

**GENESIS AND THE WILDERNESS COMMUNITY:  
MOSES' LESSONS FOR ISRAEL IN GENESIS**

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It is intended to give readers quick and easy access to some of the more important ideas in the Genesis section of *Yahweh's Song: A Handbook for Understanding Old Testament Historical Theology*. Unlike *Yahweh's Song* which is a long and detailed academic study, this book avoids academic discussions or footnotes. It is also focused more clearly on the practical application of Moses' Genesis lessons for the believing community today.

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## INTRODUCTION: ISRAEL'S EGYPTIAN SOJOURN AND MOSES' WILDERNESS THEOLOGY

For over a century, the book of Genesis has been the center of culture wars and endless academic conflict. The debates that swirl around Genesis often seem unrelated to any topic that would have been understood in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC when the book was written. It is often forgotten that Moses wrote Genesis to teach the wilderness community of his day. To understand Genesis, it is important to catch a vision for the lessons that Moses may have been trying to teach by writing the book. Unfortunately, that is not always easy to do. It is not possible to step back 3400 years in history and ask Moses why he wrote the book the way that he chose to write it. Of course, Genesis is "God breathed." It was written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and it contains the content that God wanted recorded in it. Yet that can not justify removing Genesis from its historical context. To draw a New Testament parallel, Paul wrote Galatians for a purpose even though it is inspired and "God breathed." To understand Galatians, it is necessary to see how Paul used the book to address the conflicts that the supporters of the Jewish law had brought to the Galatian church. To understand Genesis, it is also important at least to seek the lessons that Moses might have been teaching through the book. While there is a limit to how far authorial intent can be traced in Genesis, it is vital to learn from Israel's historical context so that some glimpse of Moses' purposes might be caught.

One of the most important things to realize about the historical context of Genesis was that Israel had not been faithful to Yahweh in Egypt. While some Israelites like Moses' parents had remained faithful, most had not done so. They had fallen into idolatry. While Moses never mentioned the names of foreign gods, it is probable that some Israelites worshiped traditional Egyptian deities while others worshiped the Canaanite gods supported by Egypt's Hyksos rulers who ruled Egypt for 150 years during Israel's Egyptian sojourn. Beyond that, a mixed rabble of gentiles left Egypt with Israel. It is difficult to guess what their religious traditions may have been. Several biblical passages recorded Israel's Egyptian idolatry. In Leviticus 18:3, Moses warned Israel not to do what they had done in Egypt but to serve Yahweh. In Joshua 24:14, Joshua warned his generation to put away the idols that their fathers had served both beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt. In Amos 5:25-26 and Acts 7:42-43, the Israelites were reminded of the idols that their fathers had worshiped in the wilderness. Ezekiel wrote in Ezekiel 23:3 that Israel had played the harlot in Egypt before the exodus. Ezekiel was claiming in this verse that the Israelites had served other gods. In Ezekiel 20:5-10, the prophet reminded Israel that Yahweh had made Himself known to them while they were still in Egypt. Yahweh had commanded that the Israelites give up the idols of Egypt because He was their god. Ezekiel noted that the Israelites had refused to give up their idols, and that Yahweh had poured out His wrath on Israel while they were still in Egypt. In God's judgment, He had allowed the Egyptians to oppress the Israelites very severely until Israel's rebellion had been broken. Then God delivered Israel for the sake of His great name. Moses knew that the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 27-28 were real. They shaped history, and they had always done so. In Deuteronomy 27-28, Moses promised Israel that obedience to God's covenant would bring them health, blessings, and dominance. Moses also warned Israel that revolt, sin, and idolatry would bring them ruin and slavery.

When Israel left Egypt, the Israelites were not a people committed to their God. They were a collection of tribes that could hardly be called a nation. When Moses led Israel in the wilderness, he needed to teach them many lessons to build them into a nation that could serve Yahweh and receive His blessings instead of His curses. One of the teaching tools that Moses used was the

book of Genesis. Many passages in Genesis may have been intended to teach specific lessons to the wilderness generation. The stories included in Genesis were historically correct, but they may also have been chosen for specific purposes. To seek a deeper understand Genesis, it is helpful to think about what those purposes might have been.

### Timeless Truths

Western Christianity today is seeing a significant falling away from the faith. Behaviors that were once thought unacceptable are now being taught as proper or commendable. Basic doctrines of denominational traditions are being called into question. Across the United States, 70% of our High School graduates are being lost to the faith each year. It would be easy to look at the future with discouragement. However, God is still on His throne. His people have constantly fallen away, and He has constantly sought them out and restored them to Himself. The same God who led Israel across the sea can bring such a revival today that it can shake the world. We are called simply to love Him with our whole hearts and trust His leading as He works purposes in the world.

## CHAPTER 1: YAHWEH AND A CREATION THEOLOGY

### A. Creation as a Theological Argument against Egyptian Religion

Creation accounts were very important in the ancient Near East because they defined the nature of reality. In the ancient world, people based their most basic beliefs about god and reality on their creation accounts. It should not be surprising that Moses began Genesis with a creation account. Moses wrote Genesis both to address theological problems in the wilderness community and to provide a theological basis both for Israel's faith and for Israel's life. The Genesis creation account may have been Moses' most important lesson for the wilderness community because it made the worship of Yahweh necessary and required the rejection of all other religions. The creation account was critically important for the wilderness generation because many of them had fallen into idolatry in Egypt. Moses may have included the creation and flood accounts in Genesis because they provided a point by point refutation of key ideas that were at the heart of Egyptian theology.

### B. Egyptian Parallels to Genesis 1-3

Egypt contained many temples. The theology of each temple was different from the theology of its neighbors, and the theology of each temple developed over time. This resulted in an enormous theological diversity. The Egyptians delighted in affirming a vast number of contradictory ideas at the same time. A complex tradition of creation accounts stood beneath the glorious diversity of their theology. Egypt contained three important creation accounts drawn from the temple theologies at Memphis, Hermopolis, and Heliopolis. All three creation traditions were refuted by the Genesis creation account. Egypt also knew a number of minor creation traditions drawn from the theology of lesser temples. While Egypt contained a number of creation accounts, the narratives all tended to be based on similar principles, and these principles were at the heart of Egyptian theology. From temple to temple, nearly all of Egyptian theology was a direct outgrowth of its creation accounts.

As Moses taught Israel proper theology, he began with his own creation account because the wilderness community would have expected both God's Word and proper theology to grow from just such a creation account. Moses' creation account formed a theological argument by mimicking key aspects of the Egyptian creation accounts.

The first way that Moses' creation account mimicked Egyptian accounts can be seen in Genesis 1:1. In this verse, Moses claimed that Elohim had created the heavens and the earth. This contrasts sharply with the creation account at Heliopolis where the gods Geb (earth) and Nut (sky) were born from the gods Shu (air) and Tefnut (moisture). Shu and Tefnut were in turn the children of the primal god Atum. In most Egyptian creation accounts, the earth was not really created. Instead, the earth developed through the successive births of various gods. Moses insisted that Elohim created a physical earth that was only an object. For Moses, the earth was not in any way a god. It was simply Elohim's creation.

In Genesis 1:2, Moses described a time when the earth already existed but was formless and void. God's Spirit moved over the primal waters of creation. This mimicked and refuted the Egyptian claim at Hermopolis that the god Amun brooded over the face of the primal waters, stirred the waters, and caused the first land to rise from the water. Amun was identified with the wind just as the Hebrew word *ruah* in Genesis 1:2 meant both wind and spirit. A variety of other

Egyptian motifs were also attacked by Genesis 1:2. In Egyptian theology, Geb (or Seb) was the lord of the watery abyss. He lived in the watery mass of the sky. So in a sense, Geb hovered over the primal deep. Moses argued that all of these motifs were incorrect. God's Spirit alone moved over the primal waters forming the earth.

In Genesis 1:3, Moses recorded Elohim's command, "Let there be light!" Moses noted that this command produced light. All subsequent creation occurred by the Word of Elohim. In several Egyptian creation motifs, the gods Ptah and Atum created things by wishing in their hearts and speaking a word with their mouths. The creation account at Hermopolis was based on a similar claim. At Hermopolis, Thoth created the world with a word from his mouth. Thoth was the Egyptian god of Wisdom. To understand the importance of this, remember that Egypt's religious literature was claimed to be "the words of the god." This religious literature was of the same character and authority as the creative word that had formed the earth. Moses wrote Genesis as the beginning of the Word of God. As such, Genesis shared the authority of Elohim's creative Word itself. Moses also stressed that Elohim and Elohim alone had the power and authority to speak such a creative word.

In Genesis 1:5, Moses stated that there was evening and morning, one day. Subsequent creation occurred in a series of six days, and Yahweh rested on the seventh day. The evangelical world has understood these creation days in a great many ways. Creation days were important in the ancient Near East. The whole ancient world structured time in 7 day weeks that were based on the four phases of the 28 day lunar month. Egypt also reflected rather loosely the idea of a week in its creation accounts. The Eye of Horus was formed in six days. The theology of Heliopolis celebrated a festival on the seventh day in honor of its creation. Another Egyptian motif depicted the god Ptah resting after he had created the world by the word of his mouth. Moses grounded the seven day week in Elohim's creative activity instead of either the moon's phases or the Egyptian creation motifs.

Perhaps the most useful Egyptian parallel to the Genesis creation days can be seen in the creation account from Hermopolis. This creation account also structured in creation days. The first four creation days at Hermopolis echoed the first four creative days in Genesis. In the first creative day at Hermopolis, the chaotic deep was formed. In the second day, god's breath moved over the primal waters of the great deep. In the third creative day, light was created. Then in the fourth creative day, the primeval hill rose above the waters of the great deep. While these similarities are quite striking, it is important not to oversimplify the relationship between the Egyptian motifs and the Genesis creation account. There were importance differences between them as well. Perhaps the most important fact was that the Israelites could not accept both Moses' creation accounts in Genesis 1-3 and the Egyptian creation accounts. At heart, they were not compatible.

In Genesis 1:26, Moses claimed that Elohim had made man in His image. In Egypt, the image motif was represented in at least two ways. First, it appeared in a Wisdom text called *The Instruction of Merikare*. This text claimed that every man had been formed from a god's body, and was the image of a god. This wisdom text was written before Abraham was born. It was very ancient in Moses' day. It is hard to evaluate how well known and influential it still was. The text clearly was still in use. The only surviving copy of *The Instruction of Merikare* was produced during the Egyptian 19th Dynasty two centuries after the exodus. By the 19th Dynasty, the image of god motif in Egypt was no longer used to describe common people. The great image of god was now Pharaoh who claimed to be the god Horus incarnate and the living image of god. Pharaoh's claim to god's image was a claim to personal divinity. It is less clear whether the

image of god motif was already being used as a claim to divinity in the Mosaic Age. Moses stressed that every man was created in Elohim's image and that no man was in any way divine.

In Genesis 2:7, Moses recorded that Yahweh Elohim had formed Adam from the dust of the ground and had breathed into his nostrils the breath of life. The Hebrew verb translated as “formed” in Genesis 2:7 came from the same root as the Hebrew word for potter. In the Egyptian texts, men were formed from clay on the wheel of the potter god Khnum who gave man's nostrils the breath of life. So Moses may have been arguing that Adam was formed from clay by Yahweh not by the Egyptian potter god Khnum on his potter's wheel.

The man created by Yahweh Elohim was named Adam. This name was closely related to the Hebrew word for ground since Adam was taken from the ground. The name Adam was also similar to the name of the Egyptian primordial god Atum. The god Atum was the father of the gods. He completed in himself all of the other gods, and was preserved in the form of a man. While Atum was a god, he resembled in some ways the first man ever to exist. Moses argued that the first man was not in any way divine. He was simply a man created by Yahweh Elohim.

### Timeless Truths

God speaks to us in words that we can understand. In His love, He reaches into our lives and finds ways to teach us about Himself. While He never violates His Word and His truth, He speaks to each of us in a unique and personal way. Just as God spoke to Israel in their cultural context, He speaks to us in a contemporary culture that is very different from the age in which the Biblical text was written.

## CHAPTER 2: YAHWEH AND SEMITIC PREHISTORY

### A. Genesis 6:14-22 and the Flood Account

One of Moses' most important lessons for the wilderness generation was the nature of their identity as Israelites. What did it mean to be part of the West Semitic world, and what did it mean to be a Jew? Moses used Genesis to teach the Israelites their spiritual and physical ancestry. How was he able to do this? In part, Moses wrote Genesis by drawing on ancient records that had been preserved within the Semitic world. Moses' commitment to ancient history can be seen in the Genesis account of Noah's flood. In Genesis 6:14-22, Moses reminded Israel that Yahweh had given Noah detailed instructions for building the ark. It had to be built with gigantic proportions because its purpose was the preservation of life during the flood. The similarities between the Genesis account and Mesopotamian stories like the *Gilgamesh Epic* and the *Atra Hasis Epic* suggest strongly that Moses inherited this account from the ancient Semitic traditions of faith. In both Genesis and the Mesopotamian accounts, God (or the gods) decided to destroy the human race with a flood. God (or one of the gods) warned one man about the coming destruction. That man was commanded to build a huge boat to preserve his family in the flood. In both accounts, animals were brought into the ark. In both traditions, the flood came and destroyed all life outside of the ark. In both traditions, the hero opened a window in the ship and sent out a bird to see if the land could be resettled. In both traditions, the hero left the ark and built an altar to sacrifice animals in thanksgiving for his deliverance. The story of Noah's flood would have been handed down from generation to generation among the descendants of Shem's faith. Shem's descendants became the East and West Semitic peoples. The Mesopotamian accounts reflect how the tradition preserved correctly in Genesis was slowly corrupted and changed as it was handed down in an East Semitic culture that drifted further and further from God.

The flood account was itself theologically vital for the wilderness generation because it explained why God would create a nation like Israel. Genesis 4:14-17 noted that Cain was driven away from God's presence for killing his brother. Then Cain founded the first human city and named it after his son Enoch. From that point forward, human culture was centered in the cities of man instead of God. Human culture rapidly ran away from God and descended into nearly demonic violence. This happened partly because people lived for very long lives before the flood. Why would people fear God if they could expect to live for nearly a thousand years? So men with power like Lamech ruled with violence. In Genesis 4:23, Lamech bragged that his own rage and violence was ten times that of Cain. This verse also demonstrated that the story of Cain's murder was handed down from generation to generation among his descendants, and the story shaped their own destiny. Then Genesis 6:1-4 described that way that family relationships had been destroyed before the flood. While this passage may be one of the hardest texts in the Bible to understand, it clearly points to a disruption in the family structure that God had created as a model of his own triune character. The unity between a man, a woman, and God was intended to echo the unity within the Godhead itself. Yet before the flood, that family structure had fallen apart.

While Cain's descendants created a culture in revolt against God, a faithful remnant also remained on the earth. Seth's recorded descendants were men of faith who lived in the promise that God had made in Genesis 3:15. God promised that a Redeemer would be born who would remove the curse of sin by crushing the Eden Serpent's head while driving its poisonous fangs

into His own heal. By choosing death, He would bring an end to the curse of death forever, and He would restore the earth to the land that God had intended it to be. This promised Redeemer would finally prove to be Jesus Christ who chose to die on the cross to save His people from the curse of sin. His promised return will finally make the world an Eden forever. As Seth's descendants carried on this promise, Seth's son Enosh began calling on Yahweh's name in prayer, and far down the line of Seth's genealogy, his descendant Enoch still walked with God as Adam and Even had walked with Him in the Garden. Enoch named his son Methuselah which may mean "When he dies, it will come." According to the dating scheme used in the Hebrew text, Methuselah died in the year that God brought the flood. While different dating schemes were used both in the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Greek Old Testament Septuagint, the Hebrew text may suggest that Methuselah was named as a prophecy.

Eventually, the violence of Cain's descendants overpowered the righteousness of Seth's descendants. Genesis 6:11-13 recorded God's condemnation of human culture. God decreed that the time for His judgment had come because violence filled the earth. Noah was the only descendant of Seth who was found still to be righteous. So God warned him to build an ark to deliverer his family from God's flood. That must have made him seem insane. If the conclusions reached in the author's books *When the Rains Failed* and *Yahweh's Song* are correct, the earth had been cold, dry, and barren for a thousand years during the Younger Dryas climate period. People lived by basin irrigation agriculture on the bottoms of the river valleys, and the valleys were dry most of the year. How could a great flood bring an end to human life? Such a thing would have been unimaginable to that culture. Yet God's Word proved to be true, and the flood came. The God formed His vassal covenant with Noah just as He had formed a vassal covenant with Adam.

Then in Genesis 9:18-27, Moses reached the point of the story. Noah's son Ham was never described in Genesis as being righteous. He survived the flood, but he also shared Cain's revolt against God. In Genesis 9:20-22, Ham saw his father's drunken nakedness and mocked him before his brothers. The phrase "nakedness of his father" resembled other biblical expressions used for serious sexual misbehavior either with a man or his wife. Having sexual relations with a spouse was also called "uncovering the nakedness." The Genesis text does not explain exactly what had happened. Ham had done something to his parents that enraged Noah. After this, Noah pronounced a blessing and a curse that may be one of the most important verses in the Old Testament. He pronounced that Yahweh would be the God of Shem. Japheth would be blessed as long as he lived in Shem's tents. However, the descendants of Ham's son Canaan would be servants of Shem's descendants. This promise dominated redemptive history for all time. Japheth's descendants would become Europeans (among others). Shem's descendants would become the East and West Semitic people. As faith in Yahweh was handed down among the Semitic people, the West Semitic culture eventually gave rise to Abraham and the Israelites. The Canaanites became the peoples of the coastal plain in Palestine. It is interesting that Ham sinned, but the curse fell on Canaan. Ham's other sons would inhabit parts of Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Africa. Noah never gave Shem's descendants the right to dominate any of those regions. Noah only promised Shem's descendants that they would dominate the peoples of Palestine, and they would only do so when Yahweh was their God.

Think about the lesson that this gave to the wilderness generation. They had suffered terribly in Egyptian slavery, but God had never promised them dominance over the peoples of Egypt or Africa. Israelites in Egypt had also been dominated by the Canaanite Hyksos rulers who seized control of Egypt for a century and a half during Israel's Egyptian sojourn. That should not have

happened. Joseph's righteousness had led the nation to a position of power and importance for a time, but Israel's Egyptian idolatry had led to slavery. God was in control. Yahweh had promised that Shem's descendants would dominate the nations in Palestine as long as they remained faithful.

### Timeless Truths

God's Word is always true. There has been endless debate about flood geology and about possible ways that Noah's flood could be grounded in history. The improbabilities behind some flood geology models have driven many university students away from their faith. Yet when the evidence is explored carefully with humility, the Bible's truth can often be seen. The endless debate about flood geology is far less important than the implications of the account for the history of God's people. The story of Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth set a pattern of events that continues to dominate world history down to the present time. It is important to think about the long range impact that our own actions may have. How will our children and their children affect the world because of things that we have done. Sometimes only one brief moment of sin can have consequences that last for centuries in the lives of our descendants. Always try to live in fear, love, faith, and wisdom.

### B. Moses' Interpretation of Post-Flood History

Dominating Palestine would not be an easy thing to accomplish. While Moses had hidden in the wilderness from Thutmose III, Pharaoh had led his army north 17 times campaigning in the area now occupied by Israel, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. Thutmose III established an empire that initially stretched so far north that his army crossed the Euphrates River. While the Egyptian empire had its strong and weak periods, Egypt dominated Palestine for over 200 years. The Egyptian empire is reflected in the Bible in the fact that Israel was not able to defeat the Canaanite city states on the coast during the period of the Judges because they had iron chariots. The Canaanite rulers were vassals of Egypt. Whenever Israel threatened their safety, the Canaanite rulers asked Egypt for military assistance, and the Egyptians prevented Israel from taking control of the coast of Palestine. Israel's heartland during the Judges would be the central highlands which were beyond Egypt's control. This happened during the Judges partly because it was a 400 year period of spiritual struggle reflected in Israel's military struggles.

At the exodus, Egypt's control of Palestine was at its strongest point. That created a huge issue for Israelites who left Egypt with Moses. God had promised to give Israel the land. Yet Egypt controlled it with an iron hand. How could that be true? If God controlled human history, why would He allow Egypt to seize His land? How could Israel fight Egypt for control of the land. At the exodus, God had specifically let Israel into the wilderness instead of leading them north along the Way of Horus straight into the Promised Land. God declined to lead them directly to Palestine because they would have had to force their way past the string of fortresses that Thutmose III had built along the coast. God told Israel that they were not ready to fight. Forty years later, would they have any better chance to defeat Egypt's allies in the land? Moses addressed this issue by including in Genesis the Tower of Babel account. Babel was the first recorded empire in human history. The Tower of Babel account showed that God was sovereign over human empire no matter how determined man was to oppose God. So no matter how impossible the task seemed to be, God could lead them into the Promised Land.

While Moses used the Tower of Babel account to teach Israel about God's sovereignty over man's empire, the Tower was a historical event that fit surprisingly well into the history of the ancient Near East. If Noah's flood is associated with the end of the Younger Dryas, (see the author's study *When the Rains Failed*) the flood occurred around 9000 BC. If so, the flood was followed by a millennium of relative silence in the archaeological record. A few small and isolated settlement sites have been found that may date as far back as 8000 BC. It took time for the human population to grow large enough to spread across the region and to leave significant archaeological remains. Perhaps not surprisingly, the great river valleys were largely avoided by human populations for a millennium after the great floods.

The Central Sahara was inhabited after 8000 BC. This period marked the beginning of the period of greatest rainfall in the Sahara. By 7000 BC, farming was becoming common in many areas of the ancient Near East. Wild wheat and barley were being planted in Turkey. Between 7000 BC and 6000 BC, farming communities in southwestern Anatolia and Greece were raising sheep, goats, and pigs. The earliest farming villages in northern Iraq appeared between 7000 and 5000 BC. Çatal Hüyük in Anatolia (modern Turkey) may have been occupied as early as 6700 BC, although that date is debated.

Pastoral nomadism had appeared in the ancient Near East by 6000 BC in semi-arid regions that had been largely empty of population for three millennia. These pastoral nomads contributed strongly to the settlement of Akkad, the Semitic region of northern Mesopotamia. Around 6000 BC, Mesopotamia, the Nile valley, and the Indus valley were first re-settled. It is unclear why the river valleys were not settled before this. It may be that memories of the great flood made people hesitate to inhabit a flood plain. It was once popular to argue that the valleys were just too swampy to inhabit before 6000 BC. Recent climate change studies have suggested a better reason why the river valleys were first re-settled around 6000 BC. The years between 6200 BC and 6000 BC saw a brief return to cold and drought conditions. Marginal areas like the Iranian plateau were emptied of population at this time. The river valleys may have been settled after 6000 BC because water could still be found there.

The Hassuna and Samarra cultures were among the earliest settlements in Mesopotamia. Little is known about the ethnic makeup of these earliest inhabitants of Mesopotamia, and it is unclear whether specific ethnic groups had even developed in the ancient Near East at this time. These were Neolithic cultures that used obsidian weapons and crude pottery. The Hassuna and Samarra cultures were followed by the Ubaid culture which began after 5200 BC. There has been substantial debate about the origin of the Ubaid culture. This debate has centered in part on whether there was a complete break in the pottery tradition at the start of the Ubaid.

