to do - commit himself to God and obey Him. Abraham remained steadfastly loyal to God. He believed that *God* knew what was best for him.

Adam's disobedience shattered his relationship with God. In contrast, faithful Abraham became the friend and confidante of God (2 Chronicles 20.7, Isaiah 41.8, James 2.23). We see this so clearly when God confided with Abraham his plan to destroy Sodom (Genesis 18.16-21). As God's friend, Abraham pleaded with Him to save this city (Genesis 18.22-33). Abraham was here acting as privy counsellor to the King of creation - 'the king's friend' (compare 1 Kings 4.5 and 1 Chronicles 27.33).



'Sarai overhearing the renewal of the promise of a son'. A painting by William Hole R.S.A., R.E. Abraham entertains the three men under a tree (Genesis 18.1-8). *"The LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son." And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him."* (Genesis 18:10).

► Righteousness

Job asked *"how can a man be righteous before God?"* (Job 9.2 NKJV). God tells us in Genesis 15.

Abraham believed God's promises. He believed that God would do what He said, however impossible it might seem. *"Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness"* (Genesis 15.6, NIV). That verse resounds through the pages of Scripture. It's quoted in Romans 4.3, Galatians 3.6 and James 2.23. And it's echoed by Habakkuk when he says *"the just shall live by his faith"* (Habakkuk 2.4, quoted in Romans 1.17, Galatians 3.11, and Hebrews 10.38).

Abraham was still a sinner. But he had faith in God. So, in His grace, God credited this sinner's faith as *righteousness*. God graciously considered this sinful man to be *righteous* – a man in right relationship with God. He called him *"my friend"* (Isaiah 41.8). Accordingly, God bound Himself to him through the covenant ceremony of Genesis 15.9-21.

What is righteousness? We perhaps think of it as living a decent and morally upright life. But, *fundamentally, to be righteous is to be in right relationship with God.*

Of course, being in right relationship with God demands right living, too. God commanded Abraham: *"walk before me, and be blameless"* (Genesis 17.1). That word "blameless" doesn't mean 'sinlessly perfect'. It's to walk moment by moment in open, transparent relationship with God, living to please Him in every way. We, too, are to *"walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God."* (Colossians 1.10).

A step at a time

God trained Abram in how to trust and obey Him over many years. Abram's walk with God was not a great leap, but a series of steps (compare Romans 4.12). Abram simply had to obey God one step at a time. The first step was to leave Ur *"even though he did not know where he was going"* (Hebrews 11.8, NIV). Decades later we see Abraham take his greatest step of faith – offering up his beloved son Isaac (Genesis 22.1-19, Hebrews 11.17-19, James 2.21).



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God reveals His names

Since the day he fell, Satan has slandered God. With the call of Abram, God begins to reveal His nature in ever greater depth. An important way He does this is by disclosing some of His many names. Through His names God reveals His nature.

► The Most High God

In Genesis 14 we read how Abram met Melchizedek, king of Salem. He blesses Abram *"by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth"* (Genesis 14.19 NIV). God (here, the Hebrew 'El) is the Most High, the Supreme God; He created everything. All creation is under His lordship.

► Almighty God

In Genesis 17.1 God declares to Abram, *"I am God Almighty"* (in Hebrew 'El Shaddai). This name most likely means 'God All-Powerful' or 'God All-Sufficient'. God will fulfil His promise to make Abram fruitful, despite his age, and give him possession of the land in which he was then only an immigrant.

► Elohim

In the rest of Genesis 17 and in some other places in the narrative of Abraham, God is called 'Elōhîm. This name is translated simply as *"God"*. This name of God is used, for example, in the creation account in Genesis 1. It's the second most widely used name for God in the Old Testament. It denotes God as the mighty, omnipotent God.

'Elōhîm is a plural name. The plural may well denote intensity, absoluteness or uniqueness; it may alternatively be a plural of majesty. But it seems pretty certain that the name carries overtones of the Trinity, too – a plurality of Persons within the Godhead.

Why does God use this name in Genesis 17? This chapter records God reiterating His promises to Abraham. He's emphasising His promise of offspring, and especially the son Isaac. Abraham was *"as good as dead"*; Sarai was barren and past childbearing. God was promising to rejuvenate their power to conceive and bear a child. Only an omnipotent God can do that. Perhaps that's why this name is used here.

► I Am

Going forward to the time of Moses, we read in Exodus 3.14 that God tells Moses to identify Him to His people as *"I AM"* or perhaps 'I cause to be' (both senses may well be meant). God *is!* God isn't merely saying here that He exists. God is here revealing Himself as the living God, personally and dynamically present, inexhaustively active. As J. Alec Motyer comments, *"In every place, at every point of time, in every circumstance or need, he 'is' "*. We might translate this Name as *"I am He who is here for you"*. Michael D. Williams explains: *"Thus, by announcing his name, God reveals his*

essential character to Moses. . . . He is active, dynamic, working in history, entering into relationships, giving and fulfilling promises." Moses and all God's people could count on Him – and so can we!

► Yahweh

In Exodus 6.2-3 God said to Moses: *"I am the LORD. I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but by my name the LORD I did not make myself known to them."* The word 'LORD' here is YHWH in Hebrew. YHWH is God's most common Old Testament name (the ancient Hebrew text omitted vowels; YHWH may well have been pronounced 'Yahweh'). YHWH is not a title. It is God's personal name, just as you and I have personal names.

What does YHWH mean? YHWH is similar to the Hebrew for 'to be' (*hāwā*). It seems there's a play on words here – YHWH sounds like the Hebrew verb for 'to be' as it was pronounced in Moses' time. Pronouncing YHWH brought the verb 'I Am' to mind, and so YHWH essentially means 'I Am'. This Name reveals God as the personal God Who is always present with His people and actively working to save and bless them.

The Jews consider this name unutterably holy. When reading the Scriptures, devout Jews, even today, do not pronounce it, and say 'Adōnāy' ('Lord') instead. The printed Hebrew text adds the vowels of 'Adōnāy' to the four consonants YHWH, resulting in a compound 'YaHoWaH' or, in English, 'Jehovah'.

In fact, God had said "I Am YHWH" to Abram (Genesis 15.7) and to Jacob (28.13). But now God was going to reveal Himself more fully and wonderfully at the moment of Israel's dire need. He is the God who is there for His people, fully and gloriously able to save them from bondage in Egypt – as we shall see later in this session.

Faith falters

► Sarah – sister or wife?

But Abram's faith sometimes faltered. Whilst staying in Egypt (Genesis 12.10-20) and again in Gerar (Genesis 20.1-18), Abram pretended that Sarah was his sister but not his wife (she was, in fact, a half-sister). He feared that someone might want to kill him in order to take her. In so doing, Abraham placed his wife – and God's whole plan of redemption through the promised son – in jeopardy.

► Ishmael – the son of the slave-girl

On another occasion, Abram gave in to his wife's entreaties to have a child by Hagar, her maid (Genesis 16.1-16). Sarai and Abram tried to 'help' God fulfil His promise. Faith gave way to human scheming.

And that led to disaster. Sarah and Abraham have an argument; Sarah and Hagar are at loggerheads. So intolerable did Hagar find Sarah's treatment of her, that she fled. Hagar lost her home, Sarah her maid, and Abraham his second wife and his son. All our attempts to do things our way will end in disaster, too.

