

Wilderness and Hill Country

- founding families and the events of the Exodus

FOUNDATION FAMILIES

Enigma of the origins

□ Many 'clues' but no 'proof'

Only with the stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, do we begin to deal with Bible narratives that fit into periods of history that we can attempt to date with any certainty. And yet we are still unable to date them with any accuracy. Archaeology has done much to give us a picture of the life and customs of the first quarter of the second millennium BC, and the stories of the founding families fit perfectly into that environment. However, none of them left their mark on any inscription of their day, and no event of which we can be certain at the moment can be linked with any that are mentioned in the Bible. So while archaeology gives numerous 'clues' that harmonise with the stories it has so far not given us any 'fix' to provide the vital proof of when exactly they did live.

□ 'Truth' and not 'legend'

The stories of the founders of Israel are unique in their concern with herds-people and tent dwellers of little significance. When you compare them with the 'origin stories' of all other nations (eg. Egypt, Babylonia, Greece, Rome, India, China etc.), you see the contrast, because they begin with tales of demigods or at least royal families, never peasant nomads. There is a 'truth' about Israel's origins that the legends of other nations cannot match. It only goes to emphasise that her existence does not depend upon mythical aristocracy but upon the grace of God (Dt 7:7-8).

Who were the Hebrews?

□ A distinctive title

The Bible portrays the founding families as people of peace, avoiding clashes with neighbour if possible, but able to use weapons well if the occasion demanded it (cf. Gen 14). We see them as nomadic herdsmen moving from place to place. In certain Bible passages the founding families, and other Israelites, are referred to as 'Hebrews', but only in certain contexts:

- When a foreigner is speaking about them;
- When they are identifying themselves to a foreigner;
- When they are being spoken of as one group among a larger group.

□ A social class

We know that about 2000 BC there arose a group of people within the population of Mesopotamia known as 'Apiru' or 'Habiru'. Scholars are certain that the name refers to a 'social class' of people and not an 'ethnic group'. They seem to have been 'wanderers' and 'outsiders' without citizenship or a fixed place in society. Sometimes they would hire themselves out as servants, at other times they were semi-nomadic herders moving from place to place, on other occasions they served as mercenary troops, others became musicians and craftsmen settling down in urban areas. Their name 'Habiru' seems to



mean something like 'donkey driver' or 'caravaneer'. Its root meaning appears to have been 'dusty', referring to the dust raised by the donkeys on the much-traveled road. In simple terms they were the 'gypsies' of 2000 BC!

□ **'Habiru' and 'Hebrew'**

The link between 'Hebrew' and 'Habiru' seems obvious, especially when we see the kind of people to whom the title was given. Both Ur and Haran were great trading centers. Abraham and his family are called 'sojourners', moving from place to place, having shallow roots. If he were a 'donkey caravaneer' it would explain how he could call some 300-armed servants to aid him at short notice (Gen 14). We know that Pharaoh Ramases II (most likely the Pharaoh of the Exodus) enslaved many of the Apiru, and there can be little doubt that the children of Israel were among them.

Customs and lifestyle

□ **Living in 'nomads land'**

The founding families were semi-nomads, living in tents, constantly wandering the hill country between Dothan and Beersheba in search of pasture and springs (not plentiful in the soft limestone rock). We know that until about 1700 BC this hill country was free to nomads, but that the plains and the valleys (where they rarely went) had settled populations and were less accessible to nomads. It is also interesting to note the towns mentioned in the stories of the Patriarchs:

- Abraham is closely linked with Mamre, near Hebron;
- Isaac spends most of his time in Beersheba, in the South;
- Jacob moves in the area north of Jerusalem, Bethel and Shechem.

Archaeology has shown that each of these sites were major settlements between 2000-1700 BC.

□ **Customs ring true**

. A few examples are:

- Abraham complains that having no son Eliezer will be his heir. (Gen 15:2; cf 24:9). Nuzi text shows that childless couples could adopt a slave as a son and that they became the legal heir. However, any natural son born would immediately take precedence.
- Sarah (Gen 16:1-4) and Rachel (Gen 30:3) both give slave girls to their husbands in order to have children by them. Nuzi text again shows us that this was the accepted custom (sometimes an obligation). Again, any natural son would assume priority, but the expelling of the proxy child was forbidden.
- Laban accuses Jacob of stealing the 'household gods' (Gen 31:30-35). Why was this significant? Archaeology has shown that these may have been title deeds to property.

□ **The Jordan Valley**

Archaeology has raised some interesting questions about the population of the Jordan/Dead Sea Valley. The Bible describes Sodom and Gomorrah as the 'cities of the plain' in an area 'as fertile as the Garden of Paradise', but that they were destroyed 'by fire from the Lord'. Surveys of trans-Jordan and the Dead Sea area show that before 2000 BC



it was settled and well populated, but that suddenly and inexplicably during the period of 1900 BC it became nomadic. Is this fact related to divine destruction?

□ **Dating the families**

All the evidence above allows us to fit the founding families naturally into a period between 2000-1600 BC, though for the reasons mentioned earlier a more precise dating is difficult at the moment. Genealogies are not very helpful as they are almost certainly incomplete.