Ubaid period settlements in Mesopotamia were built on virgin soil, so they were the earliest settlements at their sites. The Ubaid culture survived for quite a long time. It was a sparsely settled, rural, agricultural culture that included small scattered villages. Since the Ubaid period lasted for so long, it has become convenient to subdivide it into smaller time periods. The earliest part of the Ubaid period is represented by the Halaf culture in the northern part of Mesopotamia. The Halaf culture in the north spread rapidly across a large part of Mesopotamia, Anatolia and the Levant (which is Syria and Palestine). It was a high culture with well constructed pottery and multi-room houses.

After 4800 BC, the Halaf culture in Mesopotamia was replaced by a later phase of the Ubaid called the Eridu culture. With the rise of the Eridu culture, the center of population and civilization moved from the northwest end of the valley to the southeast end of the valley. This would seem to be consistent with Genesis 11:1-2. Moses recorded that men moved east into the

land of Shinar before the Tower of Babel was built. As the Eridu culture moved east to the region of Shinar, villages like Uruk, Ur, and Eridu became more important. Crown suggested that this culture was based on improved irrigation. This irrigation produced a surplus of population which enabled the Ubaid culture to spread across Mesopotamia.

This may have happened in the days of Shem's descendant Peleg. In Genesis 10:25, Moses noted that the land was either divided, irrigated, or canalled, in Peleg's day depending on how the Hebrew verb *palag* is translated. Irrigation may have provided an economic basis for the earliest civilizations in the ancient Near East. Irrigation required both political organization and social differentiation. These factors produced economic prosperity and led to the rise of a centralized culture. Moses may have chosen to record the beginning of irrigation in Peleg's time because it marked a parting of the ways between two factions of Shem's descendants: the semi-nomadic West Semitic population, and the relatively more settled East Semitic population. The faction of Shem's descendants who moved east to Shinar may have joined the descendants of Ham's son Cush in founding the first complex urban cultures in the Near East. The remnant of believers among Shem's descendants may have been in tension with the rising idolatry of the age. Evidence for this rising idolatry can be seen in the earliest level of the ziqqurat at Eridu.

The next phase in Mesopotamian history lasted from approximately 3500 BC to 3100 BC. It was centered at the city of Uruk. The Uruk period began around 3500 BC as climate conditions improved in southeast Mesopotamia. Oak forests spread through the mountains north of Mesopotamia, and severe floods struck cities in the valley. During the Ubaid period, the earliest occupation levels at sites around Uruk had been small scattered villages that were only occupied for a short time. Excavations of the earliest settlements around Uruk suggested that the population of the region was very sparse and widely scattered. At the end of the Ubaid, the population center in Mesopotamia had shifted to the southeastern end of the valley. During the Uruk period, this culture began to develop the first large and complex cities to appear in human history. The Early Dynastic I period at Uruk saw the largest city population ever to exist at Uruk. The city grew at the expense of the countryside. Whole districts around Uruk were depopulated as people poured into the cities. The increased urbanization at cities like Uruk produced the first centrally administered kingdoms in Mesopotamia. Uruk experienced this great increase in urbanization earlier than sites near Ur or Eridu. Zarins suggested that the Semitic pastoral nomads may have begun their rise to political dominance in northern Mesopotamia as early as this Proto-literate period.

The construction of the Anu ziqqurat at Uruk was well underway by this time. Ziqqurats were man made temple mountains. They were constructed of sun dried brick and backed brick with tar as mortar. They were shaped like a stepped pyramid, although the earliest ones were quite small compared to the huge ones built in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC. The Sumerian temple hymns from 2300 BC showed that the tops of the ziqqurats were thought to be heaven on earth. So the top of the ziqqurats literally reached to heaven according to the beliefs of that culture. A total of two dozen ziqqurats were eventually built throughout Mesopotamia. Jack Finegan suggested that the ziqqurat at Uruk was the earliest of these ziqqurats. The ziqqurats were great centers for both worship and education. The Uruk period was a literate era from beginning to end. The earliest extant large collection of written texts was written at this time. Between 500 and 600 tablets were found at Uruk that were written after 3200 BC.

All of this resembles Moses' description of the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11:1-9. In this passage, the population of Mesopotamia had moved east across the valley floor to the land of Shinar which was the southeastern part of the valley. The rise of an empire and tower in Shinar

could then correspond with the 1st Dynasty at Uruk, when rural populations were being replaced by organized city cultures. The early sanctuary at Uruk was being rebuilt into one of the first ziqqurats in Mesopotamia. Ziqqurats were also being expanded in cities like Babel at this time.

God sent His special presence down to Shinar to see the city and temple tower that the Uruk culture had built. By confusing their language, God limited man's ability to found an empire opposed to Him, and God scattered the population. The confusion of tongues would have to have occurred before cultural diversity appeared in Mesopotamia. After the Sumerian immigration into the valley, Mesopotamia would never again know a uniform culture or language. There was even a Sumerian text sometimes called *Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta*. This text may have described the end of the Uruk period. It recorded that once there were no dangerous animals on earth. All men were united in one culture, and all men praised the god Enlil with a single language. The text claimed that the god Enki confused man's language and brought dissention between men. So this text may point back to the same time period recorded in the Tower of Babel account.

What would all of this have had to do with the wilderness generation? The Tower of Babel account taught Israel how and why human empire appeared in the world in opposition to God. It helped explain why God would allow Egypt to establish an empire in Palestine that would challenge God's ownership of His land and threaten Israel's ability to inherit God's land. Yet it also assured Israel that God was in control. He would bring man's empire to an end in His own time.

#### Timeless Truths

Human empires have always been opposed to God. Such opposition could almost be said to be at the heart of the nature of an empire. It is the kingdom of man instead of the kingdom of God. Empires are usually based on the desire for power instead of service. It should not be surprising that the world has little use for God. It has always been that way. We probably stand on the threshold of the final great empire in human history, the empire of the Antichrist promised in Revelation and scattered other biblical passages. During the troubles of that age, the Antichrist's empire will attempt to destroy faith on earth. It will seem like God is powerless to stop the evil that devastates His people and the terrible suffering that grips the earth. Yet God is on His throne, and he mocks man's attempts to defeat Him. Despite everything that evil men can do, Christ is coming back to rule His people forever. No matter what troubles and trials may come from the birth pangs of God's eternal kingdom, God's eternal promises will stand forever, and His people will share in the blessedness His coming. Whatever life throws at you, hold up your head. Your salvation draws near.

## CHAPTER 3: WILDERNESS LESSONS FROM THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM

### A. Abraham and the Nature of Faith

#### *1) Abraham and a Life of Faith and Obedience*

How did Moses teach Israel about the nature of faith through the account of Abraham's life? Moses taught first that faith was grounded in God's promise. In Genesis 3:15, God promised that the curse of sin would be removed by a future promised Redeemer. This promise applied to personal salvation, divine judgment, and a return to the conditions of Eden. After Adam's time, believers called on God's name. Adam's descendant Enoch became famous for walking with God. The nature of Enoch's conversations with God were not recorded. Jude 14 recorded a prophecy from Enoch claiming that he saw thousands of God's holy ones coming in judgment on the earth's sins. There has been a lot of academic discussion about the relationship between these words and the book of I Enoch which was written perhaps a century or two before Jesus was born. If the Biblical text is assumed to be inspired and inerrant, there should be a relationship of some kind between these words and the content of the original Enoch's prophecies and visions. The hope for the promised Redeemer was passed down through human history. While Israel sojourned in Egypt, this promise was represented in Job's words recorded in Job 19:23-27. Job reported that despite his great suffering, he knew that his Redeemer lived. He knew that his Redeemer would one day take his stand on the earth. Job knew that even though he died first, one day he would see his Redeemer with his own eyes.

In Abraham's family, the promises of a Redeemer, a judgment, and a redeemed land were expressed in passages like the promise of land in Genesis 12:7, the promises of a seed and a blessing in Genesis 12:2, and the judgment on Sodom in Genesis 19:24. A relationship with God was rooted partly on faith in these promises. The centrality of faith can be seen in Genesis 15:6. Moses noted that God declared Abraham to be righteous because Abraham had believed God's promise. Yet while faith was the foundation of any relationship with God, the Old Testament community knew that faith without works was dead. The Old Testament never separated a theoretical faith from faith lived in practice. As Isaiah would echo so many years later in Isaiah 59:21, God's covenant with His people was the presence of His Spirit within them and the presence of that Spirit reflected in their words and actions. God's covenant always involved both faith in God's promises and the working out of that faith in the lives of His people.

To teach that truth, Moses included Genesis 26:3-5. God told Jacob that the promises would be handed down to him if he stayed in the land. Moses wrote that Jacob and his descendants would inherit the promises because Abraham had obeyed God's charge, commandments, statutes, and laws. Moses used four law words in this passage. This is important because Moses used very similar wording in other passages. In Deuteronomy 11:1, Moses summarized the whole Mosaic legislation in the words charge, statutes, ordinances, and commandments. Three of the law words were identical in both passages. The only difference was that Moses wrote *torah*, Law, in Genesis 26 while he wrote *mishpat*, or judgment, in Deuteronomy 11:1. Moses was claiming that Abraham already knew and obeyed at least the heart of the legislation given on Sinai. For Moses, a relationship with God was based both on faith and on the expression of that faith in life.

Timeless Truths

Salvation has always come by grace through faith. Yet saving faith has never been simple intellectual understanding. If it were, intelligent people could be saved far more easily than those of very limited understanding. Salvation does not come by gaining knowledge. Saving faith is a life commitment to the promised Redeemer that results both in belief and obedience.

## *2) Circumcision and the Sign of the Covenant*

Covenant signs and symbols were used to demonstrate that faith was being lived out in life. One of the most important symbols of faith was circumcision. In Genesis 17:9-14, Moses discussed Yahweh's command that every male in Abraham's household should be circumcised. Circumcision was to be the great sign of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants. Under the principle that a part represented the whole, circumcision pointed to dying to sin and rising in Christ. While Israel was in Egypt, the Egyptians had practiced a form of circumcision, but Egypt's Hyksos rulers had not done so. The Biblical text does not state whether the Jews had practiced circumcision in Egypt, but the implication may be that they had done so. This had changed in the wilderness. According to Joshua 5:5, Israel had not circumcised their children in the wilderness. As soon as Joshua led Israel across the Jordan, he stopped to circumcise the whole nation. If this was true, Moses wrote Genesis 17:9-14 for a generation that was rejecting God's covenant sign by refusing to circumcise their children. No wonder that Moses stressed the importance of the ceremony as highly as he did in Genesis 17. In Exodus 4:24-25, Moses even warned the wilderness generation that God had sought to kill either Moses or his own son because the son had not been circumcised in the wilderness. If Moses' own family could die for disobedience, how would the nation escape God's judgment if they rejected the sign of His covenant?

### *Timeless Truths*

The Israelites were commanded to circumcise their male children as a sign that they belonged to God's covenant. The Bible rarely explained why God chose circumcision as a sign. The most likely explanation is that it was a symbolic death similar to some biblical descriptions of baptism. Spiritually, it may have pointed to participation in Christ's death and resurrection. While the question of infant baptism versus believers' baptism remains a highly controversial question in the church, the parallel between circumcision and baptism argues strongly that believers should be baptized in one way or the other. The importance of circumcision is that it created an identifiable group of believers that placed unbelievers outside of the bounds of the group. The closest parallel today would be membership in the institutional church. What are the contemporary implications of God's command that the Jews must be circumcised? The institutional church is losing the central role that it once played. Many people today believe that they can live their faith without going to church or gathering with other Christians for worship. They try to keep their faith while living outside the bounds of the believing community. They live as "jews" without being "circumcised." The problem with that life is that true faith slowly dies away. Life is so busy that the faith becomes a memory. It is important to be a part of a healthy church.

## *3) Genesis and God's Presence*

There are roughly 50 places in the Old Testament where people claimed to see God. These appearances of God are called “theophanies.” Sometimes people heard or saw God in dreams or visions of the night. Other times, people actually saw someone that was present. Even when people actually saw God present before them, the theophanies were often quite different from each other. Sometimes God appeared in a form that resembled a man. Other times, He was seen with such burning glory fire that no one could ever mistake Him for a person. The differences between the theophanies seemed in part to be based on God’s purpose for appearing to people. When God appeared to people who were more or less faithful to Him, He came in meekness like a man giving grace and promise. When God appeared to rebellious people, He came in glory fire stressing the vast difference between their sin and His absolute holiness. The differences between these two types of theophanies may have been part of an important lesson that Moses tried to teach the wilderness generation.

The wilderness community lived in God’s presence constantly. This contrasted strongly with Israel’s experience in Egypt. Ezekiel 20:5-8 was the only reference to a theophany in Egypt before the exodus. After Israel left Egypt, God went before Israel in a pillar of cloud and fire for 40 years. Exodus 13:21 declared that Yahweh was moving before them in the cloud. Numbers 14:14 claimed that Yahweh was seen eye to eye when His cloud stood over them. His presence made the cloud radiant at night. His presence protected them and gave them shade in the burning waste. Israel also stood in God’s presence on Mount Sinai. For over a month, the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven and shook. Israel was terrified. God’s presence was very dangerous because He will not allow sin in His presence. In Exodus 33:5, God warned Israel that if He should go into their presence for even a moment, he would destroy them. Then in Exodus 33:20, God even warned Moses that no one could see His face and live. Exodus 20:18-20 and Deuteronomy 5:22-26 described how Israel had stood at the foot of Mount Sinai and had seen the mountain quaking and burning with fire to the heart of heaven itself. They had heard God’s voice speaking from heaven. Then the Israelites had begged Moses to speak to them instead of God. The Israelites recognized that if they heard God’s voice any longer, they would all die. God declared that their fears were justified. Throughout the wilderness journey, God occasionally descended into the tabernacle filling it with glory fire. When that happened, fire from God’s presence lit the altar fire for sacrifice. In Leviticus 10:2, fire from God’s presence consumed Aaron’s sons Nadab and Abihu. In Numbers 16:35, Fire from God’s presence consumed 250 of Korah’s followers. In Numbers 17:12-13, the Israelites cried to Moses that they were all dying and that everyone who came near Yahweh’s presence in the tabernacle must die. The Israelites asked Moses if they all were going to die.

How could Moses ease their fears and teach them that they could approach God without dying? Moses included in Genesis a surprising number of theophanies, but those theophanies were quite different from the appearances of God in the rest of the Pentateuch. In Genesis, God appeared to people who were more or less faithful to Him. So God appeared to them in mercy, grace, and promise. Moses taught Israel that God’s presence need not destroy them. Moses’ first theophany was occurred in Genesis 1:2 when God’s Spirit hovered over the surface of the primal sea. Throughout Genesis 1 and 2, Moses continually reminded Israel that God was present and active within His creation. In Genesis 3:8, Moses recorded that Adam had heard the sound of God walking in the garden. In Genesis 4:14, Moses recorded that Cain had complained because he would be hidden from God’s face and would be a wanderer on the earth. In Genesis 5:24, Moses noted that Enoch walked with God. In Genesis 6:13, Moses recorded that God had spoken with Noah. Throughout the Pentateuch, Moses depicted God’s presence as a continual reality

throughout Israel's patriarchal age. Moses did not write Genesis only as the story of a family. Moses also wrote it as the story of Yahweh. Genesis was the account of how Yahweh had appeared to men, what Yahweh had said, and what Yahweh had done.

Among the theophanies that Moses recorded, Genesis 18:8 held a unique position. It illustrated most clearly the radical difference between the theophanies that Moses recorded in Genesis and the theophanies that Moses described in the rest of the Pentateuch. The theophanies that Moses recorded in Genesis resembled the kind of theophanies seen in passages like Joshua 5:13-15, Judges 2:1 and Judges 6:11. In Genesis 18:8, Moses recorded that God's form resembled a human form so closely that He actually ate a meal prepared by Abraham. Nothing like this appeared in the Pentateuch after Genesis. In the rest of the Mosaic books, God usually appeared with glorious, fire like radiance. The closest parallel to Genesis 18:8 in the Old Testament is Exodus 24:9-12. Moses, Aaron, Aaron's sons, and 70 of Israel's elders were told to climb Mount Sinai. They saw God at a distance above the crystal sea. Then they ate a fellowship meal in sight of God's presence. Nothing in Exodus suggested that God Himself took part in the fellowship meal as the theophany had in Genesis 18.

The Patriarchal narratives often made a number of different points at the same time. Another theme in Genesis 18:8 may also have been quite important. Genesis 18 contrasted sharply with Genesis 19 in a key way. When the heavenly visitors arrived at Abraham's dwelling, he immediately showed proper hospitality for them. He invited them into his tent, washed their feet, and presented them with a feast. Regardless of the identity of his visitors, this was the correct way to treat strangers in Abraham's culture. To do less would have brought shame on the household. In the next chapter, the angelic visitors would receive a very different welcome in Sodom.

Lot offered the angelic visitors shelter, a chance to wash their feet, and a feast. Lot treated them correctly in his culture. Lot had no right to do this at Sodom. Victor Matthews argued that Lot was acting as if he were a representative of Sodom by offering hospitality to the visitors. This enraged the inhabitants of Sodom. They saw Lot's actions both as condemnation and as an assumption of power in the city which he did not have.<sup>1</sup> The inhabitants of Sodom attacked Lot, his family, and his visitors. By doing this, they proved their wickedness to everyone who would hear of the event. Abraham and Lot proved their righteousness by their proper treatment of strangers. The inhabitants of Sodom proved that they deserved judgment by their failure to offer hospitality and their violence. In this context, the Lord said to the other angelic visitors that Abraham had been chosen to command his household after him to act in a righteous way. Only by doing so would God bring on Abraham and his descendants the covenant promises made to them.

The wilderness community stood in a similar position. They had seen Egypt destroyed in God's judgment for failing to offer Israel proper hospitality. After forty years in the wilderness, they were about to see God's judgment fall on all of Palestine, not just the cities of the plain. Moses may have been reminding Israel that God had called them to live their lives in a righteous way as Abraham had done. If Israel wished to enjoy God's presence and live in His abundance, they had to live in His ways and teach their children to obey His law. Only then would God give them the promises that He had made to Abraham.

## Timeless Truths

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<sup>1</sup> Victor H. Matthews, "Hospitality and Hostility in Genesis 19 and Judges 19," *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 22.1 (1992): 3-11.

It is easy to get into a mindset that God is in heaven and we live on earth. It is easy to think that God looks down at us, but He really isn't here. Yet whenever two or three gather in Christ's name, His special presence is in their midst. God is with us even if we do not see Him. This is the heart of sanctification. Few people make great progress toward sanctification by being saved by grace through faith and trying very hard. Sanctification happens as people stand in Christ's presence. The more time that people spend experiencing Christ's presence in prayer, study of the Word, and worship, the more they are transformed by the Spirit as if they were looking in a mirror. That is part of Paul's point in II Corinthians 3:18.

God's presence may also be more than this. God has been at work drawing many to Himself from the Muslim world. Roughly ¼ of those who are converted from Islam report that Christ appeared in a dream and told them to become Christians. Down through the ages, there have always been believers who claim to have seen the Lord, and those claims can not be completely discounted. After all, Acts 23:11 recorded a similar theophany well after Christ's ascension. Theophanies were common in the Old Testament text, but the Old Testament covered a huge period of time. Theophanies were rare in Israel's yearly life. In most generations, God would only appear to a few people a few times. It would be interesting to know if real theophanies are more or less common today than they were at some points in the Old Testament.

#### *4) Israel's Egyptian Slavery and the Patriarchs' Spiritual Ambivalence*

In the final century of Israel's Egyptian sojourn, the nation had been enslaved with great brutality. Why had this happened? If Yahweh loved Israel, why had the nation been brought so low? If Israel was to be brought back to God, the nation needed an answer. Moses' answer was that Israel had been brought down by sin. Moses justified this explanation by arguing that the principles of blessing and curses in Deuteronomy 27-28 had already been active in Israel's Patriarchal Age, so they certainly applied as well to Israel's life in Egypt. In Genesis, Moses argued that Israel's Egyptian bondage could be explained not only by Israel's idolatry in Egypt but also by the earlier sins of their forefathers.

Moses reminded Israel that their patriarchs had been wealthy and powerful people. They gained their wealth and power by obeying God and following His lead into the Promised Land. Genesis 12:5 noted that Abraham had left Haran with Sara, Lot, and all of the people that Abraham had acquired in Haran. This suggested that many gentiles were present in the patriarchal community from the beginning, and this remained true throughout the patriarchal age. Genesis 12:16 noted that Pharaoh had given Abraham male and female gentile servants. Genesis 20:14 noted that Abimelech did the same thing. Genesis 23:6 recorded that the Hittites had called Abraham a mighty prince. Genesis 24:35 claimed that God had made Abraham rich in servants, as well as animals. Abraham's dominant position in Palestine can be seen in Genesis 14:14 where Moses noted that Abraham had led a force of 318 armed retainers who had been raised in his household. The Hebrew word for "armed retainer" in Genesis 14:14 was *chânîyk*. This word appeared nowhere else in the Bible, but it did appear in the Egyptian Execration Texts from the 19th century BC. In the Egyptian texts, the word was used to describe the retainers who served chieftains from Palestine.

When wives and children are added to the 314 retainers, Abraham's household could have numbered as high as a thousand people. In Genesis 23:6, Moses noted that the Hittites had called Abraham a mighty prince, and he had indeed been a powerful prince in the region. While

evangelicals still debate patriarchal age dates, Abraham probably entered Palestine near the end of a devastating 300 year long drought. This drought had devastated the Fertile Crescent. It had caused the 1st Intermediate Period in Egypt as central government collapsed into social, political, and economic chaos. The drought may have contributed to Sargon's formation of a Semitic empire in Mesopotamia. In the Levant, the highlands of Palestine had been largely emptied of population. Even great cities like Megiddo had been reduced to villages. During these years, Palestine was occupied largely by a semi-nomadic population that farmed small fields in the summer and moved to warmer areas in the winter. In this cultural context, a force of 318 armed men would have made Abraham a mighty man.

While Abraham and the Patriarchs were powerful men, their sins also always threatened their continued presence in the land. Both Abraham's power and his weakness can be seen in the strange tale recorded in Genesis 12:10-20. When Abraham entered Palestine from Haran, he was unable to live in the land because of the great drought. He simply passed through Palestine and moved south to Egypt. He reached there near the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Intermediate Period. Conditions in Egypt had been improving since around 2135 BC. When Abraham reached Egypt, he found a civil war. After the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> Intermediate Period, Egypt was still not a unified culture. The land was divided between a southern ruler at Thebes and the northern ruler at Herakleopolis. These kings were struggling for control of the whole land. The ruler of Herakleopolis may have sought military assistance from Abraham in his struggle against Thebes. The northern ruler may have sought to form a marriage alliance with Abraham because Abraham led a very large armed household, and Abraham's forces could have helped him win the war.

When Abraham should have trusted God, he chose expediency and passed off his wife as his sister so that he could form a marriage alliance with Pharaoh. Taking Sara into Pharaoh's household would quite properly have been regarded in that culture as adultery. It could not be allowed in the Egyptian culture because she was already married to Abraham. The Egyptians viewed adultery as a serious social evil. When the northern ruler realized that Sara was Abraham's wife, he removed her from his house and his land as soon as possible. Pharaoh may have feared that public adultery would weaken his support in the delta. As Sara left Pharaoh's house, the ruler gave Abraham gifts of servants and livestock. These things were often given as gifts to gain alliances with Egypt.