Children of the slave and the free woman

Paul refers to this incident to drive home a spiritual truth. He writes this to the Galatian believers: *"For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by a slave woman and one by a free woman. But the son of the slave was born according to the flesh, while the son of the free woman was born through promise. Now this may be interpreted allegorically: these women are two covenants. . . . Now Hagar . . . corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free, and she is our mother. . . . So, brothers, we are not children of the slave but of the free woman. (Galatians 4:22-31).*

Abraham sired a son through Hagar by his own effort. He did it himself. But *Isaac* was born through God's enabling. God did it.

Hagar's son, Ishmael, symbolises Jews who were trying to be saved by their own effort. That included the Judaizing Christians plaguing the Galatian churches. Paul refers to them as the *"children"* of *"the present Jerusalem"*.

Sarah, in contrast, represents the children of *"the Jerusalem above"*; these children are Christians who trust in God alone, and receive salvation as His free gift. As Paul writes, *"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, . . ." (Ephesians 2:8-9).*



Detail from 'Hagar and Ishmael' by Jean-Charles Cazin (1840-1901) (Musée des Beaux-Arts de Tours, France)

Amazingly, God did promise Hagar a multitude of offspring (Genesis 16.10, 17.20). Her son Ishmael fathered twelve princes (Genesis 25.12-16), mirroring the twelve tribes of Israel, and many descendants.

But Ishmael wasn't God's promised offspring (compare Galatians 4.21-30, Romans 9.7-8). God was going to wait until Abram was *"as good as dead"* (Hebrews 11.12, Romans 4.19) before that promised son would be born. All human hope and strength had to perish. Only then would God fulfil his promise.

Abraham's other wife Keturah

Abram also fathered children through Keturah (Genesis 25.1-4). This seems to be a flashback to an earlier period of Abram's life, while he was still married to Sarah and before Isaac was born. 1 Chronicles 1.32 refers to Keturah as a concubine, a woman with whom he had ongoing sexual relations but was not his wife.

Perhaps Genesis 25.1-4 was placed here to avoid interrupting the story of Ishmael and Isaac, with its message for us that Paul brings out in Galatians 4.21-31.

The sacrifice of the beloved son

At last, the promised offspring, Isaac, was born. The last and greatest test for Abraham came when God said to him: *"Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I shall tell you."* (Genesis 22.2). We read the story in Genesis 22.1-19 and Hebrews 11.17-19.

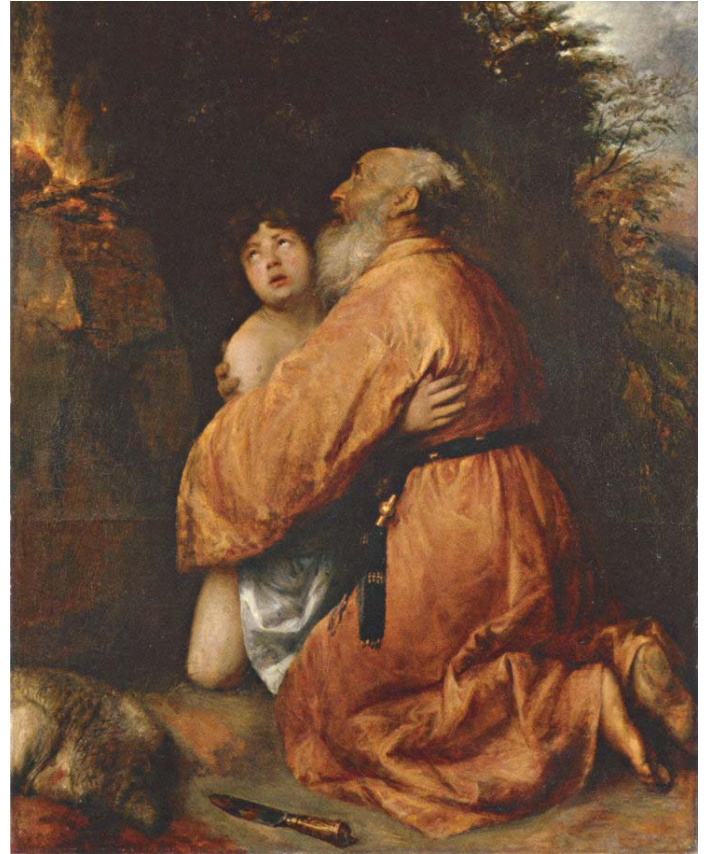
To sacrifice his precious son, Isaac, was the greatest sacrifice Abraham could ever make - greater even than sacrificing himself. Isaac was not only Abraham's beloved firstborn, his *"only son"* (Hebrews 11.17), but the very one through whom the promised offspring would come (Genesis 21.12). And now God tells Abraham to sacrifice him!

But without delay Abraham obeys God - he trusts Him absolutely. Notice that he says *"I and the boy will . . . come again to you"* (Genesis 22.5). Did he believe that God would raise Isaac up after being sacrificed? Yes, he did. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that he believed *"that God was able even to raise him from the dead, . . ."* (Hebrews 11.19).

James comments: *"Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered up his son Isaac on the altar? You see that faith was active along with his works, and faith was completed by his works;"* (James 2.21-22). Abraham's faith was a *real, living* faith that was outworked in practical obedience - even to the point of sacrificing his beloved son.

Notice, too, that Isaac was old enough to carry the wood up the mountain - he was perhaps a teenager by now. And doubtless he was old enough to resist his aged father when he realised that *he*, and not an animal, was to be the sacrifice. But Isaac co-operated with his father and so gave his consent to this act of faith. He was as much a partaker in this sacrifice as Abraham.

God told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on a mountain in the land of Moriah (Genesis 22.2). This may well be Mount Moriah where Solomon's Temple would one day be built (2 Chronicles 3.1). If so, it was close to where Jesus, God's only-begotten Son, would be sacrificed on the Cross - a sacrifice that Abraham's offering strikingly foreshadows.



Detail from 'Abraham's offering' by Jan Lievens (1607-1674) (Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, Braunschweig, Germany). In the left foreground are the ram that God provided instead of Isaac, and a knife. The artist captures the moment after Abraham has slain the ram. A fire burns on the altar ready to receive the sacrifice as a burnt offering. Abraham embraces his son as perhaps he listens to the angel of the Lord making the covenant promises recorded in Genesis 22.15-18.

Isaac and Jacob

Isaac

Abraham goes to great lengths to ensure Isaac marries the right girl - not a Canaanite, but one from his own family (Genesis 24.1-67). This beautiful story is told at length. It foreshadows how God the Father, through the agency of the Spirit, finds a bride for His Son, Jesus. In fact, woven through the entire Old Testament are hints and allusions that point us forward to Jesus - as Jesus Himself explains (Luke 24.27,44, John 5.39, and compare John 1.45). The most important character in the Old Testament is not Abraham, Moses or David. It is Jesus.

Isaac reminds us of Abraham. God confirmed to Isaac the oath which He swore to his father (Genesis 26.2-5,24). God blessed and prospered him (Genesis 26.12-14) just as Abraham prospered (Genesis 13.2). Isaac built an altar (Genesis 26.25), like his father did. He even failed over the same issue that stumbled his father - he pretended Rebekah was his sister (Genesis 26.6-11).