Faith and character

It is important to see the founding families against the customs and history of their times, but we must never forget that they are important because of the spiritual message they proclaim through their encounter with, and obedience to, God, and the outworking of his covenant promises to them.

These stories of the founding families are the prologue to the climatic events of the Exodus. The God who speaks to Moses at the burning bush is the same God who spoke to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

The stories of each of the families are important, but we shall focus on Abraham (Gen 11:27-23:20). He not only serves as an example for each of the others, but from a biblical perspective he is clearly the most significant of all.

'The Father'

Within Israelite history Abraham stands plainly and simply as 'the Father', and that of 'all Israel'. In the same sense he is the example of how each person should live before God. To the Jew, throughout the centuries, he has always been 'our Father Abraham' (cf Matt 3:9; Jn 8:39).

Experience of God

Abraham came from a home in which many gods were worshipped (Josh 24:2). It is clear that his understanding of God was one that was unfolding and growing. He probably believed that other gods existed, but for him, the God whom he was following was 'the Lord God of heaven and earth' (Gen 24:3). In all practical terms he was the only God that existed.

The gods of his day were linked to geographical areas, so the striking thing about Abraham's experience is that the same God is with him wherever he travels.

An important point to notice is the unique way in which an individual name is linked with God. He is 'the God of your father', Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Ex 3:6); this did not happen to anyone else. He was 'the God of Israel' because he was 'the god of the fathers'.

Throughout Abraham's life God unfolded his character through the distinctive names by which he revealed himself:

- 'El Elyon' - 'God most high' (Gen 14:8-20), with Melchizedek;
- 'I am your shield' – (Gen 15:1) 'his next of kin', in the night vision;



- 'El Shaddai' - 'He of the mountain' (Gen 17:1), probably 'God Almighty';
- 'El Olam' - 'Everlasting God' (Gen 21:33).

Call and promise

God spoke to him first when he was in Ur (Gen 15:7) and later in Haran (Gen 11:32). The call was in the form of a promise, the elements of which are very clear:

- 'Go to a land that I shall show you' (inheritance);
- 'I will make you a great nation' (children);
- 'By you shall all the families of the earth bless themselves' (universalism).

This laid an immovable foundation stone in Abraham's heart upon which everything else was built. The promise was repeated in different forms at different times throughout his life:

- At Shechem (Gen 12:7) - 'to your descendants will I give this land';
- Separating from Lot (Gen 13:16) - 'descendants as the dust of the earth';
- After Melchizedek (Gen 15:5) 'number the stars .. so shall your descendants be';
- The promise of a child within a year (Gen 17:21,18:14);
- After Isaac was offered (Gen 22:16-19) - 'multiply your descendants like sand and stars, they shall possess the gate of their enemies, by them all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves'.

Covenant making

During a terrifying night vision (Gen 15) God stresses the solemnity of the promise to Abraham in physical form by the 'sign' or 'seal' of a covenant. Covenant is one of the most important single ideas in the Bible and we shall explain it more fully when we reach Sinai. At this point only the briefest comment must suffice:

- God is being bound to Abraham, emphasising love, giving him reassurance and confirming the divine promise
- God gives two signs that the divine word to Abraham will be fulfilled:
 - God changes the name 'Abram' to 'Abraham' and 'Sara' to 'Sarah'. This inclusion of the 'honorific H' emphasises status; God had his hand upon them;
 - Abraham is told to circumcise his family as a 'sign' in their flesh that they were in covenant with God.

Faith and the final test

Abraham is the scriptural model of faith and trust in God, the one who 'hoped when there was nothing else to hope for'. Nevertheless, we see him frequently doubting, needing reassurance, and when the divine promises did not seem to materialise he tries to help them along by his own efforts. However, the Bible's commentary on his life is clear, 'he believed the Lord, and he reckoned it to him as righteousness' (Gen 15:6). His every fibre was tested and shown to be up to standard. This is most clearly seen in his final years when Abraham faced the supreme test on Mount Moriah over Isaac, now a young man. Remember that to sacrifice the firstborn was common practice at this time, so it was not only a test of faith but also of God's character. At the close of the story we sense God's joy as well as Abraham's.



God's chosen one

It is impossible to summarise this spiritual giant, this 'father of Israel', in so few words. He is marked by his sensitivity to God's word and his obedience to it. He is called 'God's servant' (Gen 26:24), a title of great honour emphasising nearness to his master. He is also called 'God's friend' (2Chron 20:7). With Abraham we see God's 'election' at work, that electing love which will unfold through him to all Israel, and ultimately for the blessing of all people (Gen 12:3, 22:18). The call of 'election' is to 'service' before 'blessing', which can only ever be the fruit of 'faithfulness'. This is the responsibility that lay upon Abraham and lies upon all the subsequent people of God. So the 'God of Abraham' is to become the 'God of the nations'.