Moses argued that even in Israel's patriarchal age, Jacob's household had not been completely committed to the Lord. Moses noted in Genesis 31:19 that Rachel had stolen her father's household idols when Jacob set out for Palestine. In Genesis 35:1-4, Moses noted that Jacob had commanded members of his household to bury their idols in the ground before worshiping God at Bethel. This suggested both that Jacob was determined to worship only Yahweh and that idolatry had been prevalent in his own household. This patriarchal age idolatry may have created a context for understanding future idolatry among Jacob's sons and in Egypt. Moses warned in Genesis that such idolatry had caused trouble for the Patriarchs as it would later for Israel.

### Timeless Truths

It has always been true that the wages of sin are trouble, confusion, grief, spiritual death, and eventually physical death. While it would be completely untrue and unfair to claim that trouble in life always grows from sins in the life of the grieving person, it is often true that sin brings trouble. The Bible testifies from Genesis to Revelation that there are consequences for rebellion

and blessings for faithful obedience. Exercise righteousness so that you can live in peace. Never assume that God will overlook your spiritual failings because of your role in the church. He holds leaders in His church to a higher standard just as Israel's patriarchs were troubled so often by their spiritual failures. Yet sometimes it does seem that the righteous suffer while the wicked laugh. When that happens, remember that they lack God's peace in their hearts, and they face a pay day someday.

## B. Abraham's Life and Israel's Relationship with the Nations

### *1) Genesis 10, Abraham's Lineage, and the Origin of the Nations*

One of the most important lessons that the wilderness community needed to learn was the nature of their identity as Israelites. Moses taught this lesson by recording genealogical data in Genesis. It is not clear where Moses found the records recorded in Genesis. Israel did preserve its genealogy in some manner during the Egyptian sojourn because it was possible at the Exodus to determine the tribal membership of each Israelite. It was also possible to determine who was and was not an Israelite. This suggested that a system of preserving genealogical records had been in use since the Patriarchal Age.

The genealogies were theological statements rather than simply historical records. The lessons taught by a genealogy were at least as important as the history recorded in it. This may be why the genealogies were somewhat inconsistent and why they gave at least the appearance of literary structure. In recent years, there has been a lot of academic interest in how the genealogies functioned as theological statements. Moses did not have the same purpose for each genealogy that he included in Genesis. For example, Moses' purpose in Genesis 10 was rather different from his purpose in the genealogies recorded in Genesis 5 and 11. Moses' purpose for the genealogy in Genesis 10 was to trace how nations, languages, and cultures were re-established after Noah's flood. The nations described in Genesis 10 were consistently Israel's neighbors. Moses was describing to Israel how the nations arose that were within their own awareness and cultural horizon. The context of Genesis 10 was the ancient Near East instead of the whole world. The genealogies recorded in Genesis 10 were not just historical background for the wilderness generation, but the records implied hints about why the nations had fled so far from faith in Yahweh.

By including genealogies in Genesis, Moses grounded the lives of Israel's Patriarchs in history. Moses stressed that these men were real people and not mythical religious figures lost in antiquity. The genealogical records in Genesis demonstrated that the wilderness community belonged to a long tradition of faithful men that stretched back through Shem to Adam. Moses reminded Israel in Genesis 9:26-27 that they had inherited Noah's blessing as descendants of Shem. This blessing would have great implications for their life in Palestine after the conquest.

The tradition of faith in Genesis can also be seen in the motif of a promise seed which was a central structural motif in Genesis. A man's seed in Genesis shared his characteristics. So as history progressed, descendants in a family would duplicate the actions of their fathers. For example, Isaac's treatment of his wife at Gerar resembled Abraham's treatment of his wife in Egypt. Jacob's sons deceived their father, just as Jacob had deceived his own father. The consistency among descendants could also be seen outside of the covenant community. Cain's murderous character was repeated by his descendant Lamech. Ham's descendants included the population of Sodom and Gomorrah who shared Ham's improper sexual behavior.

## Timeless Truths

Who are you? You are more than an individual. You are part of a culture, a family heritage, and a community of faith. These things help shape your life in unseen ways. It is useful to trace your own family history because it can shed light on why you act and think the way that you do. Thought patterns and actions are often passed down through a surprising number of generations.

### *2) Genesis 13:10-11 and Sodom's Agricultural Abundance*

Despite the brutality of their slavery in Egypt, Israelites in the wilderness often looked back at Egypt with nostalgia and argued that the nation should return there. Numbers 11:4-6 described how the sons of Israel wept because they remembered the free fish in Egypt along with the onions, leeks, garlic, melons, and cucumbers. They yearned for the produce of Egypt instead of manna in the wilderness. Moses provided a lesson in Genesis that may have helped Israel when they felt this way. In Genesis 13:10-11, Moses reminded the wilderness generation that Lot had settled in the southern Jordan River plain near the Dead Sea because it was well watered. Moses specifically compared the fruitfulness of Sodom to the fruitfulness of Egypt near Zoar.

Sodom's fruitfulness contrasted sharply with conditions in the rest of Palestine. In Abraham's day, Palestine had known drought conditions for over 300 years. Urban life in Palestine had almost disappeared between 2300 BC and 2000 BC. Palestine was inhabited for the most part by semi-nomadic people who farmed small fields in the summer and led their flocks to warmer areas in the winter. Cities only began to reappear in Palestine after 1800 BC. It is interesting that Genesis had little good to say about conditions in Palestine during the patriarchal age. This contrasted sharply with the rest of the Pentateuch. After Genesis, Moses consistently referred to Palestine as "a land flowing with milk and honey." This expression appeared four times in Exodus, once in Leviticus, three times in Numbers, and five times in Deuteronomy. Yet Moses never used the expression in Genesis because Palestine was far from being "a land flowing with milk and honey" in Abraham's day. Palestine was still suffering from the drought conditions that had ended the Early Bronze culture. This drought would return briefly at the end of Jacob's life. Drought conditions in Palestine forced the patriarchs to move permanently down to Egypt.

There was a great exception to the drought conditions in Palestine, and that was the Dead Sea valley. The Dead Sea level was significantly lower in Abraham's day than it is today, and the whole southern part of the Dead Sea was dry land. As the limited spring rains brought water flowing down the Jordan River and various streams, the water was probably stored in ponds and was used to water fields. While this approach to agriculture is labor intensive, the inhabitants of Sodom would have had a nearly endless supply of cheap or free labor. Since the highlands of Palestine were almost uninhabitable, a nearly endless parade of people would have sought shelter in the Dead Sea valley. Lot had his choice of locations where his household could move. He chose the abundance and fruitfulness of the Dead Sea basin in spite of the wickedness of its inhabitants. Moses may have used this account to warn Israel of the trouble and destruction that would come from choosing the abundance of Egypt instead of God's presence in the wilderness.

It is easy to overlook the fact that individuals in the wilderness community were not trapped in the wilderness. They were free to leave if they chose to do so. The nation as a whole would not have been able to move anywhere without God's leadership and provision. However individuals in the believing community were not confined to the wilderness. Moses had visited

Sinai in Exodus 3:1 before the exodus without miraculous provision of food or water, and Aaron had found his way there as well. Sinai had been the mountain of God long before Moses' time, so travel to and from Sinai had always been possible. Individuals in the wilderness community may also have been able to find employment in the Egyptian mines in the Sinai. The mine at Serabit el-Khâdem was in use at this time. Stela written by Hatshepsut and Thutmose III have been found at the mine. It has even been suggested that one of the inscriptions found near Serabit el-Khâdem might describe Israelites molding metal objects for the tabernacle.

It is also true that most of Israel's life in the wilderness was not spent in the southern Sinai. It was spent at the north end of the Sinai Peninsula rather close to settled areas. Through much of their sojourn, the Israelites either circled around Mount Seir or lived near Kadesh. Moses associated Mount Seir with Esau's descendants in Genesis 32:3 and 36:8. Kadesh was an important caravan stop. These areas were not out of touch with the cultures of the ancient Near East. Individuals in the wilderness community could also have traveled north into the Dead Sea valley and on into the settled regions of Palestine. Doing so, they would have encountered a hostile culture and they may have been as welcome as Joshua's spies at Jericho. Yet Israelites could always take that risk if they chose to do so.

Moses may have used the history of Sodom to warn Israelites against leaving the wilderness where God had placed them among His covenant people. Moses may have used this story to warn the Israelites not to choose a Canaanite culture with its abundance in place of Yahweh's bread for the day. Doing so would lead them both to Lot's eventual poverty and to the same kind of spiritual ruin that had destroyed the community that Lot had led into Sodom.

#### Timeless Truths

Compromising with the world for the sake of material possessions can have disastrous long range consequences. When you choose prosperity instead of God, you risk losing both God and the satisfaction of the prosperity that you have chosen.

#### 3) *Genesis 14:1-24, Faith, and Sodom's Wealth*

Moses may have continued this lesson in Genesis 14. Moses reminded the wilderness generation that Palestine had been invaded in Abraham's day by four kings from Mesopotamia named Amraphel, Arioch, Chedorlaomer, and Tidal. Several details of this account have been verified by archaeology. In Genesis 14:6, Moses wrote that Chedorlaomer defeated the Horites who were an ethnic group that archaeologists call Hurrians. Tablets found at Ebla described the city's trade relations with many towns and cities in the region. The tablets mentioned Damascus, Sodom, Gomorrah, and the cities of Genesis 14: Admah, Zeboiim, and Bela. Chedorlaomer and his allies captured Sodom and carried away its wealth and people. All of the wealth that Lot had brought to Sodom was lost, and Lot himself was captured. Lot was only delivered when Abraham and his allies attacked Chedorlaomer's forces.

Genesis 14 contrasted Lot and Chedorlaomer with two righteous men, Melchizedek and Abraham. Melchizedek was the priest/king of Salem. The name Salem means Peace. This name is usually understood to be an early name for Jerusalem. The Hebrew word for city is *îr*. So Jerusalem is *îr shâlôm*, the city of peace. A place called Salem was only described in a few Old Testament passages. Psalm 76:2 paralleled Zion with Salem, which suggests that Salem was

another name for Jerusalem. Psalm 110:4 which described a priest after the order of Melchizedek which suggested a connection between Melchizedek's Salem and David's Jerusalem.

Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek can best be understood by putting it in the context of the surrounding chapters. In Genesis 13, Abraham and Lot had separated because the arid land could not support their combined possessions. Lot had moved to Sodom because the city was rich and the valley contained agricultural abundance. This was a destructive decision based on a desire for a wealthy and comfortable life style. Moses recorded in Genesis 14:1-16 that Sodom and its allies had stopped paying their annual tribute to Chedorlaomer and his allies. This was another destructive decision based on a desire for wealth. These decisions led to slavery and a complete loss possessions when Chedorlaomer's allies invaded the valley. When Abraham heard that Lot had been seized by Chedorlaomer, Abraham and his allies attacked the invaders. Abraham reclaimed Lot, the residents of the plain, and all of their possessions.

Then Moses arrived at what may have been the point of the account. In Genesis 14:17-24, two men went to meet Abraham. In Genesis 14:21, Moses noted that the king of Sodom offered to give Abraham all the goods that he had seized from Chedorlaomer. Abraham had a right of conquest to take the spoils of war, although the king of Sodom may just have been opening a Semitic negotiation for the amount of the spoil that Abraham would claim. The king of Sodom offered to Abraham the possessions that had tempted Lot to sin. Moses noted in Genesis 14:18 that Melchizedek came to Abraham at the same time offered only food for the day. Abraham had promised God that he would take nothing for himself from the spoils of battle. The king of Sodom tempted Abraham to break his vow to God so that he could become wealthier. Melchizedek reminded Abraham of his vow, and called Abraham to remain faithful to God.

There was a remarkable similarity in Genesis 14 between the words of Abraham and Melchizedek. In Genesis 14:19, Moses recorded Melchizedek's blessing of Abraham by God Most High, El Elyon, possessor of heaven and earth. Then in Genesis 14:22, Moses recorded Abraham's words to the king of Sodom that he had sworn to the Lord Most High, Yahweh El Elyon, possessor of heaven and earth. The whole chapter concerned faithfulness, life style, and possessions. Who owned the spoil, God or the king of Sodom? Who could give true possessions, God or Sodom? Abraham faced a severe temptation in Genesis 14. He may have shown that he had passed the temptation by giving Melchizedek a tithe of all the spoil. The tithe stood for the total. By giving a tithe of the spoil, Abraham may have demonstrated his belief that all of the spoil belonged to God, and he refused to accept any of it for himself. Then Moses began Genesis 15 with God's promise to Abraham that his reward would be very great because he had remained faithful to God. Through Genesis 14, Moses may have called Israel to accept Melchizedek's bread and wine as God's simple provision for the day. From the context of the wilderness generation, Moses' message may have been that Israel should be satisfied with the manna that God provided for them in the wilderness instead of yearning for the agricultural abundance that would come at the cost of sin.

### Timeless Truths

God promises to make few people rich. He only promises to love them and to give them bread for the day. Even this promise is conditional based on the ways that He is dealing with the nation as a whole. The desire for wealth often leads Christians to self-destructive behaviors and a wasted spirit.

#### *4) Genesis 22, the Sacrifice of Isaac, and Finding Help in Battle*

It is possible that there might have been another lesson introduced by Genesis 14 as well. This passage might be directly related to the sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22. In Genesis 22:1-2, Moses recorded God's command that Abraham offer his firstborn son as a sacrifice on a mountain in the land of Moriah. II Chronicles 3:1 identified Mount Moriah as the temple mount in Jerusalem. In David's day, this mount contained a threshing floor outside of the city. A millennium earlier in Abraham's day, Jerusalem had been a small village surviving the great drought because of its location on the trade route. While the site had been settled before 4000 BC and had been mentioned in the Ebla texts before 2300 BC, Jerusalem was one of a small handful of villages in the region during the Early Bronze Age/Middle Bronze Age transition. So it is not impossible that God could have called Abraham to sacrifice his only son on one of the hills outside of Jerusalem. The village population was probably too small for the town to have opposed what he was about to do (or perhaps even be aware of it).

Why would God tell Abraham to sacrifice his son? If Genesis 14 and 22 were related, what could Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac have had to do with Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek? A text from the Canaanite city of Ugarit told rulers how to seek divine assistance in battle when their cities were surrounded by enemies. The text instructed the rulers to enter Baal's temple and lift their eyes to Baal in prayer. A ruler was required to sacrifice a bull and a firstborn child to Baal. Then the ruler was to give Baal's priest a tenth of all that he possessed. After this was done, the ruler would receive Baal's assistance against his enemy.

Abraham had prayed for Yahweh's assistance in battle before fighting Chedorlaomer. Moses recorded in Genesis 14:22-23 that Abraham had made a vow to Yahweh that he would take none of the spoil of battle for himself. Moses recorded in Genesis 14:20 that Abraham had given Melchizedek a tithe of all. In Genesis 15:9, Moses noted that Abraham had offered a sacrifice to Yahweh. Then Moses recorded in Genesis 22 that Yahweh told Abraham to return to the region where he had earlier requested divine assistance in battle. Yahweh commanded Abraham to offer as a sacrifice the firstborn son who had been born after his battle with Chedorlaomer. This raised interesting questions. Was Yahweh's demand for a sacrificed child in some way a theological confrontation with the religious motifs of Palestine? The evidence is not clear enough to require any relationship between Genesis 22 and Genesis 14, but the parallels are highly suggestive of what might have stood in the background.

What might the wilderness generation have learned from this passage? They certainly learned that Yahweh did not really require human sacrifice like the gods of Palestine. Child sacrifice was common in the ancient Near East, but it was punished by execution in Israel. Whatever their culture had demanded in the past, Yahweh's law would now govern their lives. In Exodus 13:2, Moses recorded God's decree that the firstborn of every man and animal belonged to Him. The firstborn of most animals were to be sacrificed to Yahweh, but first born children were always redeemed with a price just as Isaac had been redeemed with the sacrifice of a ram. This passage was a strong call for faith and obedience.

#### Timeless Truths

Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac was one of the strongest types of Christ in the Old Testament, and the church has always seen it to be that. However, Abraham and Isaac would not have interpreted the event that way from the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD to the present time. Sometimes pictures

of Christ in the Old Testament were intentional prophecies written into historical events. Other times, pictures of Christ can be seen behind Old Testament events simply because Christ's Spirit was within His people.

## CHAPTER 4: MOSES' GENESIS LESSONS ABOUT ISRAEL'S RELATIONS WITH OTHER NATIONS

### A. Abraham's Cultural Setting

One of Moses' purposes in Genesis was to teach Israel what their relationships should be with gentiles in their environment. This can be seen as early as Genesis 10 when Moses recorded how ethnic groups in the ancient Near East were related to each other. The accounts that Moses added to Genesis often had implications for the way that Israel should interact with her neighbors.

#### *1) Genesis 15:16 and the West Semitic Tradition of Faith*

One of the most basic issues for Moses to address was the character of the Amorite population. The name Amorite was used in two ways in Genesis. Sometimes, it referred to a specific ethnic group in the region. Other times, it had a more general meaning. The name often referred to the "Westerners," or *Amurru*, who inhabited the western part of Mesopotamia and part of the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine). In general, the ethnic groups of the coastal plains in Palestine were Canaanites while the ethnic groups in the highlands and east of the highlands were Amorites. A large percentage of the "Westerners" were West Semitic people. They were descendants of Noah's son Shem, and the valid tradition of faith was handed down from Noah especially within the West Semitic world (although by Abraham's time, only a small remnant of West Semitic people were still faithful to God).

The Amorites, or the *Amurru*, played a very ambiguous role in Genesis. Moses recorded in Genesis 48:22 that Jacob had given to Joseph an additional portion of what Jacob had seized by armed force from the Amorites. This depicted the Amorites as Jacob's opponents. On the other hand, the Amorites in Genesis included Abraham's friends Mamre, Eshcol and Aner. In Genesis 14:13, Moses specifically called these men Amorites. In Genesis 15:16, Moses explained that God had sent Abraham down to Egypt for 400 years specifically because the wickedness of the Amorite was not yet full. This suggested that at least a remnant of true faith remained among the Amorites in Abraham's day. This remnant of faith may have been reflected in Melchizedek and the believing community that he led. Surprisingly many parallels can be found between the valid West Semitic believing tradition and the Canaanite myths of Baal and El. The possibility must be considered that the Late Bronze Age Canaanite and Amorite religions of Palestine may have been in part an apostasy away from an earlier believing tradition.

This ancient Amorite believing tradition was also represented by the relatives of the patriarchs. Moses assumed that Abraham's father worshipped Yahweh, and faith was preserved to some degree among Abraham's relatives like Nahor and Laban in western Mesopotamia. In Genesis 25:16, Moses recorded that Abraham had given presents to Keturah's sons and had sent them to the east. It is impossible to know how many of Keturah's descendants retained some kind of faith. Esau settled east of Palestine. Job lived north of Esau's home and east of Palestine. One of Job's friends was named Eliphaz the Temanite. He may very well have been a descendant of Esau since Esau's son was named Eliphaz, and Esau's grandson was Teman. Job and his friends Eliphaz, Bildad, Zophar, and Elihu all knew God and knew quite a bit of theology. All of these early believers lived in the *Amurru* territory east of Palestine while Israel sojourned in Egypt. Another faithful man east of Palestine was Moses' father-in-law. Jethro was a priest of the true

God in Midian. While Jethro served Yahweh in Midian, another prophet named Balaam lived east of Palestine in the Semitic territory of northwest Mesopotamia. Balaam knew God, saw Him several times, and received several prophecies directly from God Himself. Balaam was not as noble a person as Jethro. He opposed Israel for profit and died in God's judgment.

It is fair to ask why Moses might have included Genesis 15:16 in the text of Genesis. Why would Moses stress that Israel had lived in Egypt for 400 years because the wickedness of the Amorite was not yet full? The answer might be that Yahweh had ordered the Israelites to drive out the peoples of Palestine as a part of God's judgment on the nations. The Israelites would always be faced with the temptation to live peacefully among the West Semitic nations instead of driving them out. The Israelites could argue that they should be allowed to do so because the patriarchs themselves had lived at peace with the Amorites in Palestine. Moses argued that Abraham could only live at peace with the Amorites in his day because the wickedness of the Amorite was not yet full. Yet even in Abraham's day, God had warned that this would no longer be true when He led His people back out of Egypt. Then the wickedness of the Amorite would be full, and the time for God's judgment would have come.

### Timeless Truths

What is the difference between being part of a Christian culture and actually knowing God? The Patriarchs were part of the West Semitic culture that was descended originally from Noah's son Shem. The tradition of faith was handed down in their culture. Yet the great majority of people in the West Semitic world had an echo of the truth, but they did not personally know God. Western culture today is approaching the same condition. In Western Europe today, true faith is relatively uncommon, and the culture is predominantly secular. In North America, the church is relatively stronger, but it is rapidly losing ground to secularism. That process has happened time and time again in history. Whenever part of the world has turned away from God, the Lord has started a new thing. The spiritual dryness of the Renaissance in Europe gave birth to the Reformation. The gradual spiritual darkening of Europe and North America has seen the explosion of faith in Africa, Korea, and China. God is always at work in His world. When hearts grow dark around you, look for the places where God is at work in His world.

### *2) Genesis 15:18-21 and the Cultures of Palestine*

In Genesis 15:18-21, Moses recorded God's declaration about the boundaries of the land promised to Israel. This passage noted that God has given to Israel the land of the Kenite, Kenizzite, Kadmonite, Hittite, Perizzite, Rephaim, Amorite, Canaanite, Girgashite and Jebusite. This was a strange list in several ways. The Kenizzites and Kadmonites appeared nowhere else in the Old Testament. After the Rephaim were defeated by Chedorlaomer in Genesis 14:5, they disappeared from the Old Testament account. Their name was preserved only in the place name Valley of Rephaim. The list of nations in Genesis 15 was also surprising because of its omissions. The Hurrians were always included in later lists under the names Horite or Hivite, but they were absent in Genesis 15. All of this suggested that the nation list of Genesis 15 did come from the patriarchal age. Even by Moses' day, the nations of Palestine were quite different.

It may be that Moses included this nation list because of the contrast between it and so many later lists. It is striking that the Kenites were not included in later lists of nations to be driven from the land. Judges 4:11 points out the relationship between Moses' father-in-law Jethro and

the Kenites. In I Samuel 15:6, Saul reminded the Kenites of the special presence they had in the land because of the support they had given to Israel during the wilderness sojourn. The contrast between the list of nations in Genesis 15 and lists elsewhere in the Pentateuch might have been intended partly to teach Israel that the Kenites were no longer to be driven from the Promised Land. Of course, Moses did record Balaam's prophecy in Numbers 24:21-22 that the Kenites would suffer God's judgment in the distant future.

### Timeless Truths

God speaks His timeless truth to each generation in terms that it can understand. It is important to hear the Word that God spoke to His people 3500 years ago. However, it is also important to apply that Word to the contemporary culture. The law against boiling a goat in its mother's milk has little meaning today outside of the kosher laws still used in the Jewish community. The principle behind that law is still very important. The principle is, "Do not do the things that the idol worshipers do in their worship services." That principle has to be applied to the world today. In the 1960's, the law could have been applied as advice against wearing an orange robe to the airport and passing out flowers. That would have identified you as a follower of Krishna. However, it is also vital that the application of the eternal Word to contemporary culture not be done in a way that justifies sin. So many people today justify things that are abhorrent to God by claiming that modern intellectuals know better than to believe the Bible's claims. One of the hardest things to do when interpreting the Bible is to understand honestly how its words to an earlier culture should and must be applied to the world today.