Finally, Isaac's wife was barren (Genesis 25.21), just as his father's wife was (Genesis 11.30). God made sure that if His promise of an Offspring ever came about, it would be through His work alone, not through human strength. God healed Rebekah's barrenness and she bore twins - Esau the eldest and Jacob (Genesis 25.21-26).

Esau

Esau was *“unholy”* (Hebrews 12.16). He didn't care about his position as firstborn. In a moment of hunger, he sold his birthright to Jacob for a meal (Genesis 25.29-34), exclaiming, *“What good is the birthright to me?”* (verse 32, NIV). As firstborn, not only would he have succeeded Isaac as head of the family, but he would be first in line to continue Abraham's lineage down to God's promised Offspring.



'The Mess of Pottage' by James Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902) (Jewish Museum, New York). Esau, back from hunting, exhausted and ravenous, barter his birthright for the stew that Jacob is preparing (Genesis 25.29-34).

But the privilege and responsibility of being the firstborn in God's chosen line was lost on Esau. This was highlighted when he married Hittite girls (Hittites were a Canaanite nation) rather than girls from his own family group (Genesis 26.34-35 and compare Genesis 36.2). (The wives named in Genesis 26.34-35, 28.9 and 36.2-3 don't tally; two plausible suggestions are that Esau had more than three wives, and at least one wife had two names. Both suggestions may be true.)

Esau made a belated attempt to please his father – he married an Ishmaelite girl (Genesis 28.8-9). Ishmael was Abraham's son by Hagar. But Ishmael and his family still weren't part of God's chosen line, but (in Bruce Waltke's words) *“the rejected natural offspring of Abraham”* (compare Romans 9.6-9, Galatians 4.22-23,30). An Ishmaelite wife was better than a Caananite wife, but it was still the wrong choice.

Jacob

So wily trickster Jacob obtained the birthright from Esau. And, by an act of deception, he secured it irrevocably (Genesis 27.1-40). When the time came for aged Isaac to pronounce the blessing of the firstborn on Esau, Jacob deceived his blind father into thinking he was Esau. So he got the firstborn's blessing. Jacob's very name is closely related to a Hebrew word meaning 'to seize by the heel' or 'to betray'.

We may be inclined to treat Jacob and his mother as the villains of this sorry tale. Their actions are inexcusable –

they used lies and trickery to do what they should have relied on God to do. But actually *all four* participants were at fault. This was one dysfunctional family!

Esau *“despised his birthright”*. But then, having sold his birthright, he tried to wrest it back by allowing Isaac to bless him.

And we don't get a very rosy picture of Isaac either. Why did he allow Esau to marry Hittite girls? Why didn't he find suitable wives for him, as his father Abraham had done for him? It would have been a perfectly reasonable thing to do in that patriarchal society. And why did Isaac try to bless Esau instead of Jacob? It seems certain he knew what God had spoken to Rebekah – *“the older shall serve the younger”* (Genesis 25.23). He tried to use the power of his patriarchal blessing to reverse what God had Himself decreed! And in any case, he should have summoned *all* his sons for blessing - Jacob as well as Esau – just as Jacob himself summoned *all* his sons for blessing at the end of his life (Genesis 49.1-2).

Deprived of the firstborn's blessing, Esau determined to kill Jacob. So Isaac sent Jacob off to Uncle Laban in Haran (Genesis 27.43-45, 28.1-5), to give Esau time to cool off.

But on his journey to seek refuge with Laban, God met with Jacob in a dream (Genesis 28.10-22). God confirmed to him the promises He had first made to his grandfather Abraham – (1) He would give him and his offspring the land of Canaan; (2) he would have a multitude of descendants, and (3) all the families of the Earth would be blessed through him and his offspring. God also declared, *“I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land.”* How that must have encouraged this fugitive's heart!

Jacob's staircase

Jacob's vision reminds us of the Tower of Babel. But this isn't a human tower. This is *God's* tower. Ancient ziggurats were designed to link Heaven and Earth. The one in Jacob's dream really *did* link Heaven and Earth. God Himself stood above it, speaking to Jacob asleep on the Earth. Jacob exclaimed: this was *“none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven”*.

Ziggurats had stairways up them (see the pictures in the previous session). The one Jacob saw had a stairway on which a stream of holy angels ascended and descended.

Jesus Himself recalled the imagery of Jacob's staircase. He said to Nathanael: *“... you will see heaven opened, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”* (John 1.51). He was telling Nathanael that He was the House of God, the true Temple (compare John 2.18-22), the One in Whom Heaven and Earth meet. He is the living Way to the Father (compare John 14.6).

Awestruck, Jacob responded by worshipping God and making a vow to Him. Jacob named this spot Bethel (meaning 'the house of God').

This encounter with God was a life-defining moment for Jacob. But it was only the beginning. God still had work to

do in this enterprising and self-reliant man. But in the end, by the sheer grace of God, Jacob took his place among the men and women of faith (Hebrews 11.21).

The mystery of God' election

God loved Jacob and hated Esau (Malachi 1.2-3, Romans 9.10-13). How do we tally this with God's love?

► This is a Biblical way of saying that God chose Jacob and rejected Esau. God didn't hate Esau as a man (though He did hate Esau's careless attitude to his birthright); rather, He chose Jacob, rather than Esau, to be the father of His nation Israel.

► There's curious harmony between God's choices and those of the people He rejects. God disallowed Esau's birthright, yet Esau himself despised his birthright, too (Genesis 25.32,34, Hebrews 12.16). We find the same principle in the Pharaoh of the Exodus. Sometimes he hardened his own heart; sometimes God hardened his heart. God did not harden Pharaoh's heart against Pharaoh's will.

Jacob's life took a different course from that of his brother, Esau. Jacob was being shaped by God in a special way. And he's a different kind of character from Esau. Like Abraham and Isaac, Jacob built altars - something never recorded of Esau (Genesis 33.20 and 35.1-7). Unlike Esau, he didn't marry Canaanite wives. He married within his clan - his uncle Laban's daughters, Rachel and Leah (see Genesis 28.1-2).

