

## Survey of the Bible

### Notes from 10-20-19 Class

At the end of the last class, we were looking at the oldest, and one of the longest sustained, narratives of the bible, and that encompassed Genesis 2-50 and Exodus 1-20. This is a lot of material, 70 chapters, so let's review what we've said about it so far.

We called this genre a saga, albeit a unique kind of saga, one of a kind actually. In terms of its structure it begins in a series of four myths (stories that reveal the world view of a people). These four myths are:

1. Adam and Eve
2. Cain and Abel
3. Noah and the Flood
4. The Tower of Babel

These myths are succeeded by four histories, but it might be more correct to say four legendary histories. A legendary history is one that is thought to be historical but cannot be corroborated as such. These are the histories of:

1. Abraham
2. Isaac
3. Jacob
4. Joseph

The first three of those histories are of the so-called patriarchs. When we left off last month, we were discussing Noah, so let's open our bibles to Genesis chapter 8. We talked last month about how God was intent on destroying his creation because they were nearly all irredeemable in one way or another, but that God saved the best guy he could find along with two of every animal, and then God sent the floods and that everything that had the breath of life from God (the nephesh chayyah, or God's spirit) was destroyed. And then the flood subsides and eventually the earth gets dried up again.

So let's pick it up at Genesis 8:18 – Noah went out with his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives, and every animal and bird. They all finally get out of the ark, and what is the first thing they do? Noah builds an altar to the Lord and took every clean animal and every clean bird and offered burnt offerings. So in their way, they're giving thanks that the flood had subsided and they're now standing on terra-firma again. And when the Lord smelled (more anthropomorphism) the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of human kind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth, nor will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done." So note this: Human kind hasn't changed. The flood did not change humankind, even though Noah was blameless in his generation (at the time of the flood), the flood didn't really change the basic problem. The inclination of humankind is evil from youth. So humankind hasn't changed, but God has changed. This is the punchline I promised last time, because this is God's great pivot. He goes from annihilating wrath to a policy of mercy.

We had added up what these myths are disclosing last time, and I had said the first thing they disclose is that humankind, by nature, is prideful and that pride is a species of sin. I had said that in sin's enactment, humankind receives knowledge of its guilt, which it is resourceful to deny or evade. We also learned that humankind lives out its days in a seemingly cursed or inhospitable environment. We also learned that alienation from God breeds alienation within humankind, and that alienation within humankind looks like disunity unto violence. Then a snowball effect occurs, because alienation from God breeds alienation within humankind, which presents as disunity and violence, and that disunity and violence leads to further alienation from God, which leads to further alienation within humankind, more disunity and violence, more alienation from God, and so on, in a never

ending spiral. Crash and burn mode. In our stories, crash and burn mode is where humankind was at when we get to the story of Noah. In Noah we were done, because God finally said I regret making you, I'm going to blot you out. But now this punch line I was talking about gives us another step, which is: Annihilating wrath will not be God's response to this whole train wreck. Instead, God will show mercy. He will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of humankind is evil from its youth, nor will He ever destroy every living creature as He had done. So God's annihilating wrath *pivots* in the direction of God's endless mercy.

Becca gave an example of how wrath can pivot into mercy with a story of how her son, Herry – when he first got to the US – was overwhelmed and probably frightened by the television, having never been exposed to one before. The first time he saw it he threw something at it and cracked the screen. She tossed it out and bought a new one, and the next day he did the same thing again. Becca was initially very angry, but when she saw how troubled and sorry he was, her anger dispersed and she felt sorry for him and forgiving. Everyone probably has a similar story, so that pivot from wrath to mercy is not wholly unfamiliar to us. It doesn't just happen with parents, people can experience it with friends or acquaintances as well.

So now we can read on. With this being the thrust of Noah, God makes a covenant to that effect. This is the first covenant mentioned in the bible, and note that it's a covenant made as broadly as a covenant can possibly be made. It is to cover *all* humankind, *all* creation, for *all* of time. Look in Genesis 9:8 – then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “As for me, I'm establishing my covenant with you. You and your descendants after you and every living creature that is with you or comes after you. I will establish my covenant with you that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy all the earth.” God said, “This is a sign of the covenant that I made between me and you and all living things and all future generations I've set my bow in the clouds. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember my everlasting covenant between God and all flesh that is on the earth.