### 3) *Genesis 19: 1-38 and God's Judgment on the Nations*

In Genesis 19:1-26, Moses recorded God's judgment on Sodom and Gomorrah. Why might Moses have included the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis? Several times, the wilderness community had seen God's spiritual fire flash out against rebels in Israel. God used His great fire to destroy those who sinned against Him. The destruction of Sodom taught Israel that God was willing to judge the gentile nations that way as well. It may not be going too far to see in Moses' account of Sodom's fall a promise that God would one day judge all of the earth's nations in a similar way. The story of Sodom's fall was certainly used later in Scripture as part of the prophets' warnings of pending judgment. Perhaps Moses used this account to teach the wilderness community that God would one day judge all of the nations no matter how completely they opposed God and His people today.

Genesis 19 has been a topic of continued academic discussion. Evangelicals assume that the account is correct as written. In the mainstream (liberal) world, some authors have expressed skepticism about the historical accuracy of the story, while others have seen at least a limited amount of historical merit in the account. It is interesting that Abraham's battle with Chedorlaomer had occurred in a region that contained tar pits. Genesis 14:10 described these tar pits. J. Penrose Harland wrote quite an interesting discussion of the presence of tar in the Dead Sea basin.<sup>2</sup> Harland noted that this tar was described by the 1st century Greek historian Diodoros of Sicily who described large amounts of asphalt that spouted up from the Dead Sea and floated on the water's surface. This tar was also described by the Greek geographer Strabo who lived

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2 J. Penrose Harland, "Sodom and Gomorrah," 41-75 in G. Ernest Wright and David Noel Freedman, eds. *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader*, (Garden City: Doubleday, 1961).

between 63 BC and 19 AD. Strabo described hot water, sulfur, and bitumen that were found in the Dead Sea valley. Harland noted that the Roman historian Tacitus recorded that people who lived near the Dead Sea often collected bitumen from the surface of the water. Harland noted that Josephus used the name Lake Asphaltitis for the Dead Sea because of the asphalt that rose to the surface of the sea. Josephus claimed that Sodom was located at the southern end of the Dead Sea. Harland noted that Josephus had located Abraham's battle against Chedorlaomer in the valley of asphalt wells and had claimed that this valley was later covered with salt water producing Lake Asphaltitis.

Harland asked how the plains of Sodom and Gomorrah had become submerged beneath the waters of the Dead Sea. He noted that the southern end of the Dead Sea was shallow. In 1848, the deepest part of the southern end of the Dead Sea was only between seven and thirteen feet deep. The sea became shallower near the southern shore. When Lynch sailed to the south end of the Dead Sea in 1848, his men had to wade ashore the last 300 yards because the water was too shallow for his boat to proceed. Harland noted that the Dead Sea water level changed rapidly. He described three islands located at the mouth of the Jordan River. In 1848, these islands were eight feet above the sea surface. In 1892, the islands were barely visible, and in 1924, they were covered by several feet of water. Harland noted that DeSaulcy found the distance between Jebel Usdum and the Dead Sea shore to vary between 260 feet and 750 feet as the sea level rose and fell. Harland added that an old Roman road had once crossed the Lisan Peninsula that stretched out between the north and south ends of the Dead Sea. The Roman road forded the water at this point, and continued on the eastern shore. Since then, the water level rose high enough to make such a crossing impossible. Abraham entered Palestine near the end of the terrible drought that had destroyed the Early Bronze Age culture in the Levant. It should not be surprising that the Dead Sea water level had fallen so far during the drought that the southern part of the Dead Sea was dry land in Abraham's day.

Harland discussed how the cities of the plain were destroyed. He argued that there were two key elements to Moses' description of their destruction. The first was that fire and brimstone fell on the cities. Brimstone was burning sulfur, and sulfur was common in the Dead Sea valley. The second element of the account was the smoke rising to heaven like the smoke of a great furnace. Harland noted that Strabo described the bitumen that rose to the surface of the Dead Sea. Strabo claimed that before the bitumen rose to the surface, vapor would bubble up make the water's surface boil. Soot would rise with this vapor, and the soot could be seen at a great distance. Strabo noted that the bitumen was hot and thin as it reached the sea surface, and that it formed clumps as it cooled. Strabo argued that there were many kinds of evidence for the fiery character of the Dead Sea region. The rugged rocks near Masada had a scorched appearance. Soil around the Dead Sea contained ash, and drops of pitch dripped from cliffs in the region. Strabo argued that rivers flowing into the Dead Sea boiled and emitted a foul smell. He noted that in his day, ruined settlements could still be seen in the valley. He claimed that they were the remains of thirteen villages and cities that had once inhabited the plain. Strabo noted the local claim that these villages had been destroyed by a great earthquake, by eruptions of fire, and by hot water that contained asphalt and sulfur. As this happened, the Dead Sea burst its bounds. Rocks were enveloped with fire. Some of the cities were swallowed by the sea, and others were abandoned by those who were able to escape.

Harland also noted that Diodoros described the Dead Sea water as evil smelling and bitter. Diodoros claimed that those who lived near the sea were warned when bitumen was about to rise to the surface of the sea. Before it rose, a bitter smell spread across the region. This vapor

tarnished gold, silver, and bronze. It dispersed after the bitumen had risen to the surface. Diodoros noted that people who lived in the Dead Sea valley were susceptible to many diseases. Harland used these ancient comments to explain how Sodom was destroyed. Harland suggested that there was a great earthquake which brought ruin and conflagration. He suggested that the fire may have been caused by igniting methane that had bubbled up from the tar pits because of the earthquake.

While the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah can not be proven to have occurred, archaeological, geological, and historical evidence is consistent with the accuracy of the account. It is completely credible to believe that the Genesis account is correct as written. It is interesting that Genesis 19:24 described Sodom's destruction as God raining fire and brimstone from heaven on the cities of the plain. This was a way to describe what may have been a natural event since methane, sulfur and bitumen continued to bubble up through the Dead Sea waters until Roman times, and large tar blobs still occasionally surface in the Dead Sea today.

### Timeless Truths

God is patient, and His judgment can wait for a very long time. In Abraham's day, the Dead Sea valley had enough water to grow crops while Syria and Palestine had been arid and nearly uninhabited for almost 300 years. It is likely that a constant stream of people sought shelter in the valley so that they would not starve or die of thirst in the hills. It is also likely that they were willing to give themselves as slaves to gain food and shelter. The prophet Ezekiel claimed that Sodom's sin was that the city had careless ease and great abundance. Yet in her abundance, she stopped caring for the poor. Ezekiel claimed that Sodom's unconcern for the poor led to all the city's other sins, and those sins led finally to God's judgment.

Have things really changed all that much? The hardest thing for the church to face is not persecution. It is ease and abundance. Rich churches are only rather rarely spiritually strong churches. In our culture, wealth isolates people. When people have money, everyone wants it. People start to shut the doors of their hearts to people to preserve their own wealth. They are taught that the poor exist so that the rich can stand on their shoulders. Someone who owns a factory rarely wants to know very well the line workers whose family income would be devastated by being laid off to preserve the factories financial stability. The more money that people have, the more that they tend to isolate themselves behind physical and mental walls. That is why statistically, rich people commit suicide more often than poor people. Suicide often results from isolation. The Bible's approach to wealth is quite a bit different. The Bible sees proper wealth as a blessing that comes from righteousness and as a responsibility to use part of its proceeds to help others. The two most important laws in both the Old and New Testaments were the commands to love God with all your heart and to love your neighbor as yourself. If you love your neighbor, you can't cut yourself off from his troubles.

Ease and comfort in western cultures are once more leading to a problematic spiritual environment. Most people today read the account of Sodom and laugh at it. They deny that God would ever judge anyone. Yet God sits on His throne. Their denials mean nothing to Him. In His time, and in His way, He will bring every person to account for his life. He will also hold the world to account for the actions done in it. The destruction of Sodom is a warning intended to

echo down through all the halls of time. The God who once destroyed a gentile city because of its sin will surely bring His hand of judgment against the world as well.

#### *4) Genesis 21:32, Abraham, Philistines, and Relations with Nations that Recognize God*

God commanded the Israelites to drive out the Canaanite nations from God's land. However, Israel was also told to have peaceful relationships with nations beyond the borders of God's land. Moses illustrated this principle with his references to the Philistines. While the Philistines in Judges would become a terrible danger to Israel, the Philistines were not really a nation in the land before the Sea People invasion of 1200 BC. Moses recognized in the Pentateuch that there were Philistines already in the land. In Exodus 23:31, Moses called the Mediterranean the Sea of the Philistines which was not the Egyptian name for the sea. The Egyptians called the Mediterranean Sea the Great Green. Moses also mentioned the Philistines in Deuteronomy 2:23. In this passage, Moses noted that the Caphtorim had defeated the Avvim and some had settled around Gaza. In Exodus 13:17, Moses even called the coastal road from Egypt to Palestine the Way of the Philistines. This was not the normal Egyptian name for the coastal road. The Egyptians often called this route The Way of Horus. Yet neither the Pentateuch nor Joshua ever included the Philistines in the lists of nations in the land. So while Philistines were present in Palestine, they were not really one of the nations of the land.

When Moses wrote Genesis 20:1-13 and 26:14-16, he gave the Philistines a very ambiguous role. A Philistine king named Abimelech had formed a treaty with Abraham, and Abimelech was depicted in Genesis as a rather noble man. Abraham sinned against Abimelech in the same way that he had earlier sinned against pharaoh. Abraham tried to form a marriage alliance with Abimelech by passing off his wife Sara as his sister. God appeared to Abimelech and warned him about Abraham's misbehavior. This is one of the very rare cases in the Old Testament where God appeared to a gentile, and it might imply that Abimelech had some kind of relationship with God. At the very least, Genesis 20 depicted Abimelech as a noble man. In Genesis 26:14-18, Moses noted that the Philistine people had envied Isaac and had filling with dirt the wells that Isaac's men had dug, but none of this suggested lasting hostility between Israel and the Philistines either in Israel's patriarchal age or the Mosaic age.

Moses described the Philistines in a far different way than later Old Testament authors. Why did Moses depict the Philistines as allies instead of enemies? The answer may come from ancient Near Eastern history. Moses' descriptions of the Philistines can best be understood by tracing the history of the Philistine people. In Genesis 10:13-14, Moses made the surprising claim that the Caphtorim, or the Philistines, were originally descended from the Egyptians. Recent archaeological research on Crete has actually supported Genesis on this point. The Minoan culture was surprisingly peaceful. Paintings on walls in the Minoan palaces consistently depicted joyful and peaceful themes. The Minoan navy was not used to dominate the region but to keep piracy in check. The Minoans established a series of trade enclaves in cities beyond Crete. The Minoans did not control the cities in which they founded enclaves, but the Minoans lived on good terms with the local population.

The Philistine presence in Palestine began in the port city of Ashkelon which may have been a port of call for the Minoan navy and a trading center for Minoan goods. While Ashkelon was always a Canaanite city, it may have contained a strong Minoan presence for many years. Minoan and Mycenaean style pottery at Ashkelon eventually became the city's characteristic pottery style. Minoan and Mycenaean pottery was also rather thinly scattered in a broad circle

centered on Ashkelon. The Philistine presence in Palestine spread out in a Pentapolis of cities surrounding the port at Ashkelon.

During the Abrahamic age, the Minoan Philistines in Palestine may have been traders present in a Canaanite culture. Just as the Minoan culture on Crete was a joyful and peaceful culture, the Minoan traders in Palestine were not a threat to Abraham or to the local Canaanite population. That may be why Abraham was on good terms with Abimelech. It may also be why the Philistines were not listed in Moses' lists of nations to be driven out before Israel. The Philistine king Abimelech had a West Semitic name. So he might have been a Semitic ruler over a city that had a strong Minoan presence. The fact that Abimelech had a Semitic name may make it somewhat more likely that he knew God and may have been a part of the West Semitic tradition of faith.

The Minoan culture lasted down to Moses' day. Thutmose III was a strong ally for Minoan Crete. Strom suggested that Minoan Crete may have sought Egyptian assistance to fend off the growing power of Mycenaean Greece. When Thutmose III died, the Mycenaean Greeks invaded Crete. During Israel's sojourn in the wilderness, the Mycenaean Greeks were taking over the whole Minoan sphere of influence. The Mycenaean Greeks were a brutal and warlike people. When Israel entered Palestine, they encountered Mycenaean Greeks in the Philistine Pentapolis instead of Minoans. These Mycenaean Greeks soon persecuted Israel, although they remained a rather weak force.

In 1200 BC, the Sea Peoples roared through the ancient Near East bringing destruction wherever they went. The Sea Peoples settled in the Philistine Pentapolis and turned the Philistines into the strongest military force in the region. After the Sea Peoples' invasion, the Philistines became a strong threat to Israel. These were the Philistines that Saul and David fought. It is almost impossible to believe that anyone writing after 1200 BC would have depicted the Philistines as a weak power allied to the patriarchs. After 1200 BC, they were the most frightening people that Israel faced before the Assyrian conquests. So the depiction of the Philistines in Genesis witnesses to the historical validity of the text.

Moses knew nothing about the terrible threat that the Philistines would become in the future. Moses might not even have known that Minoan Crete had fallen to the Mycenaean Greeks, or at least what the result of that conquest would prove to be. For Moses, the Philistines were still foreigners whose homeland was beyond the boundaries of the Promised Land. As such, it was proper for Abraham to form a treaty with the Philistines, just as the Israelites of Moses' day were allowed to make treaties with nations outside of the land.

### Timeless Truths

It is popular today for people to claim that Genesis recorded a lot of ancient stories and myths that never really happened. It is also popular to claim that Genesis recorded stories that were intended either to explain later customs or argue for later beliefs. The role played by the Philistines in Genesis is a very strong case that the Genesis text is actually true as written. It is almost impossible to find any time later in Israel's history when any Israelite author would have depicted a Philistine king as being more righteous than Israel's Patriarchs. It simply would not do to claim that Abimelech was more righteous than Abraham, unless the text recorded what did in fact happen. Trust the Bible. It is historically and theologically correct.

### *5) Genesis 23:1-20 and the Dangers of Alliances with Nations that Do Not Serve God*

Israel developed into a nation in the wilderness instead of a collection of tribes. When Israel entered the land, they would have to know how to interact with other cultural and ethnic groups. As a lesson in international relations, Moses wrote Genesis 23:1-20 to warn Israel of the dangers of alliances with nations that did not serve God. Genesis 23 recorded Abraham's treaty with the Hittites. This treaty has received quite a bit of academic attention. The most popular interpretation of this passage has been that Ephron forced Abraham to pay a huge price for the burial cave by pretending to be generous to him. This interpretation suggested that Ephron forced Abraham to pay 400 shekels for the cave because Abraham had little choice but to purchase the cave. A different interpretation of the treaty is also possible that is based on Hittite property laws written by the Hittite king Hattusas. He reigned around 500 years after Abraham's time. So it is unclear whether the legal environment implied by his laws was already in place during Israel's Patriarchal period. Hattusas' laws required of land owners annual taxes and military service. However, these responsibilities were only acquired when a complete plot of land was purchased. If someone only bought a small part of a field, the person would not be required to pay taxes or serve in the military. Abraham may only have wanted to buy the cave because he would then be free of the legal responsibilities that came with the ownership of the complete field. Ephron may have forced Abraham to buy the whole field so that Abraham would have to pay the taxes and provide soldiers for the Hittite army when they were needed. It is also interesting that the Hittite texts described property by giving a careful list of the trees found on the land. Genesis 23 noted that Abraham was forced to purchase the field with its trees. So the Genesis text may fit the cultural context pretty well.

Abraham's purchase of the cave at Machpelah demonstrated that there were Hittite settlements as far south as Hebron in Abraham's day. The Hittite territory was generally north of the Levant. The Hittite empire would center in Anatolia, although the Hittites would control vassal states in Syria during the first half of Israel's period of the Judges. In Deuteronomy 1:7, Moses told Israel to take possession of the Levant all the way to the Euphrates River as God promised in Exodus 23:31-33. That would have put Israel in direct conflict with Hittite expansion. During the first half of Israel's period of the Judges, the Egyptian empire would expand Egypt's control that far north and the Egyptians would fight the Hittites for control of the region. Israel was rarely able to project military power north of Dan, and Yahweh's assignment of tribal territories was limited to Palestine. So the Hittites were a nation beyond Israel's borders, and treaties with such nations were acceptable as Moses taught in Genesis 23. However, they were also spiritually dangerous. Just as Abraham gained treaty obligations with the cave, Israel could easily gain dangerous obligations in future alliances.

### Timeless Truths

When we are in trouble or in grief, it is hard to think straight. Abraham was mourning the death of his wife, and he needed a safe place to bury her. Since he led a semi-nomadic life, any burial place that he chose might be plundered or plowed after he left. He needed someplace permanent that could serve as a tomb for the members of his family. The best option that he found was a cave at a Hittite settlement near Hebron, but the cost was more than money. It was feudal service to an unbeliever. He may even have been forced to participate in an idolatrous worship ceremony at the exchange of property rights. It is wise to plan ahead for things like burial expenses, the loss of a job, or other life emergencies. Without good planning, crisis situations can lead to poor decisions, and the poor decisions can shape the rest of your life.

## B. Gentiles and Abraham's Extended Family

### *1) Genesis 16:2-3, Hagar, and Gentiles in the Believing Community*

In Exodus 12:38 and Numbers 11:4, Moses recorded that a mixed rabble of gentiles left Egypt with the Israelites. One of the problems for Israel was deciding how these gentiles should be incorporated into Israel. Exodus 22:21 recorded Yahweh's command that the Israelites not oppress or wrong the strangers among them. Leviticus 17:8-13 insisted that Israel's laws were also binding on the aliens among them. Leviticus 22:18 noted that Israel's sacrifices were also intended for the alien among them. Deuteronomy 29:10-13 recorded a covenant renewal ceremony where the aliens in the wilderness community joined all Israel entering God's covenant and becoming God's people. Yet the gentiles were not Jews, and they did not have the same rights as Jews. The gentiles in the wilderness community were always servants just like the gentiles in the patriarch's household. In Deuteronomy 29:11, Moses declared that these gentiles were to be the ones who chopped their wood and drew their water.

By writing Genesis, Moses taught Israel about the role that gentiles would play in the community. Gentiles were always present in the patriarchal household. It is important to notice the status that they had in the believing community. The gentiles in the patriarchal household were not just employees loosely tied to the patriarchs. They were a part of the covenant community. In Genesis 17:12-13, Moses noted God's command that gentile servants either purchased or born in the household must be circumcised when they entered the community. The gentile servants had their own share in God's covenant. In Genesis 24:27, Moses even depicted Abraham's gentile servant as a man of faith and integrity.

Moses used the story of Abraham and Hagar to teach Israel one of his strongest lessons about the role that gentiles would play in the community. Hagar was Sara's handmaid. Genesis 16:1-3, 21:9 and 25:12 stressed that Hagar was an Egyptian just as some of the gentiles in the mixed rabble might have been Egyptians. In Genesis 16:17, Hagar ran from Sarah, and God encountered Hagar the Egyptian at Shur on the Egyptian border. In Genesis 21:21, Hagar the Egyptian found an Egyptian wife for Ishmael.

Light has been shed on Hagar's story from the Code of Hammurabi and texts found at Nuzi and Nimrud. These texts noted that a barren wife was often required to give her handmaid to her husband to produce an heir. When this happened, the wife held authority over the maid's child. However, the child's inheritance rights were uncertain unless the father formally adopted the son. This can be seen in a marriage contract of Gilimninu from Nuzi that required such an arrangement if the wife proved barren. Gordon translated the text as reading, "If Gilimninu (the bride) will bear no children, Gilimninu shall take a woman of N./Lullu-land (whence the choicest slaves were obtained) as a wife for Shennima (the bridegroom)." Gordon argued that Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham as a wife because this action was normal in her cultural environment. Two generations later, Rachel gave Bilhah to Jacob for a similar reason. Gordon noted that in Genesis 21, Sarah told Abraham to drive Hagar and Ishmael from the household so that Ishmael would not inherit with Isaac. Gordon argued that Abraham objected to Sarah's request because she was asking for something that her culture would have thought improper. In this kind of situation, a wife at Nuzi was specifically forbidden to drive away the maid's child. For example, the marriage contract of Gilimninu required that if Gilimninu had to give her servant to her husband, she was not allowed to send away the servant's offspring. God intervened

in the argument between Abraham and Sarah. God declared that Abraham should send Hagar and Ishmael away even though Abraham's culture would have condemned him for doing so.<sup>3</sup>

The most important lesson for Israel in all of this was that gentiles could quite properly be included in the believing community as long as they obeyed God and respected Israel's spiritual and legal authority. When they rebelled either against God or against Israel, they were to be driven from the community. When driven out, they would lose their share of God's promises to His people, but God may still love and care for them in their own spiritual wilderness. There might have been another lesson in the Hagar account as well. In Genesis 21:8-21, Hagar left Sarah for the last time. Hagar wandered in the wilderness until she was on the point of death from thirst. It is quite striking that this occurred in the same area from which Israel had sent out spies to spy out the land. Israel wandered in the wilderness for a generation because they had rebelled against God just as Hagar had rebelled so many years earlier. The Angel of the Lord appeared to Hagar in the wilderness and showed her a well of the water of life. The wilderness generation could easily have appreciated this. They had experienced thirst in the wilderness. They also knew that the Angel of the Lord could appear and provide water in a barren waste. They had seen this happen more than once. So the Hagar account could have provided the wilderness generation with a historical perspective. Despite their rebellion and judgment, God would continue to treat them with mercy and grace in a dry land.

#### Timeless Truths

One of the hardest things both for families and churches is to decide how to treat people who are part of the family but who don't believe. What do you do with children who decide that they just don't accept God and His Word? What do you do when people come to church for reasons of their own but don't believe the Gospel? The story of Hagar might give a useful solution. Such people should be allowed to remain in the family or the congregation. They should be treated with love and understanding. However, they should also recognize their responsibilities to live according to the values of the family or the church. When they continually choose to violate the beliefs, values, and standards of either the family or the church, a day may eventually come when they will be asked to live or worship somewhere else.

#### 2) *Genesis 19:35-38, Moses and the Origin of the Edomites and Ammonites*

Moses concluded Genesis 19 with an explanation for the origin of the Moabites and Ammonites. Israelites was about to move into the territory of these nations. Both the Moabites and Ammonites were closely related to Israel. So Israel would have been tempted to form alliances with them. Individual Israelites would also have been tempted to leave the Promised Land and to move into Moabite territory as Naomi and her family would later do. Moses warned Israel that these nations had their origin in Lot's sin, and they would later be characterized by unbelief. In Deuteronomy 2:9-19, Moses commanded the Israelites to respect the boundaries of these nations, but no Moabite to the tenth generation could enter the congregation of Israel.

#### Timeless Truths

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<sup>3</sup> Cyrus Gordon, "Biblical Customs and the Nuzu Tablets," *The Biblical Archaeologist* 3.1 (1990): 1-12.

