

The BIG Picture

After the last men's breakfast, some of us were discussing where certain events in the Bible fit. When do Israelites start being called "Jews", for example? How does the line of Abraham become Israel and what about the other descendants of Abraham? As we go along through the Old Testament, in particular, it's sometimes hard to figure out just where we are. When we've studied Ezekiel and Daniel and then go back 150 years to Hosea and the end of the northern kingdom, it can get confusing. So I want to teach the whole of Bible history in 30 minutes so that you can see more easily how things fit together, so you can have a context for the specific historical and cultural situation which any book of the Bible might reflect.

First of all, what is the geographical context for the Bible and what people groups occupied that geography? The region known as Mesopotamia has been called "The Cradle of Civilization". The word means "between the rivers" and most of its population through the centuries has lived between or near the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The Sumerians of the 3rd millennium BC were a collection of city states, each trying to be the top dog in the region. One of those was the city of Akkad, which was populated by Semitic people -- Semite is a term that describes a language group, a group that includes Arabic, Hebrew, Ugaritic, Syriac and many others. The Akkadians rose to power under their king Sargon around the year 2300 BC and, by conquering territory from modern day Iran to the Mediterranean, he built the first empire. It lasted for about 200 years and then dissolved back to being a bunch of small kingdoms as it had been under the Sumerians. One of the chief cities, and one that produced some powerful rulers was Ur, which was very near the Persian Gulf. And in the city of Ur lived a man named Terah, who had a son called Avram, or Abram. They set out together as a family to move from Ur to the land of Canaan, but Terah settled them in Haran where, eventually, he passed away.

In Genesis 12 we read the call of Abram to leave Haran and go to the place of God's choosing, a place where God would establish him and make him great, a place from which God would bring blessing to the whole world. This is a key passage in human history, so let me read the final part of God's promise:

All peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Gen. 12:3)

This is a clear revelation of God's plan. He has placed His call on Abram, a Semite, which means he is a descendant of Noah's son Shem, and through this one man, God will bless all the nations on earth. The key to understanding human history from that point on is to see how God preserves this one man's line. So let's follow it through the centuries and note what God says about how He will bless the world through Abram, whose name, when he was 99 years old, God changed to Abraham.

Abraham had two sons in his first 100 years of life: Ishmael, who was the child of his wife's maid servant Hagar. His second was Isaac, the son of his wife Sarah. When Sarah witnessed Ishmael mocking her and Isaac, she demanded that Hagar and Ishmael be thrown out of the household. Abraham loved Ishmael and didn't want to have him gone from them, but God promised to look after the young man and so he

and his mother were sent away. Ishmael had twelve sons who became the leaders of twelve clans -- the Bible later refers to them as princes, or tribal rulers (Gen. 25:16) and they are considered one of the principle sources of today's Arab nations.

After Sarah's death, Abraham married Keturah, who bore him six more sons, including the fathers of the Asshurites and the Midianites. These, too, seem to have been early ancestors of today's Arab people groups. Ancient Arabs were required, by the law of blood revenge, to know the names of their ancestors back four generations. So the prophet Mohammed traced his lineage all the way back to Ishmael, although there are enough gaps that we can't do the same today. We know that Ishmael's descendants spoke a form of Arabic, not unlike the Arabic language of today.

But God had told Abraham that the promise would be fulfilled through the son that Sarah bore to him, and that son was Isaac. Isaac married Rebekah and they had twin boys, Jacob and Esau. By God's choosing, Jacob was the child of promise and through him, God would bring His blessing to the world. Esau's descendants became the Edomites and they lived in hostility to Jacob's family line.

One other family connection before we move on: Abraham had a nephew named Lot who came to Canaan with him. Lot had two daughters who gave birth to sons. The older daughter bore Moab and the younger daughter gave birth to Ben-Ammi. Their descendants became the Moabites and the Ammonites which play prominent roles in Israel's later history.

Now, where does the name Israel come from? Jacob was running away from his father-in-law Laban, who had been treating him badly and he was about to encounter his brother Esau, whom he had cheated out of his birthright and his father's blessing. He was encountered by an angel who wrestled with him and he demanded that the angel bless him before he let him go.