This is the first biblical covenant. And if you need proof that the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth, look at Noah in his old age. Noah has got the infamy of being the first alcoholic in human history. Genesis 9:18 – The sons of Noah were Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Ham was the father of Caanan (so Caanan was the grandson of Noah). Noah got drunk one night and lay uncovered in his tent. This is not exactly a beaming portrait of a guy. Ham stumbles on him, saw the nakedness of his father, and called his two brothers over and they all layed a garment over him. So when Noah awoke, he went crazy. He was not only an alcoholic, we was a verbally abusive alcoholic. When he woke up and knew what his younger son had done to him (and what did he even really do? He just covered up the guy's nakedness so no one else would see it), Noah said, “Cursed be Caanan.” So he's cursing his grandson. Obviously, it was the best way he could think of to hurt his son by hurting his grandson. He cursed him to being a slave to the slaves of Ham's brothers. So here is Noah projecting his own guilt onto his son and his grandson. Humanity – evil from its youth.

So then it's Noah's lineage that repopulates the earth, and that brings us to the tower of Babel. Look in Genesis Chapter 11. This is the last of our myths. At this time, the whole earth had one language and one nation. And as they migrated from the east (whenever you hear them refer to the east in the bible, they are referring to Mesopotamia, the Tigris and Euphrates rivers area), and came upon a plain in Babylon, and they said to one another, “Come let us make bricks and burn them thoroughly, and let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens and we can make a name for ourselves. So they all seemed to be getting along for once, right? But it was only so that they could exert their *collective* pride. They're literally making a tower that storms heaven. So their pride is now expressing itself in this great human achievement. The Lord came down to see this city (anthropomorphism) and this tower and he said, “Look, they are one people and they have one language, this is just the beginning of their hijinks.”

Here God decided to go down and confuse their language and scatter them everywhere, and the Hebrew word for confusion is babel, so that's where we get the 'tower of babel'. God scattered humankind across the face of the earth and they left off building that city and the tower. So scattered by land/nation and language, humankind awaits God's merciful response to sin. Now this, mind you, was written in 950 BCE, 950 years before the coming of Christ. The old testament is asserting all this – that humankind has got a prideful, sinful nature, that we are always going to attempt to enthrone ourselves in God's place as we inevitably enact our nature and become aware of our guilt. We're living in this seemingly cursed environment and we're alienated from God and therefore alienated from each other, and are on a downward spiral of sin and alienation, but that God's reaction to us now will be mercy instead of annihilating wrath, and we become scattered over the earth to await the coming of Christ, God's ultimate act of mercy.

You can see that these stories all set the scene for the call of Abraham, which we will turn to now. Now we get to go from myth to history (albeit legendary history as most of these things can't be corroborated). We're jumping to the four histories which disclose God's merciful response to humankind's sin. Those histories again were: Abraham, his son Isaac, Isaac's son Jacob, and then Jacob's son Joseph.

We're turning now to the account of Abraham, which is a certain type of legendary history. This is a journey narrative. And that is just exactly how it sounds. It's a narrative of a journey, and it tends to be episodic in nature. But before we transition from myth into history, there's two important changes to take note of: 1) is that we go from a focus upon generic humankind (general human traits or actions, or a focus on all humankind) to a focus on one particular people. SO you could almost diagram it like this...



The focus of the bible is very wide initially, looking at all of humankind in one generic pot, and then it narrows down, starting in Genesis 12, to focus very narrowly on one people, the people of Israel, through the rest of the old testament. This continues even throughout much of the new testament as well, but then at the very end of the new testament, the book of acts, the focus goes out wide again.

The second thing to take note of in terms of the change from myth to history is that in fact we are now on historical footing. We're not in the land of story anymore. There are different pillars that scholars use to draw that conclusion, because as I said this is legendary history, it can't be proved or corroborated outside the bible. So why do scholars think this is actually history? Three types of reasons:

1. The Names – particularly Abraham and Jacob. These are names that were popular around 1900 BCE, when these events were deemed to have taken place. If you want to date things historically, names are an easy thing to rely on. If I said to you, "I'm going to go visit three women, Josephine, Alvira and Henrietta, and hopefully their friend Mabel will be there," would you think I'm talking about people of this age? No. If I said I was going to read about Prospero, would you think I was going to read the newspaper, or would you think I was going to read some Shakespeare? So you can date something easily by names, and the names here hale from about 1950 BCE.
2. The social customs – the social customs described in this section of the bible hale from about 1950 BCE. The most obvious example would be polygamy. This is a polygamist era. And it has nothing to do with any feminist charge of patriarchy or anything, these women were very happy with the arrangement. They would defend it. For every one man, they needed ten women. They had great community together. It was a necessity, because if your family didn't rise to around 300 people, your clan would be dead, killed by larger clans. Period. A man needed to have ten or twelve wives, and they needed to have a lot of kids and a lot of servants and they needed to have a lot of animals to survive. By the time King David comes around, people have a nuclear family more like we have, one man and one wife. Maybe some of

the people living way out in the sticks had more than one wife, maybe a couple, especially if one is barren, but this is not a custom anymore by the time of David. The only other people who would have had more than one wife by David's time would have been men of great wealth or importance. Who's gonna tell a guy like that "No"?

3. The general history – the general history that is described here reflects the general history of around 1950 BCE. Specifically, during that time scholars know there was a great migration from Ur (where Abraham's ancestors came from) through Haran, down into the region of Israel. So that is what Abraham reflects.

While I'm on the topic of biblical history, you have to cut the bible a little slack in the way it records history. Today we have this notion that history has to be very sterile, we want it to be recorded in a very scientific way, almost as though we have only facts. That's not the way the bible was written. Oftentimes the bible's history is more like a Paul Bunyon story. Paul Bunyon is actually historical. If you know anything about the way Minnesota, Wisconsin, Michigan and parts of Canada were cleared, you know that men were clearing huge forest not with chainsaws, but with their bare hands and hand tools. These men were huge, strong determined people. And the way that history is recorded, they are all personified in one giant guy, Paul Bunyon. No one wrote down each guy's name, and his body measurements and how many trees exactly he took down. Instead their stories are told with a sort of folkloric license. In the same way you have to have a sort of interpretive latitude to get what the bible is presenting as a history. This is not to say that it didn't happen, it just isn't recorded history the way we expect to see it today.

Now we can leap into the Abraham account, which as I said is a journey narrative, which is one of the most popular forms of narrative that's ever been written. Not surprisingly, journey narratives tend to be episodic in nature. The way the action moves forward is not necessarily around a finely developed plot, instead it's around the episodes on the journey. We can look at it for its essential episodes. We'll cut out a lot of the side stories, say the ones about Lot, and focus just on the episodes that are important to Abraham. There's one kind of cadence or drumbeat you'll notice in this history and that's this: There's an episode that represents God's promise, and then there's an episode that represents humankind's imperilment with God's promise. Then there's another episode that represents God's promise, and another episode that represents humankind's imperilment of that promise, and so on throughout this history.

God elects Abraham, and actually does promise him nationhood (that from his issue there will arise a great nation) and then this general promise of blessings. So there adheres in this promise the need for an heir, because as the curtain rises, Abraham is rather long in the tooth, and his wife is barren. So let's begin with Genesis chapter 12.

Now the lord said to Abram, go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will give you. So Abram went, as did his foil, Lot, his nephew. At this time he's 75 years old, so he's no spring chicken. In the bible they give these patriarchs very old ages, like 125 years, as an honorific. As a way to highlight their exalted position. When he departed from Haran, he took his wife Sarai as well, and they set forth to go to the land of Caanan, which is going to become Israel. Abram journeyed on in stages toward the Negeb. So there's our first episodic promise: Journey to the land I tell you to go, and I'll make of you a great nation. But look what happens next, there's an act of imperilment in that Sarai ends up in a foreign king's harem (Pharoah). So how in the heck are they going to get to Caanan if Abram doesn't even have custody of his wife? I think I've said before that the bible does not idealize anyone. It offers even its heroes as people with feet of clay. It does not idealize any part of humankind except Jesus Christ. So here we see the feet of clay of Abraham. They get to Egypt and he realizes that his wife is very beautiful, and he fears that he will be killed so that someone can steal his wife, so he asks her to pretend that he is her brother instead. Pharoah actually does think she's beautiful and so takes her into his harem. This is not gallantry on Abram's part, he's basically pimping off his

wife to save his own skin. Really, how much could she have wanted to go into Pharaoh's harem? But that's her fate because he wants to save his own hide. For her sake Pharaoh dealt well with Abraham. He gave him sheep, oxen, male and female donkeys, male and female slaves, dogs, camels, etc. He's taking remuneration for his wife to save his own hide. But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues, so Pharaoh called Abraham to him and said, "what in the world did you do to me? Why did you say Sarai was your sister? Why in the world did you let me take her for my wife?? Take her and get out of here."