When children leave the family because they reject the family values, it is a sharp grief to everyone involved. However, there is also a dull and continuing grief when we see people who were raised in the faith but turned away from it long ago. It is often hard to know how to relate to people like that. Sometimes they still have good feelings for people who hold beliefs that they rejected. Other times, they are violently opposed to the faith. It is not uncommon to hear people attack the faith bitterly as a reaction against the faith of their youth. Israel's relationship with Edom, Moab, and the Ammonites involved similar problems.

## CHAPTER 5: YAHWEH AND THE LIVES OF ISAAC AND JACOB

### A. The History of the Period

Egypt suffered severe famine between 2005 BC and 1992 BC. This famine was caused by very low Nile flood levels, and it reflected greatly decreased rainfall levels in Africa. Barbara Bell noted that this drought was recorded in a tomb text written by Ameny who was a nomarch of the Beni Hasan nome. Ameny described how he had preserved Egyptians' lives during the great famine between the 11th and 12th Dynasties.<sup>4</sup> Severe famines that struck Egypt usually struck Palestine as well, and by early dates for Israel's Patriarchal Age, this famine would have occurred during the Patriarchal Age. In Genesis 26:1, Moses recorded that Isaac saw famine strike Palestine just as it had struck when Abraham first entered the land. Isaac sought refuge from the famine by moving into the Philistine territory around Gerar. Abraham's friend Abimelech was still the king of Gerar, and he was willing to help Isaac.

Genesis did not give enough information to determine the year that Isaac moved to Gerar. However, Isaac's sojourn with Abimelech in Genesis 26 did follow the birth of Jacob and Esau in Genesis 25. If the dates in Genesis are taken at face value, Jacob's birth may have been around 2006 BC which would be a year before the famine (since dates BC are counted backwards). So an Egyptian drought at 2005 BC would be a possible chronological fit. If Isaac sojourned in Gerar during this great drought, Abimelech's servants may have had good reason to be concerned about Isaac's presence. Isaac planted a crop near Gerar which produced a hundred fold increase and wealth for Isaac. If there was a famine in the land as Moses recorded in Genesis 26:1, it is fair to ask how Isaac could have raised such an abundant crop. The answer may be that Isaac used well water to irrigate his crops. Bedouin in the Sinai had for many years dug wells in the desert to recover rain water trapped underground in the hard rock valleys.

With low Nile levels in Egypt and drought conditions in Palestine, conflicts over water rights soon broke out between Isaac and the Philistines. Abimelech's servants may have feared that Isaac's agriculture and flocks would dry up the limited amount of water in their wells. In Genesis 26:15, Moses noted that Abimelech's servants had filled in all of Isaac's wells. Isaac left Gerar and moved his household further up the valley. In Genesis 26:15-18, Moses noted that Isaac had redug one of Abraham's wells that the Philistines had filled with dirt, but Genesis 26:19-20 noted that the Philistines confronted Isaac for doing so. The Philistines claimed that the water in the well belonged to them. In Genesis 26:21, Moses noted that Isaac had dug another well, and the Philistines had claimed the water in it as well. So Isaac moved even further from Gerar and dug another well. The Philistines did not claim the water in this well, so Isaac was able to live briefly in peace. Soon, Isaac moved even further east to Beersheba and dug a well there. In Genesis 26:26-33, Moses noted that Abimelech and his army followed Isaac to Beersheba, and made a peace treaty with him there. Behind all of these conflicts was the problem of water rights. During years of drought and famine, water rights would have been a critical concern for both Israel's semi-nomadic patriarchs and the settled populations of the land.

Barbara Bell argued that the drought between 2005 and 1992 BC formed the boundary between Egypt's 11th and 12th Dynasties. As soon as adequate annual Nile floods returned, Amenemhet I came to Egypt's throne and began both the 12th Dynasty and Egypt's Middle Kingdom. The Egyptian Middle Kingdom was in power through the rest of Israel's patriarchal

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Bell, "Climate and the History of Egypt: The Middle Kingdom," *American Journal of Archaeology* 79 (1975):225.

age. The Middle Kingdom in Egypt was a time of strong central government and great economic prosperity.

Amenemhet I may have come to court originally as the vizier of Mentuhotep IV, although he was not related to the 11th Dynasty Pharaohs. He ruled from roughly 1991 to 1971 BC. Amenemhet I regained control of the Nile delta. He moved Egypt's capital north from Thebes to *Itj Tawy*, which was just south of the Old Kingdom capital at Memphis. *Itj Tawy* was located at the point where the Nile river valley broadened out into the delta. Moving Egypt's capital may have accomplished several things. Amenemhet I escaped the power of Thebes and the priestly class there. He provided the nation with a governmental center that had not been embroiled in the war between Thebes and Herakleopolis. Amenemhet I also identified his rule with the great Pharaohs of the Old Kingdom who had ruled at Memphis. He also established his throne at a site where he was in a better position to struggle for control of the Nile delta. During the First Intermediate Period, the rulers of local Nomes had been able to assert their independence. With the start of the Middle Kingdom, the Nomarchs had little interest in submitting to a ruler from Thebes. The Nomarchs' power would finally be broken by Sesostris III.

Amenemhet I reorganized the country politically. The *Testament of Amenemhet* spelled out Pharaoh's obligations to the Egyptian people, and their obligations to him. He established the borders of individual Nomes which had been a point of substantial conflict. Amenemhet I and other Middle Kingdom rulers gave land to the priests and assured a stable tax income for the nation.

Amenemhet I appointed Sesostris I as his coregent around 1971 BC, and both ruled until Amenemhet I was assassinated. Sesostris I ruled from 1971 BC until roughly 1928 BC. Sesostris I drove out the Asiatics who had settled in the delta during the 11th Dynasty and he fortified Egypt's northeast border. The Asiatics mentioned in so many Egyptian texts were literally the *Aamu*. Centuries later, one of Hatshepsut's inscriptions would use this name to describe the Hyksos who ruled in Avaris during the 2nd Intermediate Period. Sesostris I drove out of the delta the inhabitants of Palestine who had settled in Egypt. Sesostris I built settlements in the northeast delta to strengthen the border. He also created either a defensive wall or canal along the eastern frontier. This defensive line was mentioned in the *Tale of Sinuhe* and in the *Instruction of Merikare*.

Sesostris I appointed his son Amenemhet II as his coregent around 1931 BC, and he died around 1928 BC. The day book, or *genut*, at the temple of Tod recorded several treaties that Amenemhet II formed with cities in the Levant. Egypt was superficially on good terms with the Levant during his rule, although tensions remained below the surface. Amenemhet II was probably on the Egyptian throne when Jacob fled from Palestine to Haran. Amenemhet II ruled until approximately 1878 BC, and he was followed to the throne by Pharaoh Sesostris II. Like all of Egypt's Middle Kingdom Pharaohs, Sesostris II defended Egypt's northeastern frontier against nomadic and semi-nomadic groups who threatened the northeast delta. He was not strongly opposed to the settled populations of the Levant, and he allowed a limited number of West Semitic people to enter Egypt peacefully. Canaanite traders lived in the port city of Tell ed-Dab'a on the Pelusiac branch of the Nile which was the southern anchor of the Byblos trade. From the 12th Dynasty onward, Tell ed-Dab'a was populated by a Canaanite colony from Byblos. Substantial pottery evidence has been found for the presence of Canaanites in the eastern Nile delta at this time. Tel el-Yahudiyeh ware has been found only in coastal Canaan down to Megiddo and in the northeast Nile delta.

The Canaanite sailors worshiped the storm god Baal because they believed that he controlled the storms that were their greatest danger. Baal's holy mount Zaphon on the sea coast served as a navigation aid for the sailors. It is impossible to determine when Canaanite sailors started to worship Baal or when Baal first appeared in the Nile delta. Baal was already being worshiped at Abu Salabikh in Mesopotamia by 2600 BC. References to Baal later appeared in texts from Mari, Ebla, and Ur III Mesopotamian dynasty. Baal worship may already have been a common West Semitic religious tradition by the middle of the third millennium BC. So it is possible that Baal worship may already have been present in the Nile delta during the Middle Kingdom.

During the Middle Kingdom, West Semitic people had also entered Egypt overland. A Canaanite trader named Abisha was depicted at Beni Hasan leading donkeys loaded with trade goods. Abisha's caravan carried musical instruments and a furnace for melting bronze as well as goods. One man in the caravan even wore a coat of many colors made of colored stripes of cloth. The Egyptians had close economic ties with Palestine during the Middle Kingdom. A wide variety of Egyptian Middle Kingdom objects have been found in Palestine, and a wide variety of Egyptian citizens traveled up into Palestine to make their fortunes. These Egyptians brought along the Egyptian artifacts that archaeologists have found. Many objects were also made in Palestine in an Egyptian style at this time. Some of these objects merged Canaanite and Egyptian religious motifs. These objects showed how Egypt's religion temporarily influenced Canaanite religion during the Middle Kingdom. At this time, the Egyptian goddess Hathor became the mistress of both Sinai and Byblos. Egyptian objects found in Palestine from the patriarchal age included a statue of the wife of Pharaoh Sesostris III, a sphinx of Pharaoh Amenemhet III, and a sculptured group that depicted vizier Sesostris-Onekh.

All of this suggests that Egypt's strength was on the rise throughout Israel's patriarchal age. Egypt's 12th Dynasty rulers were among the strongest rulers that Egypt ever knew. During Jacob's life, Sesostris III rose to the Egyptian throne. Sesostris III was one of the strongest rulers ever to sit on Egypt's throne. Sesostris III was such a strong ruler that his name became legendary throughout Egypt's history. Sesostris III invaded Palestine and campaigned north as far as Shechem. He carried many captives south to Egypt along with a great deal of plunder.

### Timeless Truths

God controls both history and weather. Without seeing God's hand, it is easy to feel like a victim of forces beyond human control. Either the rains come, or they do not. Farmers have no control over the weather, and they have only limited options for dealing with its fluctuations. In the city, people try to earn a living, and they compete with many other people who want the same job or the same business. Everyone in a culture is forced to deal with environmental, military, and economic forces that threaten, dominate, or define their culture. The average person has little power over these forces. God allows them all to exercise their power only as long as He chooses. Then He changes the weather. He lifts up companies and nations while bringing others to ruin. Yet His control is largely unseen. In Jacob's generation, who would have understood that God was creating a safe place in Egypt for His people to develop while the culture of Palestine finally turned away from God and earned His judgment? Who today understands what God is doing in the world? God is preparing the earth for the final conflict between good and evil. He is raising powers and governments. He is bringing people close to Himself, and He is allowing others to go their own way. All that we can do is trust Him as He does His work in the world around us.

## B. Lessons from the Lives of Isaac and Jacob

### 1) *Genesis 25:21-33, Esau, and the Edomites*

The ethnic group in Palestine closest to Israel both ethnically and geographically was Edom. While the Israelites sojourned in the wilderness, they spent most of their time on the southern border of Edomite territory. In Genesis 36:8, Moses recorded that Esau's descendants had lived in the hill country of Seir. In Deuteronomy 2:1, Moses reminded the Israelites in the wilderness that they had circled Mt. Seir for many days. In Genesis 36:24, Moses recorded that the inhabitants of Mt. Seir had at an earlier time discovered the hot springs in the wilderness. It is possible that the Israelites could have seen and used these springs. So the wilderness generation would have been very familiar with the Edomites.

Since the Edomites were such a visible presence in the region, the wilderness generation needed to learn the nature of Israel's relationship with them. So Moses spent a lot of time in Genesis tracing out the relationship between Jacob and Esau. This history began in Genesis 25. The wilderness generation learned from Genesis 25 that Israel had gained the birthright over the Edomites through the patriarchs. So the Israelites should properly exercise some measure of authority over the Edomites. Down through Israel's history, a power struggle between Judah and Edom did in fact exist. When Judah was strong, Judah dominated Edom. When Judah was weak, the Edomites raided Judah's territory, seized Judah's possessions, and sold Judah's people into slavery. The Edomites became the great slave traders of the ancient East.

Moses began his discussion of the Edomites in Genesis 25:21-23, Moses recorded that Rebekah gave birth to twin sons. Rebekah was told that the two sons would become two nations, and the descendants of the older son Esau would serve the descendants of the younger son Jacob. In Genesis 25:33, Moses recorded that Esau sold his birthright to Jacob. This passage is interesting in the light of Deuteronomy 21:15-17. Deuteronomy required that a first-born son be given an increased portion of the inheritance. Deuteronomy specifically denied fathers the ability to give the first-born's right to a younger son who was preferred. According to Israel's law, Isaac would not have been able to give Esau's birthright to Jacob, even though Isaac knew that Jacob was supposed to be the son of the covenant. The normal practice in Genesis and Deuteronomy differed from the requirements of the *Code of Hammurabi* in Mesopotamia. The *Code of Hammurabi* required that all sons inherit equally. However, the first-born's right was not an unknown custom in other texts from Mesopotamia, Mari and Nuzi. At ancient Nuzi in Israel's Patriarchal Age, it was possible to sell one's birthright just as Esau had done in Genesis 25:33. In one case, the Nuzi texts record that an older brother received three sheep for selling his birthright to a younger brother.

When Israel entered Palestine, they were forced to travel around Edom's borders. In Numbers 20:14, Moses wrote that he had sent a messenger to the king of Edom. Through this messenger, Moses called Edom the brother of Israel, and asked permission to pass Edom's territory. While Moses called the Edomites Israel's brothers, it is striking that no Edomite could become an Israelite to the third generation. Instead of becoming Israelites, the Edomites would always be Israel's neighbors, both during the wilderness sojourn and after Israel entered the land.

Timeless Truths

We all try to serve God in the presence of people who oppose Him. They may threaten God's people and try to stand in their way. Yet God's purposes will always stand firm.

## 2) *Genesis 28:12, Jacob, and the Holy Mountains*

When Moses led Israel out of Egypt, he brought them to Mount Sinai which was called God's holy mountain. God descended onto the mountain, and Sinai burned with supernatural fire to the heart of heaven itself. Israel would always trace its origin to Sinai when God spoke from heaven and gave His law to His people. While Sinai was the dominant holy mountain in the Pentateuch, it was not the only holy mountain motif taught to the wilderness generation. In Exodus 15:17, God promised Israel that He would lead them to His holy mountain and plant them there. God's holy mountain in this verse was more than just Sinai because Israel was not "planted" there. Israel only stayed at Sinai for a limited time. God's holy mountain in Exodus 15:17 was at least in part an eschatological promise pointing forward to Zion and the New Jerusalem. How could Israel understand both Mount Sinai and the holy mountain motifs?

Israel needed to understand the holy mountain idea because holy mountain motifs were common across the ancient Near East. They stood behind the ziqqurats of Mesopotamia. The ziqqurats were brick, man made, temple mountains. In Anatolia (modern Turkey), mountains were turned into divinities. Egyptian theology knew a few holy mountains like the Red Mountain. However, the most important holy mountain motif for Israel before the exodus had been Baal's holy Mount Zaphon. It was important because Canaanite gods like Baal were worshipped by Egypt's Hyksos rulers. They controlled Egypt for a century and a half during Israel's Egyptian sojourn, and their capital at Avaris was very close to Israel's land of Goshen. It was nearly impossible for the Israelites to live in Hyksos Egypt without being strongly influenced by them. The most important Baal myths centered on Baal's desire to build a temple for himself on his holy Mount Zaphon. All of the standard characteristics of ancient Near Eastern holy mountains were true of both Zaphon and Sinai. Both were depicted as heaven on earth. Both were inhabited only by one deity. Both were places of spiritual combat of some kind. Both were places where decrees were made that affected human history. Both were places where life giving streams of water flowed. Israel's idolatry in Egypt had often involved worship at Baal shrines which were each thought to be local manifestations of Baal's Mount Zaphon.

To turn Israel from idolatry and secure loyalty to Yahweh, Moses had to teach the true nature of holy mountains and of "heaven on earth" worship sites. Moses began Genesis with God's dwelling place in Eden. According to Ezekiel 28:12-14 was both God's garden and God's holy mountain. Moses went on to stress Noah's worship on Mount Ararat and the apostasy against God at the Tower of Babel, man's first man made temple mountain. Then throughout Genesis, Moses recorded patriarchal worship at true holy mountain and "heaven on earth" sites.

One of these "heaven on earth" sites was described in Genesis 28:12. Jacob had a dream and saw a ladder that reached to heaven. Many authors have compared Jacob's ladder to the stairway on the side of a Babylonian ziqqurat. The ziqqurats were man made brick temple towers that resembled stepped pyramids. Each city in Mesopotamia had one in the center of the city as its main temple to the city's chief deity. Moses had introduced the topic of Mesopotamian ziqqurats in Genesis 11:1-9 with the Tower of Babel. The name Babel meant Gate of Heaven. All of the ziqqurats claimed to be stairways leading up to heaven. The tops of these towers were believed to be "heaven on earth." By climbing to the temple on top of the ziqqurats, Mesopotamian priests believed that they were climbing into heaven itself. As Jacob left for the West Semitic

homeland of western Mesopotamia, he was given a vision of the true stairway to heaven. In Genesis 28:17-19, Moses noted that Jacob had recognized the site of his vision to be the true Bethel, the true House of God, and the true Gate of Heaven. He saw angels ascending to heaven and descending to earth. He heard God's voice and spoke with Him. Both Bethel and the ziqqurats were part of the holy mountain tradition in the ancient Near East.

The most important holy mountain site in Genesis was Bethel. The name Bethel meant "house of God," and the worship place at Bethel was a mountaintop top shrine. Genesis 12:8 recorded that Bethel was Abraham's first dwelling place and first altar in the Promised Land. Bethel became an anchor for the patriarchs' wanderings. Abraham returned there in Genesis 13:3. Jacob was there in Genesis 28:19. In Genesis 31:13, God appeared to Jacob in Mesopotamia and identified Himself as the God of Bethel. In Genesis 35:1-8, God commanded Jacob to move to Bethel, live there, and build an altar there. Jacob named the altar El-Bethel, the "God of the House of God," and Jacob buried his wife's nurse near Bethel when she died. This site of Bethel was excavated by James Kelso. He argued that the earliest object found at Bethel was a jar made around 3500 BC, and he claimed that the earliest extended occupation of the site occurred around 3200 BC. Kelso noted that a Canaanite high place was found on the mountain top near Bethel. Kelso claimed that Bethel would become a very important town in the Middle Bronze Age IIB period, but before that time, it was still a small unfortified settlement.<sup>5</sup> If Abraham lived during the great drought between the Early Bronze Age and the Middle Bronze Age, Bethel would have been at most a small village. It might have been completely unoccupied.

In Genesis 35:1-4, Moses noted that Jacob set out for Bethel when he returned from Mesopotamia. As Jacob approached the House of God, he required everyone in his household to purify themselves because Bethel was the house of God. Part of this purification involved the burial of their idols beneath a tree. Why would Jacob require that his servants' idols be buried? Near Eastern archaeologists have found quite a few pits containing statues, figurines and votive objects. Many of these pits were associated with temples of some kind. Archaeologists call these pits *bothros*. They were used to dispose of religious objects that were worn out and no longer to be used. Burial was the way to dispose permanently of religious objects. Seen in this context, Jacob did not bury ritual objects so that they could be recovered later. He buried them to dispose of them forever. As Jacob's household traveled to the house of God, they had to leave behind forever every form of idolatry. This almost constituted an act of conversion by members of his household. It is worth noting that Jacob would have buried the teraphim that his wife had stolen from Laban. Whatever her reason may have been for stealing Laban's idols, Jacob prevented these teraphim from having any future role in the believing community. As Moses wrote these words, the wilderness community had seen Yahweh's holy Mount Sinai and they were traveling to God's holy dwelling place in Palestine. As they approached Yahweh's land, it was vital for them to dispose forever of the idols in the community. So Genesis 35 may have encouraged them to do so.

### Timeless Truths

It is easy to start seeing church as one more civil commitment or one more form of entertainment. That's especially true for mega churches. It's easy to sit in the back and watch the same way that you would sit and watch a movie or ball game. Church becomes just a regularly

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James L. Kelso, *The Excavation of Bethel*, (Cambridge: The American Schools of Oriental Research, 1968), 20-1, 45.

scheduled activity. From the beginning of human history, that was never supposed to be the nature of corporate worship. Worship was supposed to be entering into a place that was in some way heaven on earth. It was coming into God's presence, bowing before Him, praising Him, and hearing His voice. Worship is only that when a person walks closely with God. As people lose their daily walk with Him, their experiences in worship become more arid and theoretical. God seems far away. God's presence was the heart of the Patriarchs' experience as they sacrificed and worshiped at holy mountain sites like Bethel. However, to encounter God there, they first had to leave behind all of the spiritual baggage that had taken God's place in their lives.

### *3) Genesis 31:34 and Idolatry in the Patriarchal Household*

One of Moses' constant nagging problems was the presence of idolatry within the believing community. Israel's early idolatry was mentioned in a surprising number of passages including: Leviticus 18:3, Joshua 24:14, Ezekiel 20:5-10, 23:3, Amos 5:25-26, and Acts 7:42-43. As he fought this latent idolatry, Moses wrote Genesis 31:34. This passage noted that Rachel had stolen Laban's household idols. Texts from ancient Nuzi have often been applied to this passage since the Nuzi texts were written near Israel's patriarchal age. It has been popular to apply the Nuzi texts to suggest that Rachel stole these idols to establish Jacob's leadership in the family. It has often been claimed that the person who held the household idols also held leadership in the family, although this may or may not be a correct way to use the Nuzi texts. Moses may have included Genesis 31:34 to warn that even Jacob's favorite wife Rachel had fallen into sin with idols. So the sin should never be underestimated. It had to be rooted out just as Jacob buried the idols under a tree when he went up to Bethel, the house of God. The implication of Genesis 31:34 was that Rachel's act brought shame and uncleanness to Jacob's household, and such things should be avoided in the future.

### *Timeless Truths*

We tend to think of idolatry as an ancient sin that is out of place in the modern world. We see idols as things that are worshiped in other parts of the world, and we associate them with religious traditions that are not yet completely integrated into the modern world. When we apply warnings against idolatry to modern Western culture, we warn against making an idol out of money or an automobile. While the lust for money or possessions is a sin, it is a different sin. No one bows down before a car and actually worships it as his god. Yet idolatry is probably the most dominant sin in modern Western culture. At heart, idolatry is creating and worshiping your own god instead of the God who created the universe and Who holds it in His hands. Idolatry is a choice of a different god. Today, few people carve an idol from a tree trunk. Yet many thousands of people carve out their gods with a word processor. Idols today appear in books written by theologians.

Baal worship in the Old Testament was an apostasy away from an early believing tradition. Throughout the Old Testament period, Israelites constantly fell into idolatry because the worship of Yahweh and Baal were in many ways mirror images of each other. From the perspective of God's prophets, the differences between them were clear. From the perspective of average worshippers in Israel, the two traditions were similar enough that they could easily be merged. Archaeological evidence from Palestine suggests that syncretism was very common in Palestine. People would worship Yahweh and His wife Asherah, or some such thing. The same kind of

thing happens today. Large denominations often contain some pastors who are faithful to God, some whose faith is confused, and some who serve a very different god indeed. Yet all of the buildings look the same. All of the services are structured the same way. All have the same hymn books in the pews, and the same worship songs on the screen. All of the pastors may have graduated from the same schools. All of the sermons may spin off from a Bible verse of some kind. Many people have a hard time telling the difference between services where God is worshiped and services that serve a different god. That has always been a problem in the believing community down through history. It is important to be deeply grounded in God's Word so that you can learn to discern between spiritual truth and counterfeit.