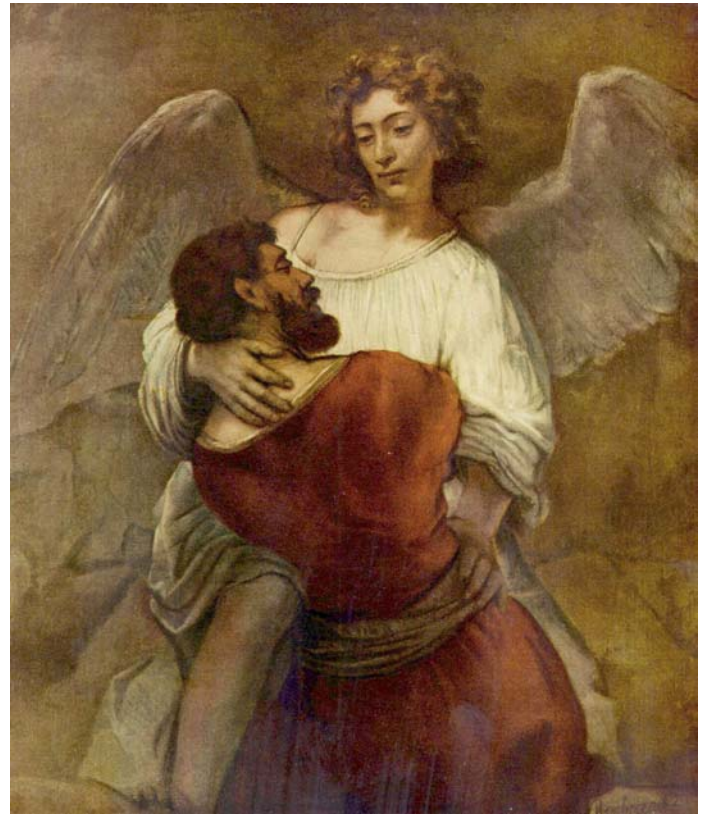
Years of trial and difficulty followed Jacob's encounter with God at Bethel. Jacob, the deceiver, was himself deceived by Laban. He awoke in the morning after his marriage to find himself with the wrong woman! Derek Kidner comments: "In Laban Jacob met his match and his means of discipline. Twenty years . . . of drudgery and friction were to weather his character; . . ."

After long years of labour - but now a wealthy man - Jacob returned home to Isaac. But those 20 years of exile were capped by another tragedy. Rachel, whom Jacob had worked so hard to get, and loved so dearly, died before he ever got back home to his father, Isaac, again (Genesis 35.16-20,27).

Jacob had fled Canaan to escape Esau's wrath. Now, on his return, he must confront his past. He must be reconciled with Esau. Jacob prays. His prayer reveals that a spiritual transformation is taking place. Jacob prays humbly and in dependence on God. He is still the resourceful planner. But he knows that, in the end, only God can save him.

And then God meets with him. God, in angelic form, wrestles with him at Peniel (Genesis 32.24-32; see Hosea 12.3-4). The man is trying to overpower Jacob - and so Jacob at first is doubtless trying to wrestle him off him.

Jacob has great natural strength (see Genesis 29.10). Seeing that Jacob isn't going to yield, the Angel then dislocates his hip - he effectively disables him. It's perhaps at this moment when Jacob realises that this is no ordinary man. It is God Himself, in angelic form!



'Jacob Wrestling with the Angel' by Rembrandt (1606-1669) (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin). This remarkable depiction shows the angel almost embracing Jacob even as he delivers the thrust that dislocates Jacob's hip.

Now Jacob changes his strategy. No longer does he try to wrestle the Angel off him. Now he hangs on to him! Though weakened, he continues to cling to the Angel. With the tenacity of believing prayer, he pleads for a blessing. Hosea comments: "*He strove with the angel and prevailed; he wept and sought his favor.*" (Hosea 12.4).

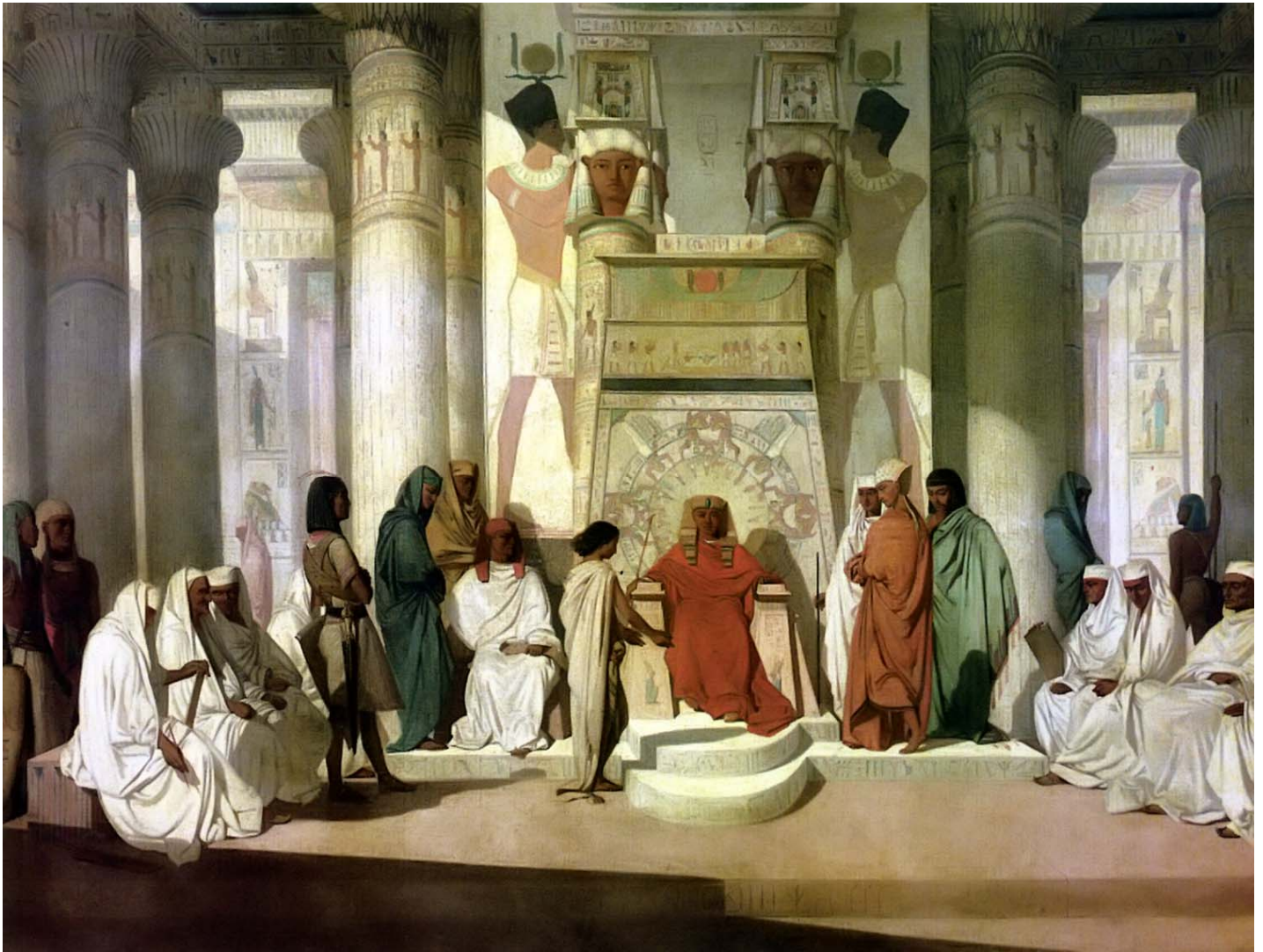
And God does bless him. God renames him 'Israel' (literally 'God struggles' but signifying here 'you have struggled with God'). Jacob is now no longer the self-reliant supplanter. He is an overcomer who has wrestled with God and has obtained His blessing through faith.

For the rest of his life, Jacob limps (Genesis 32.31). The hip socket is the wrestler's pivot of strength. It symbolises human power. God breaks Jacob's natural human ability and resourcefulness. Now he must cling to God in faith.