Then the man said, "Your name will no longer be Jacob, but Israel, because you have struggled with God and with men and have overcome." (32:28)

Israel means "he struggles with God" and that became both Jacob's new identity and the destiny of all those who came after him. They were now God's people, and their struggle would be in relation to His purposes for them.

Jacob had twelve sons, who became the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. These twelve sons had families of their own and Jacob, or Israel, became a patriarch, the head of a family of 70 people ... at least, that was the number who began the sojourn in Egypt, probably near the middle of the 19th century B.C. When the exodus occurred, the population of Abraham's descendants had grown to 600,000 men, which implies approximately 600,000 women and the likelihood of something close to 400,000 children under the age of 12, for a total of 1.6 million. After a generation had passed away in the wilderness, Israel's population was nearly the same, and so somewhere close to 1.6 million people came to occupy the Land of Promise as well as the regions just to the east of the Jordan River.

What were the tribes? They were named for the sons of Jacob. He had loved Rachel and worked for her father for seven years, only to be given her older sister in marriage first. He then married Rachel and the two rival wives gave Jacob their servants to bear them children as well. So, the sons of Israel were as follows:

The children of Leah: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar and Zebulun. (their birth order is indicated by the number beside their name on the screen).

The children of Zilpah, Leah's slave: Gad and Asher

The children of Rachel: Joseph and Benjamin

The children of Bilhah, Rachel's slave: Dan, Naphtali

Those are not the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, though, because there were actually 13 tribes, two of them named for the sons of Joseph: Manasseh and Ephraim. But only 12 tribes were given a portion of land within Canaan, because the Levites were set apart to serve in the temple and were supported by the other 12 tribes who gave them a portion of each harvest. So there are 12 tribes to which land was apportioned once the conquest of Canaan was mostly complete.

I'm skipping by a bunch of important details ... things like Moses and the law, the conquest under Joshua, the period of the Judges, so that we can focus on the big picture items. Remember that God had promised to bless all nations through Abraham's descendants and that promise is still in effect as we draw near to the time of the kings.

The last of the judges was a man named Samuel and he served Israel, not only as their judge, but as prophet and priest as well. But his sons didn't honor God the way Samuel had done for his whole life, and so the leaders of Israel didn't want Samuel's leadership role handed off to his sons -- and they asked for a king. Their first king was a tall man from the tribe of Benjamin named Saul, and he started well, but ended up distant from God, self-reliant and insanely jealous of a young man named David, who would become the next king of Israel.

Why is David so important? God made some specific promises to David, much as He had to Abraham, and it is the nature of those promises that makes David a very important figure in the history of Israel. Let me read some:

Yahweh declares to you that Yahweh Himself will establish a house for you: When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom . . . (2 Samuel 7:11b, 12)
Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before Me; your throne will be established forever (v. 16)

David's response to this promise is also important:

How great You are, O Sovereign LORD! There is no one like you, and there is no God but you . . . And who is like Your people Israel -- the one nation on earth that God went out to redeem as a people for Himself, and to make a name for Himself, and to perform great and awesome wonders by driving out nations and their gods from before Your people, whom You redeemed from Egypt? You have established Your people Israel as Your very own forever, and

you, O Yahweh, have become their God. And now, Yahweh God, keep forever the promise You have made concerning Your servant and his house. Do as You promised, so that Your Name will be great forever. Then men will say, "Yahweh Almighty is God over Israel!" (7:22-26)

God makes a promise to David; David affirms it and asks God to follow through, and the promise basically says that the line of Davidic kings, kings that are descendants of David and which rule over Israel, will never end. That can mean one of two things: there will be a continuing succession of kings descended from David who will rule over Israel or there will be an eternal king come from David's line whose throne will be established forever. And David says, "Wow, who am I?" and then asks God to do whatever it takes to glorify the great name of Yahweh in all the earth.

David's son is Solomon, who started well, but ended up with 700 wives and that cannot, and did not, lead to him ending well. He built a beautiful and glorious temple for Yahweh in Jerusalem, a temple which would stand for over 300 years, but the kingdom of twelve tribes would not last beyond Solomon's reign. His son, Rehoboam, would break it in two, just out of youthful arrogance, and be left to rule over the tribe of Judah and the Levites, with a few who came from the other tribes out of loyalty to the line of David or to the temple and the worship of Yahweh. What became known as the northern kingdom, or Israel, were led by their first king, Jeroboam, into a new religion, the worship of two golden calves. Their kings were evil idolaters, and their nation lasted just over 200 years.