## CHAPTER 6: YAHWEH AND THE LIFE OF JOSEPH

### A. The History of the Period

The cultural setting of the patriarchal age can be seen in a text and picture recorded in Egypt at Beni-Hasan. Jacob had given Joseph a coat of many colors. A picture of this kind of coat has been found at Beni-Hasan in Egypt. The Beni-Hasan text depicted a troop of Canaanites bringing their goods to Egypt. One of the men depicted on the tablet wore a tunic made of bright colored woven strips of cloth that were sowed together. Wearing such a garment was a mark of status, and the coat was resented by Joseph's brothers. The Genesis account fit surprisingly well into the history and culture of Egypt's Middle Kingdom.

Moses depicted Joseph as a favored son in a wealthy and powerful family. Joseph may already have been literate when he entered Egypt. To administer Potiphar's household, he may have needed to gain some knowledge of hieroglyphic. He may have refined his administrative abilities in prison as he interacted with Pharaoh's baker and cupbearer. Joseph would have needed literacy as a basic administrative skill when he became Egypt's vizier. During the Middle Kingdom, the vizier essentially ruled the land in Pharaoh's name. The office of vizier was described in several Egyptian tomb texts. The best of these was recorded in the tomb of Rekhmire, a vizier of Thutmose III. As Egypt's vizier, Joseph received daily written reports from high government official and then summarized those reports in his daily meeting with Pharaoh.

In Genesis 47:6, Moses then noted that Joseph gave his brothers positions of substantial authority in Egypt. He appointed them overseers of Pharaoh's cattle. Joseph's brothers were not hired to be farmers. They were given government positions that were about half way up the political ladder in the Egyptian culture. Moses may also have implied the political importance of Joseph's family in Genesis 47:20-27. This passage noted that only the Egyptian priests and Joseph's family still owned cattle at the end of the famine. All the rest of the land and cattle in Egypt and Palestine had come into Pharaoh's hands. Yet Israel's political importance may have been a factor in the nation's fall into idolatry. Egypt was a theocracy. Every Egyptian pharaoh claimed to be the incarnation of the god Horus. As time went on, the Pharaohs claimed to be the incarnation of more and more Egyptian gods. It was simply impossible to serve in the Egyptian court without interacting constantly with Pharaoh's claims to divinity. To complicate this problem further, Pharaoh gave Joseph a wife named Asenath who was the daughter of the priest of On. The city of On, or Anu, was later called Heliopolis. It was the most important Egyptian center for the solar cult that justified Pharaoh's claims to divinity, and the priests of On profited by preserving royal power. It is impossible to know the extent that Joseph's sons were also involved in the Egyptian solar cult.

It is not possible to be sure what pharaohs were in power during Joseph's years of abundance and famine. There are serious problems involved in any attempt to draw a specific chronology for events in Genesis. Egyptian chronology is also hard to pin down more closely than a couple of decades either way. The most likely biblical and Egyptian chronologies suggest that Joseph's famine years may have occurred at the beginning of the reign of Sesostri III. This is surprising because he was one of the strongest rulers that Egypt ever knew. No Egyptologist would take seriously the suggestion that seven years of terrible famine occurred at the beginning of his reign. However, the actual evidence is not as strong as is sometimes supposed. Sesostri III's greatest claim to power was that he finally gained control of the Egyptian nomarchs. Egypt was divided into administrative districts called nomes, and each of these districts was ruled by a

nomarch. They had been independent since the 1<sup>st</sup> Intermediate Period when central government had broken down and the economy had collapsed. The nomarchs had built large and expensive tombs for themselves before Sesostri III came to the throne. Some of the nomarchs used the title Great Overlord to describe themselves. After Sesostri III solidified his reign, the nomarchs stopped using this title, and they stopped building expensive tombs for themselves. The normal assumption is that Sesostri III was able to dominate the nomarchs with his military power. However, another option is also possible. Genesis 47:13-27 claimed that Joseph forced the Egyptians to pay for the grain that they took from his storehouses. During the seven year drought, the Egyptians ended up giving Joseph and his pharaoh all of the money in Egypt and Palestine that was not held by the Egyptian priests. All of the land and cattle in Egypt became pharaoh's possessions. Finally, the Egyptians sold themselves as slaves to Joseph's pharaoh so that they could buy food for themselves. This process would have reduced the nomarchs to total poverty and servitude to Joseph's pharaoh. If he was Sesostri III, he would have gained exactly the kind of power assumed for his rule.

A limited amount of hard evidence can also be used to argue for years of abundance and famine at this time. Earlier Middle Kingdom rulers had built a fort at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Nile cataract at Semna. This fort remained in use down to the time of Sesostri II. The fort was built roughly 25 feet above the normal high flood line in the valley. Suddenly, the lower levels of the fort were damaged by flooding, and Sesostri III rebuilt the fort about 20 feet further up slope. It almost never rained that far south in Egypt. The annual Nile floods made agriculture possible. Floods high enough to damage the fort at Semna would have brought great abundance to Egypt. There is also evidence for unusually low flood levels during his reign. In Sesostri III's 8<sup>th</sup> year, he opened a very old canal around the 2<sup>nd</sup> Nile cataract. He might have done so to make it possible to bring his ships past the cataract at a time of greatly reduced water levels. In his 19<sup>th</sup> year, he reported great difficulty passing the cataract despite the canal that he had reopened a decade earlier. None of this proves that the years of abundance and/or famine occurred during the reign of Sesostri III. However, the evidence is strong enough to suggest that he is a good candidate as at least one of the pharaohs that Joseph served.

## Timeless Truths

More often than not, human government is opposed to God. What then should believers do? Some Christian groups have always retreated from the world while trying to preserve their own righteousness. Other Christian groups have chosen to be involved in the political and cultural processes despite the temptations that those environments raised. There are strengths and weaknesses to both approaches. Being involved in the culture gives you a chance to reach others for the Lord. It also gives you a voice, and it lets you at least try to stem the tide that always flows away from God. Retreating from the world is usually easier. Yet when God's hand of judgment falls on a nation, it usually falls on believers and unbelievers alike. The church that has not turned a nation from revolt may be destroyed in the troubles that follow.

## B. Lessons from Joseph's Life

### *1) Genesis 35:22, 38:7 and Spiritual Failure among Joseph's Brothers*

The most important lesson that Moses taught Israel was that the blessings and curses of Deuteronomy 27-28 had always dominated the life of God's people. Sin always brought trouble, suffering, and slavery. Righteousness brought peace, prosperity, and dominance. Moses' most compelling examples of this principle could be found in the lives of Joseph and his brothers. Jacob had a highly dysfunctional family. The sons of Rachel, Leah, Zilpah and Bilhah were often at odds with each other. Jacob favored Rachel's sons Joseph and Benjamin since Rachel had been his chosen wife. Genesis 37:3 noted that Jacob loved Joseph more than the rest of his brothers. Unfortunately, Rachel's sons were young, and were in a poor position to compete with their brothers. In Genesis 44:27, Jacob made an astounding statement to his sons. Jacob told them that his wife had only born him two sons. That implied that Jacob only saw Rachel as his true wife, and he only saw Joseph and Benjamin as his true sons. That must have hurt his other sons very deeply, and it might reflect Jacob's rage over Joseph's fate. It would have been almost impossible to keep that kind of family secret for so many years, although Jacob could never admit publicly that he knew what had happened.

The most important son in Jacob's family was Reuben. He was the firstborn. He had the right to a double portion of the inheritance. More importantly however, he had the right to succeed Jacob as the leader of the extended household. This was enormously important because the patriarchal household was a large financial institution. It was big business. The patriarchs not only had large flocks and herds, Albright and Gordon argued that they were involved in the caravan trade along the highland trade routes through Palestine. There was a lot of power and money involved in the question of succession.

The question of succession came to a head in Genesis 35:22. In this verse, Moses wrote that Jacob's firstborn son Reuben had an improper relationship with Jacob's concubine Bilhah. As a judgment on Reuben's sin, Jacob declared that Reuben would no longer be pre-eminent in power and dignity. Reuben may have been trying to seize control of the family from Jacob. In ancient Near Eastern coronation rituals, it was common for a new king to take possession of the last king's harem. In later Israelite history, Absalom did this with David's concubines, and Adonijah attempted to do this as well. Reuben may have approached Bilhah because he hoped to seize leadership of the family from Jacob. As a consequence, Reuben lost the right of succession in Genesis 49:4. Reuben continued to exercise some kind of leadership as late as Genesis 42:22 and 42:37. However, what kind of leadership could he exercise in the future? How would his affair with Bilhah affect his relationships with his brothers who were Bilhah's sons? The situation would become impossible.

Reuben's loss of authority may have been important for the wilderness generation because it explained why Judah had become the dominant tribe in Israel. Reuben had lost his firstborn role of leadership through sin. Simeon and Levi should have been next in line, but they lost their leadership role because of their violence at Shechem. So leadership in the community passed down to Judah. In Genesis 43:8 and 44:14, Moses noted that Judah was already gaining some kind of leadership among his brothers. However, Judah's role as heir was also problematic in family relationships. Reuben, Simeon, and Levi would have resented bitterly Judah's new position of leadership and influence. The consequences of this conflict might be reflected in Genesis 38 which told the sad story of Judah and Tamar.

Perhaps in response to conflicts in the family, Judah left the covenant community and visited a gentile named Hirah. Lengthy visits to unbelieving gentiles typically caused trouble in Genesis. In Genesis 34:1, Leah's daughter Dinah had visited women in the area with disastrous consequences for Dinah, the men of Shechem, and the believing community. While Judah visited

Hirah, he fell in love with a Canaanite girl. Judah stayed with Hirah long enough to have children. He was still there when the children grew to maturity, although it is not clear whether he stayed with Hirah for this whole period. He may have been out of the believing community for a long time. The oldest of Judah's children was a son named Er. He married a Canaanite girl named Tamar. Judah had sinned by forming this relationship with an unbelieving Canaanite girl. His descendants could have brought idolatry into the covenant community. In response to this threat, God judged Judah's sin by taking the life of his sons. After Judah's pride and self-righteousness was exposed by Tamar, Judah returned to the patriarchal household, and his promised role of leadership in it. Standing in the background behind Moses' account in Genesis 38 may have been the question of why Israel had suffered so badly in Egypt. Sin had brought them to slavery and ruin just as sin had brought Judah to humiliation.

The story of Judah and Tamar may have had another application for the wilderness community as well. The Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land. In Canaan, individual Israelite men would be tempted to associate with the Canaanite culture and to marry Canaanite women just as Judah had before them. Moses warned that the consequences of this sin could be disastrous. Even in the wilderness, the Israelites had fallen into adultery through Baal worship with the golden calf and with the temple prostitutes at Baal Peor. Thousands of Israelites had died in God's judgment just as Judah's sons had died. With the account of Judah and Tamar in Genesis 38, Moses may have warned the wilderness generation of the grief and trouble that would follow from such sin.

#### Timeless Truths

We are certainly called to share God's love with people who do not know Him. It is proper to have friends who are not Christians because your love and values may bring them to the Lord. However, be careful about your relationships. It is easy for unbelieving friends to teach you their values and life styles instead of learning yours. Peer groups lead believers into temptation and sin more often than believers values lead peers to Christ. Guard your heart because God will act in your life to bring you back to him. At times, God's chastening hand can hurt as much as the death of Judah's sons hurt him.

#### 2) *Genesis 39:9 and an Ideal Vassal*

Israel's patriarchs in Genesis were consistently spiritually ambivalent, and they had feet of clay. Yet Joseph was consistently righteous. Unlike the rest of his family, Moses recorded no spiritual failings in Joseph's life. Joseph's righteousness led him to dominate Egypt as the vizier of the nation. The principles of blessing and curses in Deuteronomy 27-28 could be seen in Joseph's life as he inherited God's blessings. Because of Joseph's righteousness, his whole family eventually gained a dominant position in Egypt as well.

Moses recorded Joseph's life in slavery as a consequence of his brothers' sins but not his own. Joseph lived a consistently righteous life. In Genesis 39:9, Moses recorded that Potiphar's wife tried to seduce Joseph. In response, Joseph asked her, "How could I do this great evil and sin against God?" Both Egypt and Mesopotamia recognized that adultery by married people was improper. Neither culture was worried very much about immorality by unmarried people. However, adultery by married people caused too much social disruption to be tolerated. It was illegal, and those who were caught in adulterous relationships were subject to criminal

prosecution. Yet Joseph did not just tell Potiphar's wife that she wanted to do something that was wrong. He asked how she could expect him to sin against God this way. That statement implied both knowledge of God's law and a deep commitment to obey it.

Through the long Genesis account of Joseph's life, Moses recorded nothing very negative about Joseph. This lack of negative material was striking when contrasted with the lives of the other patriarchs. Joseph was a man like any other. He had his share of strengths and weaknesses. He may have been a rather vain young man. As an Egyptian vizier, Joseph would have engaged in Egyptian religious festivals. He married an Egyptian woman. He may have practiced divination despite the fact that Moses condemned this practice very strongly. Despite all of these potential problems, Moses never condemned Joseph for anything serious.

Moses may have decided to use Joseph's life to teach Israel how they should have acted in Egypt and to illustrate the principles of blessing and cursing that were contained in Deuteronomy 28. The sins of Joseph's brothers resulted in Joseph's slavery in a foreign land. Their sins also resulted in trouble and sorrow for Jacob's household. Joseph's faith and obedience brought the Israelites dominance and abundance in Egypt. In keeping with God's promises to Abraham, Joseph became the father of a multitude. The great tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh were both descended from him. Joseph possessed the gates of his enemies. He was a blessing to the earth since he preserved life in Egypt and Palestine through seven long years of famine.

Moses taught the wilderness generation that this basic reality could be seen at work already in the patriarchal age. Joseph illustrated how the Israelites should have acted in Egypt. They had begun their life in Egypt in a position of power. If they had remained faithful, they would have retained God's covenant blessings. Instead, revolt and idolatry had brought them judgment, poverty, oppression and slavery. The lesson from this is not hard to draw. As he did so often in the Pentateuch, Moses was calling Israel to obey God and live.

### Timeless Truths

Moses went in depth to describe the spiritual failings of Jacob and his sons. Moses also recorded the pain and trouble their sins brought to the household. Yet Moses never described anything seriously wrong with Joseph. Because of his righteousness, he rose to dominate all of Egypt. Yet Joseph certainly did not have an easy life. In his childhood, he was resented and disliked by his brothers. He was sold as a slave and was probably marched down to Egypt with wooden stocks around his neck. He was stood up and humiliated in the slave market. He was sold as a slave when he had once been the favored son of a rich family. He was falsely accused and thrown in prison, and he was forgotten there. Where was God in all of that grief? Yet Joseph kept his faith. He did not know that God was preparing him to save the world of his day from a terrible famine. Righteousness brings God's peace and His blessings, but it does not guarantee a life free from grief and trouble. Even the best Christians sometimes look to heaven and cry, "Why?" We can only trust God's wisdom because only He sees the whole picture. We can only trust that in the end, the righteous will live in His blessings while the consequences of sin will have their day. Sometimes we can see the consequences of sins in people's lives and the blessings that come from righteousness. Other times, the wicked seem to prosper while the righteous are oppressed. At times like these, you can only turn to God in faith and wait for His day.

### 3) *Genesis 44:14-34 and Judah's New Righteousness*

In Genesis 44:14-34, Moses recorded Joseph's meeting with his brothers after Joseph's cup had been found in Benjamin's sack. In this passage, Joseph declared that Benjamin would have to remain in Egypt as his slave while the rest were free to return to Jacob in Palestine. In this passage, Judah demonstrated the true leadership that he was gaining among Jacob's sons due to the failures of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. Judah beseeched Joseph for permission to act as a substitute for his brother. Judah declared that he had vowed to Jacob that he would be responsible for Benjamin's life. In Genesis 44:20, Moses noted that Judah had recognized and accepted Jacob's special love for Joseph and Benjamin. In Genesis 44:29, Moses implied that Jacob knew that his sons had taken Joseph from him. In Genesis 44:16, Moses recorded Judah's recognition that Yahweh was dealing with their sins. Then in Genesis 44:33, Moses recorded Judah's request that he be accepted as a substitute for his brother. Judah asked to take his brother's place and be punished in his place so that his father would not die of grief.

This offer was a type, or symbol, for Christ's death as a substitute for the sins of His people. Moses had done something rather similar himself in Exodus 32:33. After Israel sinned by making the golden calf at Sinai, Moses told them that he would try to make atonement before God for their sin. When he returned to Sinai, Moses asked that his own name be removed from the Book of Life if by doing so, Israel might be forgiven for their sins. This was a type of Christ's death that rather resembled Genesis 44:33. It is fair to wonder if Moses saw an echo of his own heart in Judah. Moses may have used the account in Genesis 44:33 to teach Israel the nature of true leadership in the community.

#### Timeless Truths

As believers, we are called to be Christ-like. That statement is often made in a glib way. We think that being Christ-like means that we are nice people who go to church. Christ-likeness is something very different. To understand what it means to be Christ-like, read carefully Isaiah 53. Then read your own name into the passage wherever it speaks of the promised Messiah. What will it cost you to be like Him? Are you willing to be despised and rejected of men? Are you willing to be a person of sorrows who is well acquainted with grief? Are you willing to bear the stripes for someone else so that he may be healed? Becoming Christ-like costs enough to break your soul. Yet nothing on earth is worth as much.

#### *4) Genesis 46:1-4 and a Promise of Restoration*

In Genesis 46:1-4, Moses recorded that Jacob had set out for Egypt to see Joseph once more. As he traveled to Egypt, Jacob stopped at Beersheba and offered sacrifices. In response, God appeared to him in a vision. God promised to bring him safely to Egypt, and to bring his descendants back to Palestine after they had become a great nation. It is not hard to speculate about why Moses would have included this detail in the Genesis text. In Moses' day, this promise was being fulfilled. God had been with Israel throughout their Egyptian sojourn. Now Yahweh was bringing His people home to Palestine. Moses may have been using this passage to assure the wilderness community of God's continual love and faithfulness. They might have seen His great hand behind their wanderings, and they might have heard His promise that He would bring them into the land.

#### Timeless Truths

Never start anything important without first seeking God's leading and His presence. When He leads, your ministry and your travels may have eternal consequences. Wherever He leads you, He is faithful.

#### *5) Genesis 47:11, Joseph, and the Best of the Land*

Moses recorded in Genesis 47:6 that Joseph was told to settle his family in the best of the land in Goshen. Joseph did not give his brothers the best agricultural land in Egypt. He gave them the best available land in the Northeast Nile delta that could still support cattle in those climate conditions. Moses added in Genesis 47:11 that Joseph gave his brothers a possession in the best of the land of Raameses. So the name Raameses was already associated with the northeast Nile delta in the Middle Kingdom. At the end of their Egyptian sojourn, the Israelites would be forced to build the store city of Raameses in the same region. It is striking that the Israelites were given land as a possession when all the inhabitants of Egypt were losing their land to the crown. Pharaoh told Joseph to settle his family in the best of the land. This did not mean that the Israelites could take the best land away from Egyptian farmers. They were given permission to raise cattle in the best land available for that use in the northeast delta. The seven years of very high Nile floods may have destroyed many settlements in Goshen. The famine year would have been caused by very low Nile flood levels. Yet even during these years, there would have been enough Nile river water to grow reeds in the delta swamps. Such reeds and rushes had always been used as animal fodder in Egypt. It is fair to ask how this passage might have been heard by the Israelites as they wandered through the arid wilderness. They may have seen it as a promise that they would be blessed with the best of the land of Palestine if they were faithful to God. They may also have seen it as a promise of protection during their own wanderings in a barren land.

#### Timeless Truths

Be thankful for the swamp reeds if the Lord uses them to provide your needs. It is far better to tend cattle in the swamp than to starve in a barren land. The Lord provides, but His provision might not be what you would prefer. Yet when He provides, it becomes the best of the land.

#### *6) Genesis 49:1-33 and Jacob's Blessings*

In Genesis 49, Moses recorded Jacob's patriarchal blessings on his sons. These blessings resembled in some ways Moses' own blessings on the tribes of Israel in Deuteronomy 33. So Moses' record of Jacob's blessings provided Israel with a background for understanding his own blessings on the nations. How were they similar? In Genesis 49:3-4, Moses recorded that Jacob had removed Reuben's leadership of the family despite the fact that he was the firstborn. Jacob gave Reuben no blessing at all. This was a very serious event in the ancient Near East. M. J. Selman noted that parents could not arbitrarily change the inheritance rights of their children. Such disinheritance could only occur as a result of a very serious attack on the family by the son. Selman noted as an example of this the law code of Hammurabi. This law code required that such disinheritance be approved by the court. It could only occur if a son took legal action against his parents, or usurped a father's authority, or despised his parents. Selman suggested that

Reuben's sin against Jacob in Genesis 35:22 was such an offense.<sup>6</sup> In Deuteronomy 33:6, Moses simply declared that Reuben should live and not die. Moses was using treaty terminology to indicate that the tribe of Reuben should remain within its covenant relationship with God instead of revolting against authority as the patriarch Reuben had done so many years earlier. If the tribe remained faithful, Moses wished that the tribe would receive the covenant blessing of many descendants.

In Genesis 49:5-7, Moses recorded Jacob's declaration that Levi and Simeon should be scattered among Israel because of their violence. In Deuteronomy 33:8-11, Moses indicated how this would be fulfilled for the tribe of Levi. The Levites would become priests, living scattered through the nation. Moses declared that their ministry would be blessed by God, even though they received no land inheritance. Moses did not even mention Simeon in his blessings. After the conquest, the tribe of Simeon was scattered through Judah. This was also a blessing of sorts because Judah would remain more faithful than Israel in future years.

In Genesis 49:8-12, Moses recorded Jacob's decree that Judah should have the position of leadership in the family. Jacob's words were a messianic prophecy that pointed to Christ's rule as Judah's great descendant. Jacob promised that Judah would hold the ruler's staff until He came to whom it belonged. Then He would have the obedience of the peoples. He would tie His donkey's colt to a vine and wash His garments in red wine. These words certainly seem to point forward to Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem and to descriptions of Him in the book of Revelation. Moses' blessing on Judah in Deuteronomy 33:7 was much shorter. Moses simply prayed that the Lord would hear Judah's voice and would bring Judah to his people. Moses added that He contended for his people, and that God would help him against His adversaries. This seems a very odd blessing. How could Judah be brought to his people? The passage makes sense if it is understood as a messianic prophecy, just as Jacob's words in Genesis 49:8-12 had been a messianic prophecy.

In Genesis 49:13-15, Moses recorded Jacob's promise that Zebulun would dwell at the seashore. He would be a haven for ships with his flanks by the seashore. Jacob promised that Issachar would lie among the sheep folds. Jacob warned that Issachar would choose to dwell in a pleasant land, but he would become forced labor because of that choice. Jacob's words were literally fulfilled. Some Israelites from Zebulun and Issachar inhabited highlands, and supported Deborah in her conflicts. Others inhabited the coastal plains in northern Palestine. The plains were dominated by the Canaanites. Israelites living on the plains became forced labor for the Canaanites. In Deuteronomy 33:18-19, Moses reflected the same ambiguity in Zebulun and Issachar's future. He noted that these tribes would offer righteous sacrifices and call Israel to the mountains. Yet he also noted that these tribes would draw out the abundance of the seas and the hidden treasures of the sand.