'The Encounter of Esau and Jacob' painted by Francesco Hayez (1791-1882) (The Pinacoteca Tosio Martinengo, Brescia, Italy). Jacob, accompanied by Rachel and Leah and their eleven children (Benjamin had not yet been born) meets with Esau, and they are reconciled.

Into Egypt



'Joseph Interpreting Pharaoh's Dreams' painted by Jean-Adrien Guignet (1816-1854) (The Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen). The artist depicts the scene recorded in Genesis 41.14-36.

Jacob had twelve sons, from whom sprang the twelve tribes of Israel. Beginning at Genesis 37 we read how God used Joseph to save his family – and Egypt - from starvation.

Joseph

The story of Joseph is different from that of Abraham or Jacob. We don't read about this man's sins or failings. Instead, he endured slavery, temptation by a seductress, the injustice of wrongful imprisonment and neglect by Pharaoh's cupbearer - all without fault. After Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dreams of feast and famine in Egypt, Joseph rose to be Pharaoh's chief minister. From this exalted position, Joseph saved God's people - and the nation of Egypt, too! And Joseph forgave his brothers, and procured the best land in Egypt for them and his father. God was behind the scenes, working his purposes out (see Genesis 45.7 and 50.20).

A picture of Jesus

Joseph is a wonderful picture of Jesus. Like Joseph, Jesus would be rejected by his own people (John 1.11), suffer humiliation (see Philippians 2.8), and become the Saviour of God's people.

But why did Jacob and his family have to go to Egypt? Why didn't God simply provide food for them in Canaan? We can suggest two reasons:

- Firstly, God was waiting until the Canaanites' sin got to the point where He *had* to destroy them (Genesis 15.16 – "*Amorites*" here stands for all the inhabitants of Canaan) - just as He waited in the days of Noah (1 Peter 3.20). He gave the Canaanites centuries to change their ways, from the time God spoke to Abram as recorded in Genesis 15 until the conquest under Joshua.
- Secondly, before settling them in the land, God wanted to establish a covenant relationship with His people and come to live among them. He wanted to reveal His character and power to them. And He wanted to discipline them, teach them how to live as His holy people, and set up the sacrificial system that dealt with their sin.

Jacob's prophecy

At the end of his life, Jacob prophesied over his twelve sons (Genesis 49.1-28). From one of these sons, Jesus Himself would be descended. Reuben, Simeon and Levi had all forfeited their place. God gave Judah, fourth in line, the honour of being our Lord's ancestor.

Jacob prophesied: *"The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he to whom it belongs shall come and the obedience of the nations shall be his."* (Genesis 49.10 NIV). The word "it" refers to the sceptre. In other words, Judah will always be a leading tribe in Israel until the one comes to whom the kingdom truly belongs. This doubtless points ultimately to the Son of David, Jesus the Messiah.

The imagery of Genesis 49.11-12 depicts "exuberant, intoxicating abundance: it is the golden age of the Coming One" (as Derek Kidner puts it). The world of painful toil is left behind. Such is the surfeit of plenty, that vines are used as hitching posts, and wine as washing water! It is a veritable garden of Eden! Such was the world that the Messiah was going to bring into being!

God's fruitful people

The Table of Nations in Genesis 10 catalogues 70 names; Jacob's (Israel's) family totalled 70 descendants when they migrated to Egypt (Exodus 1.5). It's as if God was starting again and creating a new mankind.

The fledgling nation of Israel flourished and *"were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them."* (Exodus 1.7). God was beginning to make Abraham's offspring into a great nation, just as He promised (Genesis 12.2). God's new mankind was fulfilling the

creational command – *"Be fruitful and multiply . . ."* (Genesis 1.28).

► MESSIAH ◀

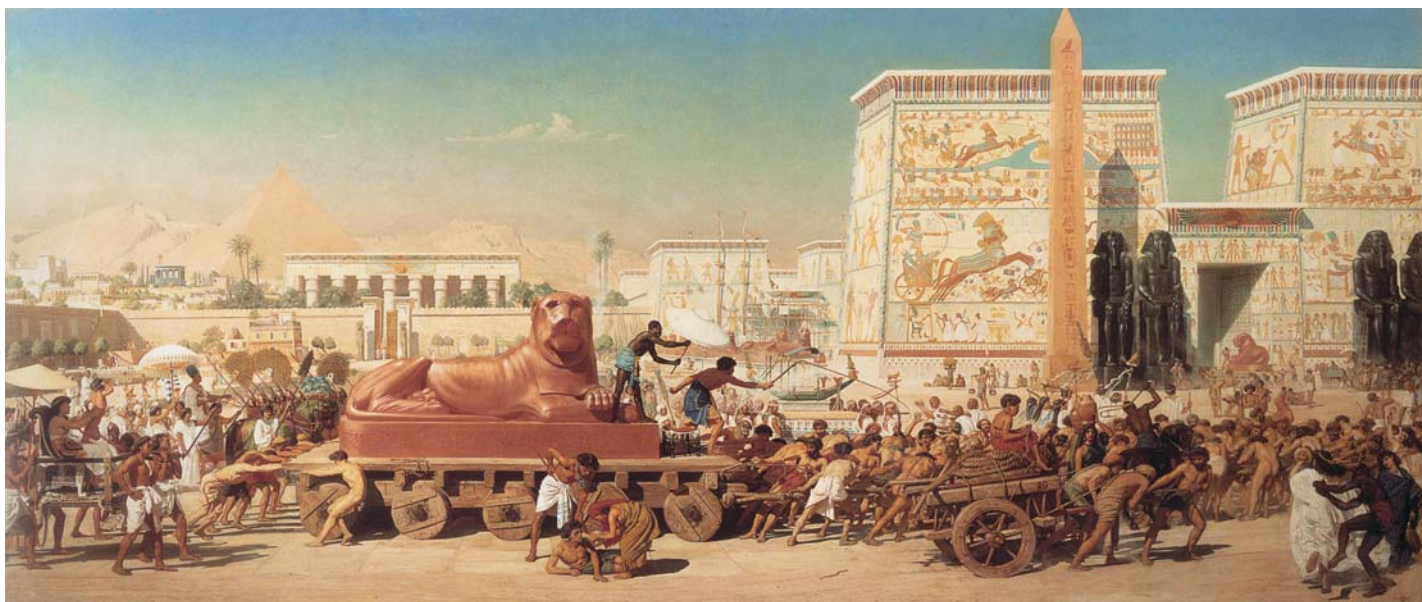
The **Man** Who brings us into God's kingdom

Jacob's blessing of Judah is a key Messianic prophecy. The first Messianic prophecy is Genesis 3.15. We learn more and more about Him as we travel through the Old Testament. Now God is filling out the picture of Who this man would be, and what He would do.

We learn here that Messiah will be a descendant of Judah. We learn, too, that He will have worldwide dominion: Jacob prophesies: *"the obedience of the nations shall be his"*. Through this Man, God will fulfil His promise to Abraham that in him *"all the families of the earth shall be blessed."* (Genesis 12.3; compare Psalm 22.27-28, Isaiah 2.2-4 and Revelation 21.24-26).

And we learn something of what life under the Messiah's rule will be like. The imagery of Genesis 49.11-12 depicts "exuberant, intoxicating abundance: it is the golden age of the Coming One" (as Derek Kidner puts it). The world of painful toil is left behind. Such is the surfeit of plenty, that vines are used as hitching posts, and wine as washing water! It is a veritable garden of Eden! Such was the world that the Messiah was going to bring into being!