Let's look at a timeline, with the understanding that exact dates are difficult to confirm. But most scholars would put Abraham's birth at around the middle of the 22nd century BC - one suggestion is 2166 BC, which means Isaac was born in 2066. On this timeline, the children of Israel would have gone to Egypt in 1875 BC and the exodus occurred in 1446. The fall of Jericho would have taken place in 1406 and the period of the Judges began in 1374, with Othniel. This period in Israel's history lasted a surprisingly long time as Saul was not named king until 1043, 330 years after Othniel. And this long stretch is only described in the books of Judges and Ruth, plus the first few chapters of 1 Samuel which describe its closing days. Samuel anointed David as the next king in about 1024, but he wasn't made king of Judah until 14 years later and he wasn't made king over all Israel until 1003. He lived until 970 and was succeeded by Solomon, who built the temple and who reigned over a united Israel until his death in 931, the same year in which Israel split into the northern kingdom and the southern kingdom of Judah which was under Solomon's son Rehoboam.

209 years later, in 722, Israel was defeated by Assyria and was deported, taken into captivity, dispersed in the regions around the Euphrates River. Another 117 years passed before Daniel and some other young men from Judah were taken by the rising power of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon and trained to serve in his court there. This was followed by a series of exiles of the people of Judah: in 597, in 586 and perhaps in 582. Unlike the deportation of Israel and the resettling of the land north of Judah with people from other nations, the exile of the Jews was temporary,

lasting, for most families, less than 70 years. You'll notice that the people of Judah are now called the Jews -- this is repeatedly emphasized in the book of Esther -- although the Bible often refers to them as Israel, not in the political sense, but as descendants of Jacob who's called Israel.

Into that timeline, I want to insert the names of some of the key prophetic voices that brought God's words to His chosen people. 863 BC marks the beginning of the ministry of Elijah and 12 years later he is taken up to heaven in a chariot and succeeded by Elisha and we are able to follow him for maybe four years of ministry. The first of the writing prophets, Obadiah, records the vision the LORD gave him during these years. In the 760's we encounter the prophet Amos, at the end of that decade Jonah is sent to Nineveh and in less than 10 years from Jonah's story come the prophecies of Hosea.

Then comes the great Isaiah, who prophesied for nearly 30 years, through the collapse of the northern kingdom and until near the end of the 8th century BC. In about 627 BC Jeremiah receives his call to prophesy from Yahweh. Then, early in the sixth century, Ezekiel begins to prophesy. During the years of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the young Daniel interprets dreams to Nebuchadnezzar and prophesies in visions of future earth-shaking events. In 537, the first of the exiles return to Jerusalem, the Temple rebuilding project is begun in 535 and completed in 515. Far away from Jerusalem, Esther became the queen of the Persian Empire in 478 BC and she helped to rescue the Jews from destruction five years later. The scribe Ezra returns to Jerusalem in 458 and Nehemiah in 444. The last of the prophets, Malachi, wrote late in this same century, while a century earlier, Haggai and Zechariah had recorded their prophetic words.

The Gospels are mostly descriptions of Jesus' ministry, which took place, most likely in the late 20's, say between 26 and 30 A.D. Matthew and Luke record information about the birth of Jesus, which took place before King Herod died in 4 BC -- so, probably around 6 BC. The events that are described in the book of Acts are from the year of Jesus' death and resurrection, right up until 63 AD after Paul has been in custody in Rome for 2 years.

That's a quick tour of over 2000 years of history now, what does all this have to do with God's promise to His friend Abraham? And what about the promises He made to King David? After all, the last king of Judah went down with the last siege of Jerusalem in 586. God's promises were, of course, looking far into the future, to the time when He would send His Son to this earth.

Jesus was a Jew, which means that He came from the line of Judah, the great grandson of Abraham and the son of the man whose name was changed to Israel. Jesus was also a descendant of King David, also from the line of Judah, as the genealogies in both Matthew's Gospel and Luke's, tell us. Jesus is an eternal king. His rule, according to the promise God made to King David, will never end. And through His Kingdom, all nations on the earth have been blessed, are being blessed and will be blessed.