Now Abraham has his wife back (plus an awful lot of goods as well, because he didn't give any of it back). After that we see another episode of promise, Chapter 15, in which the bible records the first biblical covenant made to the insipient people of Israel. God had made these open-ended promises before, but now he firms it up with a covenant. Chapter 15 says, "After these things, the word of the Lord came to Abraham in a vision, 'Do not be afraid Abram, I'm your shield and your reward shall be great.' " But Abram is still doubting, he says, "How can all this be, because I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eleazar of Damascus." In those days, if a man died childless, all his property went to his head servant. That's another social custom of around 1950 BCE. But the word of the lord came to him and told him that Eleazar would not be his heir, only his own issue would be his heir. He brought Abram outside and told him to look toward the heavens and try to count the stars. That his descendants would be as numerous as the stars. And he believed the Lord, and the Lord reckoned that belief as righteousness. That's an important line in the old testament for a couple reasons. Anything that gets picked up by the new testament gains importance in hindsight, and this idea is picked up by the new testament writers. The other reason this is important is that it describes Abraham's salient trait as *faithfulness*. He is known for his faith; he is the champion of faith, the friend of faith; the father of faith.

So his faith is great, but it begins in fits and starts. It culminates in the sacrifice of Isaac, so that's the association you can make with Abraham, he's the faithful one. And it's kind of hard to refute that, since he is the founding father of three of the world's five largest religions. His faith was so magnitudinous that it has impact to this day. So we come to this covenant with Abraham, and this is a covenant, not just a promise. Whenever the word covenant is found in the bible, the verb before it is not 'make' a covenant, but 'cut' a covenant. And the reason for that is found in this next section. We find that covenants are often ritualized by a cutting that we are about to see. But even if the covenant is not ritualized by a cutting, it's still referred to as 'cutting' a covenant (they're just being kind of sloppy about the covenant, or rushed, so they don't actually do the cutting).

In Chapter 15:7 we read about the cutting of this covenant. God tells Abram to bring him a heifer three years old, a female goat three years old, a ram three years old (nobody knows why they had to be three years old), a turtle dove and a young pigeon. Abraham brought him all those animals and he cut them in two, and then arranged the halves opposite each other so that it made an aisle down the middle. The way the ritual is going to work is that the animal halves are going to be set on fire, and the parties of the ritual are going to walk down the center. The idea is that God is going to look down at all this fanfare and agree to take part in the covenant. In 15:17 we see the enactment of this covenant. The sun had gone down, so it was dark, and a smoking firepot and flaming torch passed between the pieces. This is meant to be kind of an image or representation of God. So God is at once a party to and a guarantor of this covenant. And it's a covenant to the effect of those initial promises. Abraham's descendants will be as numerous as the stars and he'll get this land (and the boundaries of the land are delineated in the covenant).

So then we move on from this promise to the next act of imperilment. Now we're going to see Sarai's feet of clay. She's really bad news if you ask me. The imperilment we have is that there is a false heir coming along. Sarai is barren, and she has an Egyptian slave girl named Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram that he should have sex with her slave girl so that she (Sarai) can have children through the slave girl. This is about ten years after God first spoke to Abram, and Sarai seems to just not believe the promise God made and she's getting impatient for a son. So Abram took this Hagar as a concubine wife, which back then just connoted a second class of wife.

Not the primary wife, but a lesser wife. And sure enough Hagar conceived, so now there's a little reversal. She may be a second class wife, but she's got the heir. Apparently then she started to look with contempt on her mistress, and Sarai got mad about it. She wished that the wrong done unto her would be on Abram instead (though how it was his fault no one could say). So imperilment – we have a false heir.

But then we have another act of promise. I know it seems like these promises are reiterated and reiterated, but look in chapter 17:1 There are two signs given that really portend the fulfillment of these promises. When Abram was 99 years old, God came to him again, and reiterated the promise that God was going to make him extremely numerous. And he also changed his name from Abram to Abraham. We previously mentioned that people were named for their essential identity, so God changes his name from Abram (which meant exalted ancestor) name to Abraham (which means ancestor of a multitude). So the name change is the first sign that God's promises would be fulfilled, because why change his name like that if he didn't really intend to follow through. The second sign we see in chapter 17:10 – God tells him that every male among his family should be circumcised on the eighth day. Again, why would he give Abraham this rite of circumcision if the people weren't going to come into being?