Preparing for deliverance



'Israel in Egypt' painted by Edward Poynter (1836-1919). A dramatic and realistic depiction of the slavery of God's people in Egypt.

But a new Pharaoh arose. Fearing how numerous and powerful God's people were becoming, he enslaved them (Exodus 1.8-14). As a last desperate measure, Pharaoh commanded that every baby Israelite boy must be killed. And when the Israelite midwives refused to comply, he commanded that the baby boys be drowned in the Nile (Exodus 1.15-22).

God's people suffer painful toil, sorrow in childbearing, and death – all of which characterise life outside the

Garden of Eden (Genesis 2.17, 3.16-19). In the Garden, it was the serpent who assailed mankind. In Egypt, it is Pharaoh.

So God set in motion His plan to deliver His people from Egypt. For this tremendous task, God chose and prepared a man called Moses

A Levite couple, Amram and his wife, Jochabed, (Exodus 6.20) had a baby boy. Pharaoh's edict demanded they throw him in the Nile. When they could hide the infant

no longer, they did indeed put him in the Nile – but safely inside a waterproof papyrus basket. They floated this “basket” (or “ark” in the NKJV), with its precious human cargo, among the reeds along the bank of the Nile (Exodus 2.1-4).

Moses

► Another Noah

Moses was like another Noah:

- Noah and his family were saved; everyone else drowned in the waters of the Flood. Moses was saved; other baby boys were drowned in the waters of the Nile.
- Noah and his family floated on the waters in an ark (Hebrew *tebah*); Moses floated safely on the water in a papyrus basket or ark (Hebrew *tebah* - this word is used in the Bible only for these two arks).
- Through Noah, God saved humanity from extinction. Everyone else drowned in the waters. Through Moses, God saved His chosen people – a new humanity - from extinction. Their enemies drowned in the waters of the Sea of Reeds.

► God's under-shepherd in training

Pharaoh's daughter found the baby Moses (Exodus 2.5) and adopted him as her son (Exodus 2.10, Acts 7.21, see Hebrews 11.24). As Pharaoh's grandson, Moses was educated in all the wisdom of that advanced and sophisticated culture. Jim Townsend remarks: “*Pharaoh footed the nursery bill and academic tuition.*” Moses became “*powerful in speech and action*” (Acts 7.22, NIV).

But God had another - and quite different - season of training for him. After killing an Egyptian who was beating an Israelite, Moses had to flee Egypt (Exodus 2.11-15, Acts 7.23-29). He ended up marrying into a Midianite family, and tending his father-in-law's flocks in the wilderness.

Moses had been trained “*in all the wisdom of the Egyptians*” (Acts 7.22). Now he underwent 40 years of preparation in the wilderness (see Acts 7.30). God was teaching him:

► To depend on God completely

God taught him to depend on Him completely. It's a lesson God teaches all His people.

After 40 years in the wilderness, all Moses' self-confidence had been knocked out of him. When God's call came, the man who was “*powerful in speech and action*” said, “*I am not eloquent*” (Exodus 4.10) and implored God to send someone else (Exodus 4.13). Now God was able to use this man!

Indeed, while he was leading God's fractious and disobedient people through the wilderness, we read that, “*Moses was a very humble man, more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth.*” (Numbers 12.3 NIV).



Moses' painted by James Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902) (The Jewish Museum, New York). A compelling portrait of what Moses might have looked like.

► How to care for His flock in the wilderness

He cared for his flocks in the selfsame wilderness in which he would lead God's people (see Exodus 3.1). Moses knew how to live in the desert.

And the fact he's a shepherd is doubtless significant. Peter Enns observes: “*He who will soon become the shepherd of God's people undergoes training in Midian.*” Another great Israelite leader, David, tended sheep (1 Samuel 16.11, 17.34-35) before he tended God's people (Psalm 78.70-72). In the Old Testament, God Himself is pictured as a Shepherd (Psalm 23.1-4, 95.7); Jesus speaks of Himself as “*the good shepherd*” (John 10.11-15, and see 1 Peter 5.1-4).

Sheep are inclined to wander off (see Isaiah 53.6) and to ignore instructions. Sheep need constant care and attention. They depend on their shepherd for everything – protection, grazing, water, shelter and care for their injuries. God's flock in the desert was no different (see, for example, Hebrews 3.7-10).

The discipline of the commonplace

Moses probably never knew that this 40-year period in the desert was a time of preparation. He probably thought he'd never return to Egypt and would die as a shepherd in the desert.

Our lives, too, may seem mundane and, at times, positively dreary. But if we are obedient, we serve God as much in the routine of ordinary life as we do in the larger roles and responsibilities He may give us. And all the while, God is shaping us for future service for Him not only here on Earth, but in glory.

► God's call

When Moses was 80 years old, God commissioned him into His service. God appeared to him in a burning bush – a visible manifestation of God's presence - by Mount Horeb (Exodus 3.1-4.17). Mount Horeb is another name for Mount Sinai; it was the very place where Moses and God's people later encamped and received God's law.

And God appointed Moses' brother Aaron to be Moses' spokesman (see also Exodus 7.1). Doubtless Aaron also supplied much-needed moral support when confronting Pharaoh!

So Moses and Aaron met with the leaders of Israel (Exodus 4.29-31), and told them of God's plan.



A shepherd and his flock near Jebel Musa which may be the Biblical Mount Sinai. (Jebel Musa itself seems to be one of the peaks to the left of and lower than the central group of peaks).

God's school of faith

Adam fell because he refused to trust God and obey Him; he chose a life of self-reliance. God taught Abraham, Jacob and Moses how to depend on Him rather than on their own natural strength and wisdom.

► **Abraham** came to the point where he was ready to sacrifice his beloved son, believing God would raise him from the dead (Hebrews 11.19).

► **Jacob** – God wrestled with this scheming wheeler-dealer and crippled his natural human strength, impelling him to cling to God for His blessing.

► **Moses**, trained as a prince, had all his ambition knocked out of him by 40 years in the desert. Only then did God use him to lead His people out of Egypt.

And notice how much time God takes over them. Abraham, old even before he set out on his life-adventure, spent 25 years waiting for God's promise of a son to be fulfilled. Moses spent 40 years in Egypt and 40 years in the wilderness before God commissioned him into His service (Acts 7.23,30). Jesus Himself spent nearly two decades as a young man living quietly at home in subjection to Mary and Joseph, pursuing the family business, before He began his public ministry.

God's work of training and preparing us for His service takes longer than we would naturally presume. In fact, it never finishes in this life. As we serve God faithfully here, He's preparing us for a glorious life of service in the world to come.

Release!

The plagues

When Moses and Aaron appeared before Pharaoh to demand the release of God's people, things got worse, not better (Exodus 5.1-19)! But God told Moses He would indeed deliver His people (Exodus 6.2-8). They would be His people, and they would live in the land He would provide for them.

God sent ten plagues to bring the Egyptians to heel. But He was doing more than just making life miserable for the Egyptians. As Jim Townsend points out: *"the totality of the plagues serves as an artillery bombardment upon the false deities of Egypt"* (see Exodus 12.12). God was demonstrating to this nation that He, and not their many

gods, was Lord over all the Earth (see, for example, Exodus 7.17, 8.22).