Moses recorded Jacob's lengthy blessing for Joseph in Genesis 49:22-26. Moses' own blessing on Joseph in Deuteronomy 33:13-17 was equally long and detailed. While these blessings were far from identical, there were striking similarities between them. Both Jacob and Moses declared that Joseph would receive the blessing of heaven above and of the great deep beneath. Both associated Joseph's blessing with the everlasting hills. Both promised that Joseph would be distinguished among his brothers, and both associated this blessing with the crown of Joseph's head. Jacob promised that Joseph would be blessed by his father's god who had helped

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M. J. Selman, "Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age," 91-139 in A. R. Millard & D. J. Wiseman, eds. *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983).

him. Moses added that Joseph would receive the favor of Him who had dwelt in the burning bush.

There would seem to be a relationship of some kind between the blessings by Jacob and Moses although the reason for that blessing can be debated. The blessings may be similar simply because the blessings were ultimately given by the same God. It is also possible that under the influence of the Holy Spirit, Moses intentionally reflected Jacob's words in his own blessing. Yet it is striking how often the actions of the patriarchs shaped events in the far distant future.

### Timeless Truths

There are striking similarities between some of the blessings by Jacob and Moses. It is interesting how a parents blessing can shape not only the lives of the children but the lives of their descendants. Both blessings and curses can have an impact down through generations. Be careful how you treat your children. Build them up as people and as believers. Encourage them and build self-respect into them. Don't tear them down or deprecate them. Both physical and emotional abuse can create scars that are passed down through generations.

### 7) *Genesis 50:1-26 and Jacob's Return Home*

Moses recorded Jacob's death in Genesis 49:28-33. Jacob had commanded his sons to bring his body back to the cave of Machpelah where Abraham, Sara, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah had been buried. This cave was near Hebron. In Genesis 50:7-13, Moses recorded that Joseph followed Jacob's request and buried Jacob in Palestine. Joseph did so with great ceremony and with public lamentation. Then in Genesis 50:24-28, Moses recorded Joseph's request that his body be preserved and be returned to Palestine for burial. In Exodus 13:19, Moses alluded to this passage to explain why the Israelites took Joseph's body with them at the Exodus. Later, Joshua 24:32 made the fascinating claim that Joseph's bones were eventually buried at Shechem in the plot of ground that Abraham had purchased. This was presumably not the cave of Machpelah near Hebron that Abraham had purchased from the Hittites. Shechem was far north of Hebron, and Shechem was Israelite territory in Joshua's day.

The implications of this claim are rather amazing. The passage assumes that the location of this plot was still known more than 400 years after Jacob's sons murdered the men of Shechem. That in turn suggests that the events recorded in Genesis may have been accurately recorded long before Moses was born.

Transporting Jacob's bones to Palestine may have been meaningful to the wilderness community. During their 400 year Egyptian sojourn, the Israelites had seen many Pharaohs die in Egypt. After a Pharaoh died, he was mummified with great ceremony for 40 days. During these days, he was regarded as being still alive. Then with great ceremony, Pharaoh was transported in his coffin to his tomb. This ceremony brought him to his eternal dwelling place. When Pharaoh arrived at his tomb, the tomb was regarded as heaven on earth. He was being brought to his home. When he arrived there, the dead Pharaoh became one more manifestation of the high god Osiris who ruled in the underworld. Only when this ceremony was completed did the next Pharaoh become the manifestation on earth of the god Horus. So to become god himself, the new Pharaoh had to bury his predecessor with proper pomp and ceremony. When Israel brought the bones of Joseph back to Palestine, the Israelites were bringing him back to his home.

This act may have suggested both a rejection of Egyptian underworld theology and an affirmation that Palestine was the Israelites' God given home.

### Timeless Truths

Both Jacob and Joseph requested that their bodies be brought home when they died. There is something about death that is associated with home. When soldiers die in Iran, the army brings their bodies half way around the world in order to bring them home. That is an expensive task that is not necessary for the military action to succeed. Why does the army do that? The soldiers' families want their loved ones brought home. When Christians die, they go home to God's mansion and to their eternal home. They are joining a great cloud of witnesses who served the Lord and have entered their reward. Many of those are friends and family who were already in their rest. All of life is a sojourn in a strange land, and all of life is a longing for their eternal home. Like Abraham, we all look for a city with foundations whose builder and maker is God.

## CHAPTER 7: YAHWEH AND THE ETERNAL COVENANT

### A. Historical Background

Academic interest in international treaties began in the 1930's when ancient texts were found in the old Hittite capital of Boghazköy in eastern Turkey. These ancient texts included several international treaties that were written between 1450 and 1200 BC. The treaties were written in a standard form that included several key features including: an introduction, a historical prologue tracing the relationship between the high king and his vassal rulers, a list of general and specific stipulations or legal requirements placed on the partners to the treaty, a list of blessings and curses that would follow from keeping or breaking the treaty, a provision for preserving the treaty documents and for passing on the treaty to the next generation of rulers, and a list of gods who would serve as witnesses to the treaty and punish violations of it. These treaty features were common in 2nd millennium BC treaties, although not every treaty contained every feature. It was soon realized that Moses wrote the book of Deuteronomy as an international treaty between the sovereign God and Israel as His vassal nation.

The international treaties often used common words in a unique way. There has been an ongoing academic discussion about the significance of these common words when they were used in a technical way as treaty or covenant terms. Two of the most important treaty words in the ancient Near East were love and hate. People who were loyal to a sovereign overlord were described as loving him. Those who rebelled against him were described as hating him. The words love and hate in this context had little to do with emotion. Vassal rulers would continue to love their sovereign so long as they kept the terms of the treaty. It did not matter what they may have felt emotionally. They could have liked or disliked the sovereign. They could have trusted or feared him. They loved the sovereign so long as they obeyed the terms of their treaty. It is, of course, impossible to separate emotion and behavior completely. Vassal rulers who liked and trusted their sovereign overlords were far more likely to remain loyal to them than vassal rulers who feared and despised their kings. However the bottom line issue was not emotion. It was obedience.

Live and love were not the only words used in a technical way related to the international treaty form. In treaty documents from the ancient Near East, the words know, and good were also closely tied to a proper covenant relationship. The word "know" referred to life within proper treaty relationships. Know carried this meaning in a variety of ancient texts. For example, know had this meaning in a text from Moses' lifetime. The 18th Dynasty ruler Amenhotep II noted that "the country which knew not Egypt beseeched the good god." The good god in this passage was Pharaoh. It was impossible that any nation in the ancient East could be unaware of either Egypt or its ruler. Know here clearly referred to a formal relationship of some kind. The word had this meaning also in a 19th Dynasty text from Karnak that was written by Pharaoh Seti I. This text spoke about captives from "countries that knew not Egypt."

The word "know" was used in a technical sense in Amos 3:2. If the traditional translation is accepted, the text reads, "You only have I known of all the families of the earth." Amos 3:2 indicated a mutual legal understanding of the treaty or covenant stipulations by the sovereign and vassal. Know was also used in a treaty context in 2 Samuel 7:20; 1 Chronicles 17:18; Isaiah 45:3-4; Jeremiah 1:5; 12:3; 31:34; Hosea 4:1; 5:4; 8:2 and 13:4.

The word good also appeared in the international treaties in the same contexts. The things of the treaty were good. Life within the treaty was good. Life within the covenant treaty made

everything good. Life outside of the covenant was consistently evil. An example of this usage can be seen in Amos 5:6. In this verse, Amos directed God's people to seek good and not evil. The Israelites are directed to hate evil and love good.

Perhaps the greatest impact that the treaty pattern had on the rest of Scripture can be found in the idea of a covenant lawsuit. Both in the Old Testament and the ancient Near East, those who violated their treaties were taken into court and were charged with failing to meet their legal obligations. Often these treaty or covenant lawsuits were brought by the gods who had served as witnesses to the treaty when it was formed. Malamat described an example of such a divine judgment from a Hittite text. A plague had broken out in Anatolia during the reign of the Hittite king Shuppiluliuma. Twenty years later, the plague was still raging during the reign of Murshili who ruled from 1340 BC to 1310 BC. When Murshili sought the reason for the plague, he was shown an ancient tablet that recorded an earlier treaty with the Egyptians. The treaty was written in the middle of the 15th century BC, which would be very near the time of Israel's exodus from Egypt. The Hittite king Murshili was told that the Hattian storm god had served as a witness to the treaty. When the Hittites had violated their treaty with Egypt, the storm god had brought the plague to punish them. Murshili then humbled himself before the storm god, offered sacrifices, and prayed that his father's sins be forgiven. The treaty tablet in this account was later used to establish a history of Egypt's relationship with the Hittites.

The covenant lawsuit pattern has been the subject of substantial academic discussion because it had a great impact on the content of the Old Testament. In the covenant lawsuit, Yahweh brought Israel into court for violating their covenant responsibilities to Him and to each other. In this legal proceeding, God decreed that the curses of the covenant would fall on them because they had violated the terms of the treaty.

One of the most interesting covenant lawsuit accounts in the Old Testament may be the spiritual struggle that God required of Job perhaps two centuries before Moses was born. There has been endless academic debate about when the book of Job was written. Proposed dates for the writing of the book of Job run the range from pre-Mosaic to post-exilic dates. There has been much broader recognition that the story recorded in the book actually happened before Israel left Egypt. There are several reasons why the story recorded in Job should be dated during Israel's patriarchal age. Wealth in both Genesis and Job consisted in the possession of cattle and slaves. No central worship place was known in either book. In both Genesis and Job, the head of the household offered sacrifices instead of a priestly class. Both books depicted the Chaldeans and Sabeans as nomadic raiders instead of world conquerors. The money unit used in Job was found in Scripture only in Genesis 33:19 and Joshua 24:32. The prologue/epilogue structure of the book of Job resembled early Semitic literature found at Ugarit and in the Akkadian literature.

The date of Job was important because the basic issue in the book of Job was Job's desire for a covenant lawsuit hearing before God. The question of blessing and cursing stood in the background behind the whole account. The treaty motif claimed that obedience to God would result in blessing. Rebellion against God would result in God's curse on all of life. Job was cursed. He lost his family, his wealth, and his social standing. He was left only with a nagging wife. Job's friends asked quite reasonably what Job had done to earn the curses of the covenant. Throughout the book, Job asked for a covenant lawsuit hearing before God. Yahweh finally gave Job his day in court. Like a lawyer in court, God asked Job a long series of questions that were designed to prove to Job who he was before God. Job repented of his accusations against God. He bowed before God, and prayed for his friends. Job learned that even the most righteous man of his time could not stand before God on the basis of his own righteousness. He could only

stand before God by God's grace and gain His blessings through repentance and faith. While little in Job resembled very closely the specific treaty pattern of Deuteronomy, the basic concepts of the treaty clearly did stand behind the whole book.

Beyond that, the book of Job suggested that the primal history recorded by Moses in Genesis had been handed down in the West Semitic world before he was born, and concepts rather similar to the treaty motifs had been known from antiquity. In Job 8:8-10, Bildad placed Job's sufferings in a historical perspective. He advised Job, "Please inquire of past generations, and consider things searched out by their fathers, for we are only of yesterday and know nothing." Bildad was arguing that God blessed those who obeyed Him and judged those who rebelled against Him. Bildad was suggesting that the motif of covenant blessings and curses had been handed down from their ancestors.

In Job 15:7-8, Eliphaz made a similar argument. He asked Job, "Were you the first man to be born, or were you brought forth before the hills? Do you hear the secret counsel of God?" Eliphaz seemed to be pointing Job back to Adam's walks with God in the Garden of Eden. In Job 22:15-17, Eliphaz asked Job a similar question. He asked, "Will you keep to the way of wicked men whose foundation was washed away by a river, who said to God, depart from us, and what can Shaddai do to them?" If Noah's flood is interpreted as a local event, Eliphaz could have been comparing Job's denial of guilt with the rebellion that brought judgment to the pre-flood world.

Job himself demonstrated an understanding of primal history. In Job 31:33, Job asked his friends, "Have I covered my transgression like Adam?" Like Eliphaz, Job was making an argument based on what Adam had done in the Garden of Eden. Since Job lived before Moses was born, these claims could not have been based on the book of Genesis. However, they do reflect West Semitic knowledge of primal history. Job and his friends understood a surprising amount of sound theology. For example, Job understood the nature of true righteousness. In Job 31:1, Job argued that he had made a covenant with his eyes so that he would not gaze on a virgin. He knew that righteousness was a matter of his heart and not just a reflection of his actions.

## Timeless Truths

All of life is still a covenant relationship with God. Our relationship with God is a vassal treaty with a great sovereign. We owe Him faithful obedience, love, and service. He calls us to serve His purposes in the world. Rejecting this life of faith and obedience brings emptiness and pointlessness to life.

## B. Moses and the Treaty Form in the Pentateuch

As a young man, Moses was a man of strength and power. Stephen noted in Acts 7:22 that Moses had been educated in all the learning and wisdom of the Egyptians. After forty years in the wilderness, he had become the meekest of men, but he had not forgotten his Egyptian education. As Moses led Israel through the wilderness, Yahweh inspired Moses to draw on his court education to structure God's relationship with Israel in a formal, legal covenant. To do so, Moses relied heavily on the pattern that had been used in the 2nd millennium BC to write international treaties. Moses had learned this treaty pattern as a young man in the Egyptian court. Moses first used elements of this treaty pattern when he wrote the book of Exodus for the

wilderness community. Then at the end of Israel's wilderness sojourn, Moses wrote the book of Deuteronomy using this international vassal treaty pattern to lead Israel in a formal covenant formation ceremony. Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 29:10-13 that Israel's chiefs, elders, officers, men, women, children, and even the aliens living within the community all stood to enter Yahweh's covenant. Jews and gentiles together became a people for Yahweh their God. They entered Yahweh's covenant with a great ceremony, and the book of Deuteronomy was the official record of that vassal treaty ratification ceremony.

Deuteronomy received its structure from the international treaty form. It included: 1) Deuteronomy 1:1-5 which was the treaty preamble, 2) Deuteronomy 1:6-4:49 which was the treaty historical prologue, 3) Deuteronomy 5:1-26:19 which listed the treaty rules and laws, 4) Deuteronomy 27:1-30:20 which expressed the treaty blessings and punishments, and 5) Deuteronomy 31:1-34:12 which provided the provisions for preserving the treaty. Evangelical scholarship has largely agreed that Moses structured Deuteronomy with the pattern of an international treaty.

Moses used treaty terms and concepts as he wrote the Pentateuch. Moses used both loving and hating in a technical way. In Exodus 20:5-6, Moses noted God's decree that He would visit their iniquity to the 3rd and 4th generation of those who hated him. At the same time, He would show mercy to thousands who "loved" him and kept His commandments. In Deuteronomy 32:41, Moses wrote that the Divine Warrior announced His vengeance against those who hated Him. Hating God was violating His covenant, while loving God was keeping His commandments.

Moses used live and die in a treaty sense in Deuteronomy as well. In Deuteronomy 30:6-9, Moses promised that Yahweh would circumcise their hearts to love the Lord with all of their hearts so that they might live. In Deuteronomy 30:19-20, Yahweh declared that He had set before Israel life and death. God called Israel to choose life by loving the Lord and by obeying His commandments. In Deuteronomy 33:6, Moses recorded Reuben's blessing. In this verse, Moses blessed the tribe of Reuben by saying simply, "May Reuben live and not die." Moses was not contemplating the extinction of the tribe of Reuben. He was praying that the Reubenites remain within the bounds of God's covenant and not fall away from it. Other Mosaic examples of the technical use of this word can be found in Leviticus 18:5; Deuteronomy 8:1-3; and 16:20-22.

The word "know" may be used in a treaty context in Exodus 1:8 and 33:12. Moses claimed that a king arose over Egypt who knew not Joseph. It is possible that the Hyksos may have had a treaty of some kind with the Israelites. When the Egyptian 18th Dynasty drove out the Hyksos, the 18th Dynasty rulers would have had no such treaty relationship with Israel.

Moses used the word good with a technical treaty meaning in Deuteronomy 30:9. This verse promised that Yahweh would rejoice over Israel for good just as He had rejoiced over their fathers. To receive the good things of the covenant, they only had to obey. A similar technical treaty use may stand behind Exodus 18:9, Numbers and 10:29.

## Timeless Truths

"Knowing" is still far more than intellectual activity. It is a relationship with God and with others. Living and finding good are still found mainly within a covenant relationship. Marriages and Christian fellowships are not just temporary and passing relationships. They involve the kind of inner unity with each other and with God that mirrors and imitates the unity within the Godhead itself. That is one reason that both divorce and church conflict are such painful things. Love is more than an emotion. It is a commitment. That's why the word "love" appears in the

book of Deuteronomy far more often than in any other book. The book of the covenant is the book of God's love for His people and God's call that His people love Him.

### C. Moses and the Treaty Form in Genesis

#### *1) Treaties in Genesis*

When Moses wrote Genesis, he taught Israel that Yahweh's covenant was not a new invention. God's people had always been in a covenant and treaty relationship with Yahweh. Moses taught this by using a variety of treaty concepts and treaty technical vocabulary in Genesis. While Moses did not use the word covenant to describe Adam's relationship with God in Eden, Moses depicted Adam as being in a relationship with God that resembled a covenant. In Genesis 2:15-16, Yahweh gave Adam two treaty stipulations. Adam was to tend the Garden, but he was forbidden to eat from the tree in the center of the Garden. Yahweh warned Adam that disobedience would bring death.

Moses next used the treaty or covenant motif in the account of Noah and his flood. In Genesis 6:14-16, Elohim commanded Noah to build an ark to preserve his family from the flood. Then Elohim promised to establish His covenant with Noah, his family, and all creation. In Genesis 9:9-17, Elohim established His covenant with Noah, his seed, and all life on earth. Elohim decreed that the rainbow would be His sign or witness to the covenant that He had made with all life. The stipulations of Noah's covenant included the command in Genesis 9:4 that blood should not be eaten with meat.

Moses then added in Genesis 15:18-21 that Yahweh formed a covenant with Abraham after a covenant formation ceremony. Moses added in Genesis 17:1-14 that Yahweh appeared to Abraham promising to establish His covenant with Abraham. The basic stipulation of Abraham's covenant would be circumcision although Genesis 26:5 suggested that many other stipulations were also involved. In Genesis 17:14, Moses added the covenant curse that any male who was not circumcised should be cut off from God's people.

#### Timeless Truths

It may seem very strange to claim that 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC treaty language and treaty concepts were in use in the Garden of Eden. That looks like a huge anachronism. However, it should not be unexpected. The 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BC treaty pattern simply replicated concepts that had always been at the heart of man's relationship with God and man's relationship with his fellow man. The basic ideas that had always made relationships work were handed down in history until they influenced the ways that international treaties were written.

#### *2) Moses and the Technical Treaty Vocabulary in Genesis*

When Moses wrote the Genesis account, he drew heavily on the same technical treaty vocabulary that he also used in the rest of the Pentateuch. He even used technical treaty vocabulary when describing the conversations between God and Adam in the Garden of Eden. He was not being anachronistic when doing so. Languages change rapidly over time. Even if a very young earth is defended, the language spoken in the Garden of Eden would not have been West Semitic. Moses recorded faithfully the nature of God's interactions with Adam and Eve,

but Moses did so in the language of his own day. When studying Genesis 1-11, it is important to understand the meaning that Moses' words would have had in his own day.

Moses may also have used technical treaty terms like love, hate, live, die, know, good, and evil in Genesis because the book of Genesis provided the wilderness community with something similar to a historical prologue for their own covenant relationship with God. In the historical prologue of ancient treaties, the high king surveyed the history of his relationship with the vassal. The historical prologue argued that the vassal should continue to be loyal to the high king because of everything that the high king had done for the vassal in the past. Genesis served a similar purpose for Israel's vassal treaty with God. Running through Genesis was a constant reminder of God's faithfulness despite the Patriarchs' disobedience and lack of faith. Based on God's consistent faithfulness, Genesis called the wilderness community to respond to God in covenant love, faith, and obedience as God led His people home.

Treaty vocabulary in Genesis may first have appeared in Genesis 1-3 with the trees of knowledge and life in the Garden of Eden. Genesis 2:17 warned Adam and Eve that they would surely die on the day that they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Knowledge was a technical treaty term. The high king knew his vassals and was known by them. Good and evil referred to life inside and outside of the covenant. In Genesis 4:7, Moses recorded God Himself using good in this context in His warning to Cain. When Cain chose evil instead, Cain moved outside of God's covenant and was driven from His presence. So the general context of the Eden trees was a covenantal context.

What might have been the specific purpose for the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil? Perhaps the tree provided Adam an opportunity to choose covenant faithfulness, and to gain from this choice the ability to administer God's kingdom on earth. In the Old Testament as a whole, knowing good and evil was often tied to the idea of authority and administration. Before the fall, only God determined the nature of good and evil. In later Scriptural passages, the Angel of the Lord remained the One who truly could determine good and evil. However, those who administered civil and religious authority in God's name were also able to determine good and evil in a more limited way. In the Old Testament, the specific idea of knowing good and evil rarely appeared outside of the context of competent administration. If that usage is read back into Genesis, the basic question at the tree may not have been intellectual knowledge. The issue may have been instead, whether Adam and Eve would administer God's authority over His kingdom, or rejecting His authority in favor of autonomy. Then "knowing good and evil" in a proper way would have given Adam and Eve the right to administer God's kingdom as faithful vassal rulers. Unfortunately, Adam chose to reject God's authority over His kingdom. Adam became instead the ruler of the kingdom of man. As such, he was driven from God's throne room into a barren and cursed earth.

Adam and Eve were warned that they would die on the day that they ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Dying would then be losing their covenant relationship with God. Genesis 2:17 was clearly not talking about physical death because Adam and Eve lived for nearly 1,000 years after this event. While there will continue to be an academic debate about the Tree of Knowledge, the best explanation may be that Adam and Eve died by eating from the tree because they lost their status as faithful vassal rulers of the earth under the sovereign control of Yahweh. Adam and Eve were then restored to life before God when God came to them in judgment and grace, calling for repentance, and instituting both sacrifice and promise.

The Tree of Life may also reflect treaty terminology. The word life in the name Tree of Life was a Hebrew masculine plural noun. It is possible to translate this noun into English with the

singular noun life. In a few passages, the noun does appear in a plural form with an apparently singular meaning. Yet in most instances, this masculine plural noun requires a plural meaning. So it is at least possible to translate the name in Genesis as the Tree of Lives. The Living Ones could then be Adam and Eve who Moses called living souls in Genesis 2:7. What then would the Tree of the Living Ones provide Adam and Eve? It probably would not provide eternal physical life. The Hebrew word translated forever in Genesis 3:22 was just *l'olam*. This word carried the idea of for a very long time. Hebrew had no word for eternity per se. Even without continuing to eat from their tree, Adam and Eve would live for nearly 1,000 years after this time. A lengthened life would give them relatively little more than they already had. It might be that the life given by Adam's tree could have been the administration of God's sanctuary in Eden seized by sinful means. In the future, Adam and those who imitated his repentance would live in faith waiting as sojourners and wanderers for Yahweh to bring them back to His earthly sanctuary at the end of the age. Their lives as vassals of Yahweh until that time would be only a now and not yet service to the High King lived out in earthly sanctuaries that were at best only a shadow of the heavenly reality first seen in Eden.