So we should be looking now for another act of imperilment. Let's skip to chapter 20. The act of imperilment is a reiteration of the imperilment Abram found when going through Egypt. As I mentioned before, this whole enormous section of the bible is a blending of different a couple different voices. Abraham probably did not go to another land and do the exact same thing he did in Egypt, which was to prostitute his wife to save his own skin, but the writer was combining different stories that told essentially the same thing and he didn't want to lose one of them. Because they were told from a slightly different perspective, it wasn't exactly the same story and needed to be preserved. We don't need to read it because it's essentially the same thing.

Now we're up to another episode of promise, and this one is a biggie. It's the birth of the heir, Isaac. Look now in chapter 21. The Lord dealt with Sarah as he had promised. Sarah conceived and bore Abraham a son in his old age and they gave him the name Isaac. Abraham circumcised his son as God had commanded. The name Isaac means laughter, because Sarah and Abraham had both laughed when God said they would have children at their old age. We had mentioned what a jerk Sarah was, and here we read another episode of that in action. On the day Isaac was weaned, which was when he turned three years old, they had a celebration, but Sarah saw the son of Hagar (who Sarah had pushed Abraham into bringing into the world) playing with Isaac, and demanded that Abraham cast her out so that he could not inherit anything from Abraham. Abraham was pretty distressed because Hagar's son was also still his son, but God told him not to worry about it, that he would make a nation out of Hagar's son as well (which we know was the nation of Islam). So Abraham rose early and gave Hagar a little bread and water and sent them out into the desert. It was really lucky they even lived. If God hadn't been looking out for them, they surely would have died, so nice job Sarah.

But now we come to the punchline of the Abraham story. And that is the sacrifice of Isaac. That breaks this cadence of promise and imperilment, and it's kind of a jarring crescendo, but it makes sense that it would end like this. This is a difficult verse, and when you have a difficult verse all the great minds tend to weigh in on it. Some of the greatest interpreters of the bible were those that were outside of biblical criticism (or biblical study). Men like Abraham Lincoln, for example, was all over the old testament, so much so that he was actually governing based on his interpretation of the bible. Kierkegaard, Augustine, Athanasius, Barth, Lewis, were all great biblical thinkers outside of biblical scholarship/criticism.

Now we're up to Genesis chapter 22. We'll read through it and I'll tell you not what biblical critics say about it, but what other great thinkers have said. So in Chapter 22 we read that after all these other things happened, God tested Abraham. He went to him and told him to take his only son Isaac, and go to Mariah and offer him as a burnt offering. Abraham took his son to the place God had told him to go, and collected wood for the burnt

offering, and made his servants wait for them a ways off (naturally he would not want them to see what he was about to do). He had Isaac carry the wood, and he set up a little altar and was getting ready to sacrifice Isaac (forging ahead even though Isaac was asking, "We have the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb daddy?"). Abraham says, (better than he realized), "God himself will provide the lamb." Abraham built an altar and bound his son up and laid him on top of the altar, and was about to kill his son when an angel of the Lord came and stopped him and told him that he has proved that he fears God because he didn't withhold his only son from him. A ram turns up stuck in a nearby bush to take Isaac's place in the sacrifice.

So what do people say about this passage? Dietrich Bonhoeffer says that what we need to focus on is the passage at the very beginning that says, after all Abraham went through, God *tested* him. Abraham's *faith* was being tested. If his faith is so great that he's willing to not only sacrifice his son (a son he probably cannot replace because after all he's 100 years old), but all the promises that attached to him, then he gets to be the patriarch. Isaac was safe all along. All God wanted him to do was to demonstrate a *willingness* to do what he had commanded, a *willingness* to act on the faith he seemed to have in God. Once he did that, the sacrifice was no longer necessary. If he hadn't demonstrated that willingness, then he wouldn't have been the patriarch. Isaac never would have been considered for a sacrifice, and God would have started over with someone else. The topic sentence is the interpretive key. It was also pointed out that the entire passage is written as if God was testing Abraham to see if he would be willing to do what God already knew was going to have to happen with his son, Jesus. Per CS Lewis, this is one of the proofs that the old testament may and must be read Christologically.

We will pick up here in the next class.