God seems to be targeting specific gods in some of these plagues - for example, Hapi, the god of the Nile's annual flood, that was so vital for Egypt's agriculture (plague 1); Heqet, a goddess of fertility and childbirth, which had a frog's head (plague 2); and Amon-Re, the sun god, (plague 9). The forces of nature are at God's command.

But Pharaoh was resolutely obstinate. So God determined to unleash the last and most terrible plague - the death of the firstborn. God demonstrated that He alone has power over life and death. Every family would suffer the terrible loss - including Pharaoh himself, whose eldest son would normally succeed him. The firstborn occupied a special



'The Fifth Plague of Egypt' by J.M.W. Turner (1775-1851) (Indianapolis Museum of Art) The artist depicts the fifth plague – the plague on the livestock (Genesis 9.81-7)

place in society – the firstborn was, according to J Edwin Harthill *“the household’s pride, . . . the heir of the family, the one in whom the hopes of the house were centered.”* This final plague touched the very heart of the nation.



'The Plague of Flies' painted by James Jacques Joseph Tissot (1836-1902) (The Jewish Museum, New York).

Passover and deliverance

Before this final plague, God instructed the Israelites to borrow silver and gold and clothing from the Egyptians (Exodus 3.21-22, 11.2-3, 12.35-36); God's people

plundered the Egyptians. Doubtless some of these riches were used to construct God's Tabernacle home in the wilderness.

Then God told Moses that the people must eat a special sacrificial meal, called the Passover (Exodus 12.1-14, 21-28). Each family had to kill a firstling male lamb or goat, and smear some of its blood on the door-frame of their house. The sacrificial animal was to be roasted, and eaten with unleavened bread and bitter herbs.

They were to eat it hastily, dressed ready to depart at a moment's notice. The Passover and the Exodus were really part and parcel of the same event. The Exodus happened because God's people sacrificed the Passover lamb and ate the Passover meal.

The sacrificial animal formed the main course of a meal, too. In those days, a covenant was typically concluded by eating a meal together as a sign of committed friendship. Eating the lamb was significant. It affirmed their covenant relationship with God. And it affirmed their bond with each other as members together of God's covenant people.

This Passover meal marked a new step in the covenant relationship of God with His people. God was bound by His covenant with their forefathers - Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Exodus 2.24, Deuteronomy 7.8). He would now – in accordance with that covenant - rescue them from Egypt. In turn, those who ate the Passover meal would be consecrated as His special people.

This meal was to be followed by a week when they didn't eat anything made with leaven (Exodus 12.15-20, 13.3-

10). We'll look at the significance of this Feast in the next session.

Each succeeding year, God's people would kill a lamb and eat a Passover meal to celebrate their deliverance from Egypt (Exodus 12.14,24-27,43-49, Leviticus 23.5, Numbers 9.9-14, 28.16, Deuteronomy 16.1-3,4-7). And they would abstain from anything made with leaven for the following week – this was the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

The Passover animal's blood was smeared on the doorpost and lintel. It was a visible token that the lamb had been sacrificed. God would 'pass over' that house (hence the name of the meal). Inside the house, everyone was quite safe. Outside, there was death (Exodus 12.13, Hebrews 11.28). God swept over Egypt and struck all the firstborn, from Pharaoh's to the vilest criminal's - even the livestock were not spared.

In panic, Pharaoh thrust God's people out of his land. A large and motley assortment of other folk went with them. It was mass migration on a phenomenal scale. The Lord Himself guided them in a pillar of cloud and fire - a visible sign of His presence - to a place beside the Sea of Reeds.

Then God hardened Pharaoh's heart for the last and crushing blow. Pharaoh mustered his troops and chariots and pursued his fleeing slaves. God's people found themselves hemmed in with no visible way of escape. Immediately, they complained to Moses - a foretaste of what we'll meet time and time again. But God presented Himself between them and the Egyptians.

God parted the Sea of Reeds, and His nation walked over the dry sea-bed to the Sinai peninsula and safety. The pursuing Egyptians perished in the overflowing waters. God's people were free at last, and Moses and all Israel sang for joy (Exodus 15.1-18). God led His precious people out of Egypt like an eagle bearing aloft her young (see Exodus 19.4, compare Deuteronomy 32.9-12). He lovingly *"took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt"* (Jeremiah 31.32).

A new creation

God sent a *"wind"* (Hebrew *rûach*) over the sea (Exodus 14.21). This reminds us of how His Spirit (Hebrew *rûach*) moved over the Earth at the beginning (Genesis 1.2).

Dry land appears where once there was sea – reminding us of the appearance of the dry land recorded in Genesis 1.9-10). The light and darkness (Exodus 14.20, compare Genesis 1.3-5) completes the picture. God is creating again. God has created a new people, and He will bring them into a new Eden – the Promised Land.

And so, after their passage through the sea, God guided Israel into His presence at Sinai, and entered into solemn covenant with them. Here God fulfilled what He had promised Moses, and Abraham before him: *"I will take you to be my people, and I will be your God"* (Exodus 6.7). This unpromising and recalcitrant people would - if they kept God's covenant - be His *"treasured possession"* (Exodus 19.5).



'Death of the Pharaoh's Firstborn Son' painted by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836 – 1912) (The Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam). The scene is at night, shortly after the firstborn is found dead. Pharaoh stares out in mute grief, his son lying on his lap. The mother weeps disconsolately over her son's corpse. Servants are lamenting while dancers perform a dance of death. In the background on the right are the Israelite leaders Moses and Aaron. Pharaoh is about to tell them that they can now leave Egypt. The artist had a considerable knowledge of ancient Egypt and took great care over details such as furniture and costumes.

A threshold covenant

Each family had to smear some blood of the Passover animal on the door-frame of their house. God said: *"Take a bunch of hyssop and dip it in the blood that is in the basin, and touch the lintel and the two doorposts with the blood that is in the basin."* (Exodus 12:22).

The Hebrew word translated 'basin' here is *sap*. This word can also mean 'threshold'. It's translated thus in a number of places in the Bible (for example, Judges 19:27, Esther 2:21, 6:2). In fact, the ancient Greek version of the Old Testament (the Septuagint) translates *sap* in Exodus 12:22 as *thura* (meaning 'door'). This is a word closely related in meaning to threshold.

How is this significant? In ancient times, when a guest crossed the threshold of someone's home, the host was bound by the natural obligations of hospitality to honour, serve and protect their guest. In effect, he was obligated to treat him as one of the family. In the same way, the guest was obligated never to do his host harm.

To cross the threshold, therefore, was to make an implicit covenant between the host and his guest. On occasions,

this covenant could be made explicit by the sacrifice of an animal.

H. Clay Trumbull tells us that in his day (the 19th century) "when a guest who is worthy of special honour is to be welcomed to a home, the blood of a slaughtered, or a 'sacrificed', animal is shed on the threshold of that home, as a means of adopting the newcomer into the family, or of making a covenant union with him". The guest steps over the blood at the threshold. By this act, he is considered to have become a member of the family.