Love and hate were also used in a technical sense in Genesis 26:27-28. In verse 27, Isaac asked Abimelech why he had come since Abimelech hated him. Then in verse 28, Isaac offered to form a covenant or treaty with him. Abimelech had been in a treaty relationship with the patriarchs before this time. The treaty had fallen apart and Abimelech now hated Isaac. So a new treaty was formed. The same idea might stand behind the blessing and cursing in Genesis 22:17 and 24:60. Abraham and Rebekah were promised dominance over those who opposed them. The specific promise was that they would possess the gate of those who hated them. It would be easy to see hating in this context as a lack of covenant or treaty relationship.

Scripture later described God's relationship with the patriarchs in similar terms. Both Malachi 1:1-3 and Romans 9:13 stressed the God had loved Jacob and hated Esau. Love and hate in these passages spoke of membership in the covenant instead of an emotion experienced by God. It is also possible that hate had a similar meaning in Genesis 29:31-33. These verses claim that Leah was hated by Jacob. That seems an unlikely emotion for the patriarchal family. So both the New American Standard version and the New International version of the Bible softened the word to unloved, or not loved, instead of hated. It would seem more accurate to interpret hate in Genesis 29 as a claim that Jacob was not fulfilling his marriage covenant responsibilities toward her. The lack of a living marriage relationship between Jacob and Leah may be implied as well by Genesis 44:27. In this rather surprising verse, Jacob wailed that his wife had only born him two sons. This implied that Jacob regarded only Rachel as his true wife. If Jacob regarded his marriage with Leah as being somehow less valid, he had broken his marriage covenant with her and thus hated her.

The words live and die in Genesis seem to have this technical meaning several times. For example, the word "live" appeared in this technical sense in Genesis 17:18. In this verse, Isaac had not yet been born. God promised Abraham that Sarah would bear a son. Abraham responded, "Oh that Ishmael might live before Thee!" Abraham was not asking that Ishmael should have a prolonged physical life. Abraham was saying, "Oh that Ishmael might be the promised child of the covenant!" Live in this context was clearly membership in God's covenant community and perhaps leadership of it.

Timeless Truths

What does it mean to love God and be loved by Him? Love is not just an emotion. It is a life commitment. Both Jesus and the Pharisees agreed that the most important Old Testament command was the famous Shema Israel of Deuteronomy 6, "Hear Oh Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is One, and you must love the Lord your God with all of your heart, soul, and mind." That is what it has always meant to live before God.

### 3) *The Covenant or Treaty Stipulations in Genesis*

When Moses wrote Genesis, he included in it several allusions to the stipulations or laws of God's covenant with His people. These laws appeared in a less formal way in Genesis than in the rest of the Pentateuch because Genesis reflected the form that these motifs took before the Mosaic age. Moses included a number of verses in Genesis that implied a patriarchal knowledge of many covenant commands that would appear later in the Pentateuch. For example in Genesis 39:9, Joseph asked Potiphar's wife how he could commit this great evil and sin against Yahweh. This was a clear statement that Joseph understood adultery to be a sin against Yahweh.

Moses' claims to a patriarchal Age knowledge of God's law can also be seen in Genesis 18:19. In this verse, Moses recorded God's claim that He had chosen Abraham so that he would command his household to keep Yahweh's way. Then in Genesis 26:5, Yahweh reminded Isaac that Abraham's blessings would be passed on to him because Abraham had obeyed God, and had kept God's charge, commandments, statutes and laws. There was a very striking similarity between this passage and Moses' words in Deuteronomy 11:1. Both passages use four law words. Three of the four were identical in each passage. The fourth word was especially interesting. Moses used the word *torah*, or law, in Genesis 26:5, while he used instead the word *mishpat*, or judgment, in Deuteronomy 11:1. If Moses had believed that God's law was first given on Mount Sinai, he would almost certainly have reversed his use of these words. In the structure of the book of Deuteronomy, verse 11:1 summarized the whole Mosaic legislation. Genesis 26:5 could only be a claim by both Yahweh and Moses that Abraham had already known and obeyed God's revealed law.

Moses taught the wilderness generation that God's law was not a new or temporary thing. The same law given to Israel at Sinai had already been given in some form to their fathers. The wilderness generation had simply inherited an expanded version of a covenant which God's people had always possessed. This would have added to the law's authority, and may have increased Israel's sense of security as they tried to follow it. All of this material may have been added to Genesis to place God's covenant with the wilderness community in its historical perspective. God had always been loyal despite the failure of His people. God had always revealed His law whether or not people obeyed Him. God had always called His people to faith and obedience. So the wilderness community should live in faith and obedience to God.

### Timeless Truths

So often Christians want to see the Old Testament age as the period of law while the New Testament age was the period of grace. That is not based on a very clear reading of either testament. God's grace, His love, and His law flow into each other. They can not be completely distinguished. Love is not a feeling. It is a commitment that requires action. Both law and grace flow together down through history from the Garden of Eden to the present time. If you demand your own way, you do not really know or love God. It is easy to create your own designer god

and fall down before him. It is easy to pretend that god is anything that you like, or that he approves anything that you want to do. If you want to serve the God who made the earth and who holds it in His mighty hands, you have to worship and serve Him as He really is. That requires faith, love, and obedience to an eternal standard that is unchanged by your opinions about it. It requires opening your heart to the One who is really there.

#### *4) Moses and the Covenant Blessings in Genesis*

As was noted earlier, one treaty feature seen in Genesis was the presence of blessings and curses. Every treaty in the ancient Near East contained curses that would harm anyone who violated the treaty. The 2nd millennium BC treaties also contained a corresponding list of blessings which would be poured out on those who remained loyal to the treaty. In Genesis, Moses used the motif of covenant or treaty blessings and curses in a number of ways. Some of these were rather general. In Genesis 12:1-3, Moses noted that Yahweh would bless Abraham. Yahweh would then bless those who blessed Abraham, and curse those who cursed him. In Genesis 24:60, Moses added a blessing given to Rebekah by Laban and Bethuel. The notion of blessing and curses in Genesis was taught most clearly when Moses recorded the blessings that flowed in the patriarchs' lives from obedience and the suffering that came from sin.

#### Timeless Truths

My generation has failed to pass on to the next generation one of the most important truths of life. That truth is the simple fact that actions have consequences. A whole generation in Western Europe and North America has come to believe that it can do anything that it wants to do. The world does not actually allow that. When we live according to the rules and principles of God's Word, we will usually have peace and our lives will work well. When we disobey God's law, we bring on constant troubles, grief, and emptiness. The wages of sin will always be spiritual and physical death, while God's gift is life in Christ.

#### *5) The Blessing of a Promised Land*

When Moses included treaty blessings and curses in Genesis, he stressed that Yahweh had earlier promised to Abraham the treaty or covenant blessings that He now promised to Israel. The first of these blessings was the promise of a land. It could be argued that the promise of a land may have begun as early as Genesis 2:2. This verse noted that God rested from all of his works. From the Inter-Testamental Period down to the Middle Ages, both Jewish and Christian authors have interpreted this passage as a promise pointing forward to God's eternal rest in the Eschaton.

In Genesis 4:14-16, Moses recorded that God drove Cain not only from the region around Eden, but also from God's own face. Cain's son Enoch founded the first human city. This city replaced the Garden of God with a city named after man. While Enoch founded a city, Genesis 4:14 noted that Cain became a vagrant and a wanderer on the earth. Moses recorded in Genesis 7:10-12 that God judged Cain's culture with a God's great flood that destroyed the land. Then Moses recorded in Genesis 8:21-22 that God removed the curse that He had placed on the earth, and made eternal promises about the earth's preservation. So in a partial and limited way, Moses

suggested that the new earth of Genesis 8:21-22 was the uncursed land promised in Genesis 3:15.

At least a corrupted memory of this promise may have been preserved in several ancient Near Eastern nations. Most commonly, the ancient Near East recognized that the land belonged to a god, and the god gave the land to whoever he chose. The Sumerians in Mesopotamia claimed that the god Enlil had marked off the boundaries of Ningursu and Shara. They believed that Enlil owned the earth and gave it to whomever he wished. After 2300 BC, the Semitic ruler Sargon claimed that the god Dagan had given him all of the lands in the west. This also suggested that the land was owned by a god and was given to the man of his choice. It is striking that the land given by Dagan to Sargon was the Amurru homeland of the West Semitic people. Similar ideas appeared in other texts from Mesopotamia.

A related motif was expressed in a number of Egyptian texts. The Egyptians viewed the whole broad band of land on their eastern horizon as God's Land, because of the nature of their underworld beliefs. The Egyptians often called Syria, Lebanon and Palestine God's Land. For example, the 18th Dynasty ruler Thutmose III ordered plants samples from God's Land to be gathered during his campaigns in the Levant. Amenhotep III claimed to have cut cedars in the mountains of God's Land, and to have dragged them over the mountains of Retenu, or Lebanon. The texts from Egypt and Mesopotamia demonstrated the common assumption that territory belonged to a god, and that the god could give it to whoever he chose.

The settled and semi-nomadic populations of the ancient Near East saw the promise of a land in rather different ways. The settled populations often saw their own cities as gifts from their gods. Semi-nomadic populations included at least a remnant of believers who searched for a future promised land and a future promised city. This remnant preserved God's promise to Adam that the curse would one day be removed from the earth. This remnant tradition might stand behind Hebrews 11:8-10. This passage claimed that Abraham had lived in tents while looking for a city with foundations whose builder and maker was God.

In the Old Testament, this idea took quite a different form than in the rest of the ancient Near East. In the Old Testament, God gave the land as a promise instead of an ethnic right or a right of conquest. The Old Testament was dominated by the promise of a future land. It is probably no coincidence that the early Semitic Amurru were associated with Palestine, and that a believing tradition led by Melchizedek was still found there in Abraham's time. Palestine was God's land. It was the land that Yahweh claimed as His own special possession. Palestine was the goal toward which Abraham was led when he was called from Ur of the Chaldees in Genesis 12:1. The boundaries of the Promised Land were spelled out in passages like Genesis 15:18-21. However, Palestine was never a land given to Abraham and his heirs. It was always just a land promised to them as an inheritance and the land to which God's people traveled.

When Moses wrote Genesis, he gave a dominant position to the ideas of coming to the land, leaving the land, and returning to it again. Several times, members of the patriarchal household left the land, or attempted to leave the land. Each time, the faithful remnant was brought back by God. In Genesis, those outside of the covenant of promise usually left the land forever. This tradition of leaving and returning climaxed in Genesis 15:12-21. Abraham was told that his heirs would leave the land to return after 400 years in captivity.

During Joshua's conquest, Israel was brought into the land of promise. Yet even then, the land was not given to Israel. It was only promised to them. The land belonged to God. The Israelites were always only temporary tenants on God's land. They were heirs waiting to inherit the land when God would finally fulfill His promises to them. Throughout the Old Testament,

God's people always remained wanderers. They wandered as sojourners looking for their eternal home. In Leviticus 25:23, Moses recorded Yahweh's declaration that the land belonged to Him, and that the Israelites were just strangers and sojourners with Him. God's people would remain strangers and exiles in the Promised Land until the Babylonian captivity.

### Timeless Truths

When Cain murdered his brother, he was sent out from God's presence to become a wanderer on the earth. People make nations and empires so that they can feel at home in a foreign land, but everyone is in the end a wanderer. Believers wander too, but they wander here below while they look for their heavenly home. They are promised a land where Christ will rule His people in peace forever. Abraham looked for a city with foundations whose builder and maker was God, and all of us who serve Abraham's God really look for the same thing. Our home is not here below, but we will go home some day.

### *6) The Blessing of Dominance*

The second covenant and treaty blessing that Moses recorded in Genesis was the promise of dominance. This promise may also have been rooted in the Garden of Eden. As Yahweh's faithful vassals, Adam and Eve had dominance over all of Yahweh's creation. Adam's sin lost much of this control of creation, but it was not entirely lost. After Adam was driven from the garden, the promise of dominance became a key eschatological motif and it was also in a limited way a contemporary experience for God's people.

The promise of dominance was an important motif for Israel in Moses' day. In Deuteronomy 28:7-10, Moses recorded God's promise that Yahweh would cause Israel's enemies to be defeated before them, and all the people of the world would fear them. As long as Israel obeyed God, Moses promised that they would dominate their enemies. In Genesis 9:26-27, Moses recorded that Noah had given Shem sovereignty over Canaan and spiritual responsibility for Japheth. Noah's promise to Shem created a power struggle between the descendants of Shem and Canaan. That power struggle has had an impact on ancient Near Eastern history that has echoed down to the present day. It is interesting that Noah's curse on Canaan came as a result of Ham's sin. Yet the curse was not announced against Ham.

Moses explained in Genesis 10:6 that Ham's sons were Cush, Mizraim, Put, and Canaan. The descendants of Cush seem to have settled in Mesopotamia, and they may have been part of the Ubaid and Uruk cultures. Ham's son Mizraim became the father of the Egyptians, and Put seems to have been associated with the African nations. Canaan was associated with some of the nations in Syria and Palestine. Out of all these descendants, Noah only gave the Semitic people a right to dominate the Canaanite population in the Levant. God did not give Shem's descendants the right to dominate Egypt or Mesopotamia. It is interesting in this regard that the Israelites never in their long history tried to gain control of Egypt or Mesopotamia. Semitic people did at times control regions where the descendants of Canaan lived. The history of the ancient Near East recorded the struggle for dominance between the Semitic and non-Semitic populations of the ancient Near East. It can be seen, for example, in Sargon's East Semitic empire and his conquests of western Mesopotamia and the Levant.

The promise of dominance may stand behind God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:3. Here Moses recorded God's promise that He would bless those who blessed Abraham, and curse

those who cursed him. This suggested that opposition to Abraham was also opposition to God. This promised dominance may also have been in the background behind a number of other passages. In Genesis 22:17-18, Moses recorded God's promise Abraham that his heirs would be like the sand on the seashore, and would possess the gates of their enemies. This was a direct promise of military dominance. In Genesis 24:60, Moses recorded Laban's blessing to Rebekah in similar terms. Laban blessed Rebekah by expressing his wish that she become thousands of ten thousands, and that her descendants possess the gate of those who hated her. The fact that Laban gave this blessing suggested that this was not a uniquely patriarchal blessing. It may have been instead a common West Semitic blessing that was only inherited by Abraham. Moses recorded in Genesis 27:29 that the promise of dominance was passed on by Isaac to Jacob. Isaac's blessing decreed that the peoples should serve Jacob, and the nations bow down to him. It decreed that his brothers should bow down to him. It also decreed that those who cursed him would be cursed by God, and those who blessed him would be blessed by God. In Genesis 37:8-10, Moses reminded Israel that Joseph had gained his brothers' enmity when he claimed this promise for himself.

To some degree, the promised dominance was already a reality in the patriarchal community. In Genesis 14:14, Moses noted that Abraham had led a force of 318 men who had been raised in his household. In Genesis 23:6-11, Abraham was called a Mighty Prince because of this force. So Abraham was a dominant power in the region. Moses may also have implied Abraham's dominance in Genesis 16:9. Here, God commanded Hagar the Egyptian to return to the patriarchal home and to submit herself to Sarah's authority. The promise of dominance may also have been reflected in Joseph's rise to become vizier over all of Egypt.

The promise of dominance was always closely tied to the idea of a divine warrior. God Himself promised that He would fulfill His promises to His people. One way that He would fulfill His promises was to fight personally on their behalf. Moses gave an example of this in Genesis 12:17. Yahweh struck Pharaoh's house with a plague because he had taken Sarah into his palace. Moses also used the divine warrior theme when Yahweh intervened directly in history. For example, Genesis 18:20-21 declared that God would personally go down to Sodom to bring the city before His court of judgment.

The promise of dominance was also closely related to the promise of a messiah. The messianic motif in the Old Testament was grounded in the famous Proto-Evangelium that Moses wrote in Genesis 3:15. That passage has been interpreted in a number of ways, and it was at least in part a Messianic promise pointing forward to Christ's victory on the cross. The promise that Moses recorded in Genesis 3:15 may also have been fulfilled in a now and not yet way in every human deliverer that God provided for His people. The first of these promised deliverers may have been Noah. In Genesis 5:29, Moses recorded Noah's parents reaction to his birth. Noah's parents hoped that he would give them rest from their toil on the ground that God had cursed. Noah's flood was a "now and not yet" promise of God's final, eschatological judgment on the whole earth. In Genesis 8:21-22, Moses recorded God's promise that the earth after Noah's flood would no longer be cursed by God in the same way that it had been cursed before the flood. So there was a real sense in which Noah did deliver the earth from God's curse. However, Noah was at best only a partial and very imperfect representative of the future promised deliverer.

The promise of a future deliverer ran through Scripture from that time forward. Before Moses was born, Job declared in Job 19:23-27 his faith that his redeemer would one day come, and at the last would take His stand upon the earth. Job expanded on this faith statement in an amazing way. Job declared that he would see the promised redeemer with his own eyes, even

after his death. In Genesis 49:8-12, Moses recorded Jacob's promise that the scepter would not depart from Judah until He came to Whom it belonged. Later in Numbers 24:15-17, Moses recorded Balaam's prophecy that a future ruler from Judah would crush the forehead of Moab, just as the promised Deliverer in Genesis 3:15 would crush the Serpent's head. These early Messianic promises were followed by a long list of messianic promises that ran throughout the Old Testament.

#### Timeless Truths

Adam was created to keep and tend the Garden of Eden. He was the vassal ruler of the whole earth obeying and serving the High King. We all share to some degree the authority that God gave Adam. We are all called to administer God's earth. However, most people do not want to serve the High King. They want either to have power themselves or to serve a different god who will give them the power that they seek. One of the basic and primal characteristics of human will is a desire for power. Many sins grow from a desire for power over others. So one of the more important issues in life is whether you will choose to fight for your own power or whether you will serve God, respect His authority, and administer His kingdom with patient love.

#### *7) The Blessing of a Blessed Mission*

The third covenant or treaty blessing that Moses recorded in Genesis was the promise that God would raise a nation that would bless the world. This promise may also have begun in the Garden of Eden. It may appear in a shadowy way in Genesis 1:28. Here Moses recorded God's command to Adam and Eve that they be fruitful, multiply, and fill the whole earth. This command was given to them before they revolted against God. Moses recorded a similar command to Noah and his sons in Genesis 9:1 and 9:7. Shem's descendants spread abroad in obedience to this command. The first clear reference to a blessed nation may have been recorded by Moses in Genesis 9:25-27. In this passage, God decreed that He would be the Lord of Shem's descendants. The descendants of Shem were given dominance over the descendants of Canaan, and spiritual responsibility for the descendants of Japheth.

Moses recorded that Abraham had inherited this promise in Genesis 12:2-3 when God called him from Ur of the Chaldees. God promised that He would make Abraham into a great nation, and make his descendants a blessing. The nation promised in Genesis 12 grew through four centuries in Egypt. It was formally established as a nation at Sinai. It became a vehicle for preserving God's Kingdom on earth, and a vehicle for teaching God's Word to the nations. It was eventually the vehicle which God used to raise up His Son and bring salvation to the world. In its fullest meaning, the promise of a great nation was a promise of Christ Himself. The nation founded at Sinai was partly a typological promise pointing forward to Christ's eternal Kingdom when the Lord would rule among His vast people forever.

#### Timeless Truths

God works through His people. God shows His love for the world partly by encouraging His people to share His love with others. That's one of the keys to making a church grow. Churches need good programs, strong preaching, good coffee, and a good location. None of those things

are as important as love. When people feel God's love shared by people in the church, they are drawn to it. When they don't feel wanted or loved, they eventually drift away.

#### *8) The Covenant or Treaty Witnesses in Genesis*

Another treaty concept in Genesis was the appeal to witnesses. In the international treaties, various gods were summoned as witnesses to the treaty. When Moses wrote Genesis, he included in the text a number of allusions to treaty witnesses. Abraham gave Abimelech seven ewe lambs in Genesis 21:30. Moses wrote that these ewe lambs were intended to serve as a witness to the treaty between Abraham and Abimelech. In Genesis 31:44-52, Moses recorded that Jacob and Laban had made a covenant. When they did so, Moses noted that they selected a stone pillar and a heap of stones as witnesses to their treaty. In Genesis 31:53, Moses concluded his account of this treaty with their request that the God of their fathers watch, or judge, between them. In Genesis 16:5, Moses included a rather similar appeal to God as a witness. In this verse, Sarah said to Abraham, "May the Lord judge, or watch, between you and me." These verses appealed to God to be the ultimate witness to their covenant relationship. God would be the divine judge in a covenant or treaty lawsuit instigated by a voluntary breaking of these covenant responsibilities.

#### *Timeless Truths*

A key part of any covenant is the role of witnesses. They hear the promises of the covenant. When the covenant is broken, they testify to the terms of the broken covenant. All Christians are called to be witnesses. This does not mean that they are called to pass out tracts to people at the mall. They are called to tell people what God has done in history and in their own lives. They are called to warn people about the consequences of breaking His covenant, and they are called to assume people of God's love, His presence, and His grace.

#### *9) The Covenant or Treaty Lawsuit in Genesis*

Moses included in Genesis historical details that resembled the covenant trial or lawsuit pattern. Meredith Kline noted that Form Critical analysis has seen a legal-court pattern in both Genesis 3 and 4. Kline suggested that God first brought Adam into court for his rebellion in the Garden of Eden. God summoned Adam to trial in Genesis 3:9. God questioned the witnesses in Genesis 3:9-13. It is interesting that God did not question Satan. Yahweh then announced His verdict and sentence in Genesis 3:14-24. Yahweh's sentence decreed that the serpent would be cursed. It would crawl on his belly and eat dust all of its life. This was a prophecy that pointed down through the years to the Eschaton. Isaiah 65:25 promised that in the Eschaton, the lion would eat straw like an ox, while dust would still be the serpent's food. Neither would harm other creatures because the knowledge of the Yahweh would fill the earth as waters filled the sea. So a restoration of covenant knowledge would restore the ideal conditions of Eden. This may suggest a continuity of treaty terminology from Genesis to Isaiah.

Moses noted that part of Yahweh's sentence included His decree in Genesis 3:15 against the demonic presence within the serpent. Passages like Revelation 20:2 identified this ancient Serpent as Satan, the devil, and the ancient accuser of God and man. Genesis 3:15 promised that Satan would be defeated in the future. A promised descendant of Adam and Eve would one day

crush the Serpent's head while driving its poisonous fangs into His own heel. So the promised Son would give up His own life in order to defeat the Serpent.

Yahweh also brought Cain into court for murdering his brother. This trial motif can be seen again in Genesis 4:9-15. Cain complained that he would be hidden from God's face because of God's judgment. Cain had wanted the protection that would come from God's presence. Cain feared that without God's judicial protection, he would be killed as he had killed Able.

#### Timeless Truths

God knows what happens in the world, and He cares enough to do something about it. People tend to see God as a loving heavenly Father who affirms whatever His spoiled children decide to do. That is foolishness. Sin hurts people. God loves people enough to have limited tolerance for the hurt that sin causes. In His time, He will hold His final covenant lawsuit and remove from the earth those who reject His rule and who hurt His children. Those who reject God's rule in their lives will be sentenced to live forever in a place where they will be cut off forever from His presence. That will be a terrible thing for them. God's presence brings life and peace. Life outside of His presence will know only violence, grief, and emptiness forever.