Some think that this Hebrew word *sap* should be translated 'theshold', and so God was making a 'threshold covenant' with his people. By applying the blood to the threshold and the door frame, each family was, so to speak, welcoming God as an honoured guest into their home. The family ate the Passover meal in His presence – they ate as covenant partners with God. And so, through that 'threshold covenant' God was obligated to protect his hosts- *the Lord will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to enter your houses to strike you*" (Exodus 12:23).

Exodus – a birthday and a baptism

► A birthday

At the Passover and Exodus, God's people Israel were born. It was their birthday. For the very first time, we read of *"all the congregation of Israel"* and *"the whole assembly of the congregation of Israel"* (Exodus 12:3,6). Accordingly, God appointed the month in which Passover occurred as the first month of their calendar year (Exodus 12:2). Just as every year we celebrate our birthdays, God's people celebrated *their* national birthday annually at the feast of Passover and Unleavened Bread (see Exodus 12:14,17,24-27).

God's new humanity

In Isaiah 43:1,7 Isaiah prophesies about how God brought His people into existence – and he does so using creation language that echoes Genesis 1 and 2. God *"created"*, *"formed"* and *"made"* His people. These are the three words used to describe God's creation of mankind. In Genesis 1:26, God said *"Let us make man . . ."*; in the following verse, we read *"So God created man . . ."* and in Genesis 2:7, *"the LORD God formed the man . . ."*. Israel was a new creation, a new mankind made in His image, made to live in fellowship with Him, created for His glory.

► A baptism

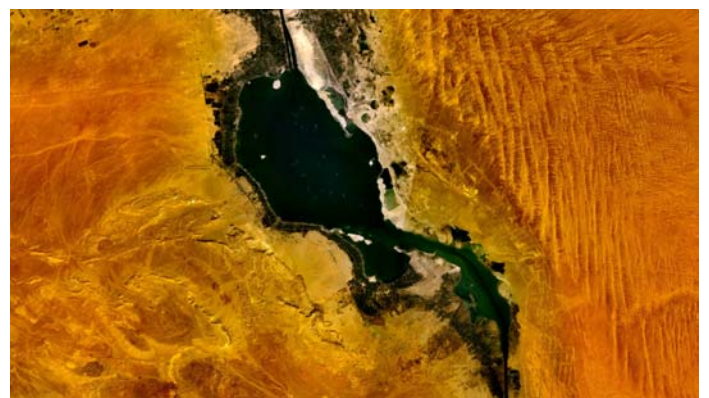
The Exodus was a baptism: Paul writes: *"... our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea"* (1 Corinthians 10:1-2).

► Right at the beginning of history, dry land emerged



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Beginning at Rameses, the Israelites journeyed to Succoth. From there they travelled to Etham and Pi-hahiroth, where they crossed the Sea of Reeds. Two of the possible routes take them through what is now the Great Bitter Lake (probably smaller now than it then was) – the illustration below is a view of this lake taken from space, by NASA. This lake appears on the maps above to the lower right of Pithom and Succoth.





'Pharaoh's army engulfed by the Red Sea', by Frederick Arthur Bridgman (1847-1928)

from the waters enveloping the globe (see Genesis 1.2 and 2 Peter 3.5), and from the ground God made His people, Adam and Eve.

► Noah's flood, too, was another baptism (see 1 Peter 3.20-21). The waters once again covered the land; then dry land appeared and Noah (like Adam before him) found himself in a new clean world. It was a new creation.

► The Exodus was a third baptism – like Noah, they were saved by water. Through the waters of the sea, God rescued His people from bondage in Egypt. He launched them on their journey to a new life in a new paradise – the Promised Land. It was a new creation, all over again.

► EXODUS ◀

Getting in to God's kingdom

● Exodus from Egypt

● New Exodus from sin and Satan's kingdom through Jesus's death, resurrection and ascension

The Exodus was the key saving event in Israel's history (see, for example, Deuteronomy 4.32-40, 6.20-25, 1 Samuel 12.6-8, Psalm 105.26-45, Jeremiah 32:20-21). The prophets told God's people there would be another Exodus. The return from Exile was, in a way, another Exodus.

But there was going to be another Exodus – more wonderful even than the first. This new Exodus is prophesied in a number of places (for example Isaiah 11.10-16 and Isaiah 43.14-21). God was going to rescue His people from a slavemaster far worse than the Egyptians. He was going to rescue them from bondage to sin and Satan. The coming Messiah Jesus Christ would do that.

A new Exodus

Jesus went through an exodus, too. He referred to His death as an 'exodus' at His transfiguration. The word "*departure*" in Luke 9.31 translates the Greek word *exodos*. Jesus's exodus was His *sacrificial death*.

Israel's Exodus was a baptism. Jesus's death was a baptism, too. Jesus called His death a "*baptism*" (Luke 12.50). He was baptised, not into water, but into death.

And everyone who believes in Jesus and is born again *participates* in Jesus's exodus, that is, His baptism of death. Paul says, "*all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death*" (Romans 6.3). When Jesus died, I – that is, my "*old self*" that was enslaved to sin - died too. My old self was "*crucified with him*" (Romans 6.6; see also Colossians 3.9 and compare Ephesians 4.22). I was "*buried ... with him by baptism into death*" (Romans 6.4, see Colossians 2.12).

And I rose with Jesus into resurrection life (Ephesians 2.6, Colossians 2.12), a life of freedom from bondage to sin. My "*new self*" (see Colossians 3.10, and compare Ephesians 4.24) was born (see John 3.3). If I am a Christian, I am a new creation (2 Corinthians 5.17)!

A picture of our salvation

As we said before, the Passover and the Exodus were really two stages of one event. Together, they show us what Jesus did for us:

► Passover - substitution

Each firstborn represented their family; the firstborn therefore collectively represented *the whole nation*.



Image © Ben Piven : Flickr.com (CC BY-NC-ND 2.0)

Sheep for slaughter at the Samaritan Passover on Mount Gerizim in 2007. The Samaritan community still practises the ancient Passover sacrifice every year.

The firstborns' escape from death represented *the whole nation's escape from death*. And they escaped because the Passover lambs died in their place.

Jesus is our Passover Lamb (1 Corinthians 5.7), Who died at the Feast of Passover. He died in our place to save us from death. And He released us from slavery - not from Egypt, but from sin.

► Exodus - identification

At the Passover and Exodus, Israel was given a new identity as God's people and a new life in His presence.

Those who share in Jesus's exodus get a new identity. Now they are members of God's people. They enjoy a new life in His presence. They have "*crossed over from death to life*" (John 5.24, NIV and see 1 John 3.14; compare Colossians 1.13). They cross over into a new life with God.

► Next Session A Wedding in the Wilderness

God's people don't travel straight to the Promised Land; they go to Mount Sinai to meet with God (see Exodus 19.1-4).

God had told Pharaoh "*Israel is my firstborn son*" (Exodus 4.22). Now, at Sinai, God makes a solemn covenant with His people. It is, in effect, a marriage covenant. He becomes the Husband of His people. Israel is His son, and His bride. So deep is His love that He describes it in terms of the two most intimate human relationships we can know - the love between a man and a woman, and the love of a parent for their children.

Next session we'll look at the covenant God made with His people at Sinai, and His Tabernacle home where He lived among them.

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