Hearing and response

The voice of God vibrates through every element of salvation history. It calls everything into being (Gen 1:3) and to its conclusion (Rev 22:17). When God called, "Adam, where are you?" his fear and guilt deafened him to the love that filled the words. Subsequent history echoes with the same call. As we shall see, it will fall on many deaf ears, but there will always be those in each generation who reply, "Speak Lord, for your servant hears" (1Sam 3:9). Abraham heard and responded, and he is the example of the kind of person God is looking for with whom he can fulfill his purposes.

EGYPT AND BEYOND

Egypt

The late Bronze Age saw a period of Egyptian domination in the Middle East, which meant that her neighbours, including Canaan became intricately involved with Egypt and her affairs. Along with most other population groups of the region, the Canaanite city states Egyptian domination led to a deterioration of indigenous culture.

By 1525 BC Egypt had been reunified and became both militarily and economically strong. It was at this point that Canaan became important once again to Egypt, which resulted in Egypt increasing attacking and laying siege to Canaanite cities.

Rameses II's battle at Qadesh against the Hittite armies provided the limit of Egyptian power. The coastal plains and northern valleys of Palestine was the route for the Egyptian forces as they travelled north to meet the Hittites and these lands remained important routes for on-going Egyptian domination.

Rameses II built a new capital in the eastern Delta, Per-Ramses, which is one of the Egyptian cities said to have been built with Hebrew labour.

Over time the power of the Egyptians waxed and waned according to internal political affairs and economic strength, but throughout the life of Canaan was closely linked to Egyptian strength.

Phoenicians

The Phoenicians were descendants of the Canaanites who had lived on the coast and who, at the end of the second millennium BC, became isolated by changes in the regions



around them. The name derives from the purple coloured dye, which they used in their highly prized textiles.

The major Phoenician cities were Tyre, Sidon, Byblos and Arwad and were a confederation of independent maritime traders. By the late eighth century BC, the Phoenicians had founded trading posts around the entire Mediterranean, the greatest of which was Carthage on the north coast of Africa.

Sudan

Sudan is the largest country in Africa and it is here that the kingdom of Kush (c. 2500-1500 BC) was established in the Nile valley, the oldest sub-Saharan African kingdom. It was at its most powerful around 1700 BC which brought it into conflict with Egypt, resulting in the eventual defeat of Kush.

The Indus

The Indus Valley Civilization is also known as Harappa civilization and was one of the world's first great urban civilizations. It was based in the river plains and surrounding area in what are now Pakistan and western India.

It was an urban culture that dominated the region for at least 700 years, from 2600 to 1900 BC and traded widely; there is evidence for trade contact with cultures in the Arabian Gulf, West and Central Asia and peninsular India.

Ancient China

Ancient China includes the Neolithic period (10,000 - 2,000 BC), the Shang dynasty (c. 1500-1050 BC) and the Zhou dynasty (1050-221 BC). Each age was distinct, but the wealth of objects that have been excavated show that in all periods great heights of sophistication were reached in terms of art, pottery and metal work. Similarly all dynasties were hierarchical and the ruling elite dominated.

MOSES AND THE EXODUS

Leader, prophet and lawgiver

□ A dominating influence

The scene changes from the story of a family to the story of a nation¹. The focus falls upon Moses, the first of many to stand as a representative of Israel. He is a towering figure who dominates the story of the Hebrews from Egypt till they stand at the threshold of the Promised Land. In fact Moses casts his long shadow over the whole of Israel's subsequent history and thought; in him all threads converge.

¹ It has been said that all the stories in Genesis are set either in, or near to, the family tent which gives them their unique intimate feel; from Exodus on they have a much wider perspective

□ **Man for all seasons**

We meet Moses in the most varied of situations:

- He is a privileged youth in Pharaoh's court; being technically prepared for much of the work that lay ahead of him (Acts 7:22);
- He is at the edge of the desert in Midian alone with his flock; this was spiritual preparation;
- He is representing his people before Pharaoh, fighting for their freedom and leading them out of bondage;
- He is leading the people through danger, distress and discontent in the wilderness;
- He is standing on Sinai in interface with God on the people's behalf and receiving details of the divine covenant;
- Finally, within sight of the Promised Land, he issues last instructions before dying and being buried by God himself.

□ **Meekness and strength**

Moses clearly had an enormous impact on his contemporaries:

- He had personal magnetism and was held in admiration by all;
- There was also resistance and a deep-seated fear of him;
- When the people failed to have faith in God's saving power they rebelled against Moses, God's representative and chosen leader;
- Even his family let him down; in the Golden Calf incident (Ex 32), in jealousy and criticism over his marriage (Num 12);
- He is remembered as 'meek' [controlled] and 'forbearing' (Num 12:3);
- He stood as intercessor and mediator between people and God.

The fact that he was not perfect (Num 20:10-ff.) is not the amazing thing, but rather that he fulfilled his commission from God with a 'stiff necked' people (cf. Heb 11:27). Moses was personally prepared to be 'cursed' that they might be 'blessed', this shows his calibre.

□ **The greatest prophet**

We tend to think of a 'prophet' as a phenomenon of later Israel, but scripture calls Moses prophet 'par excellence' (Dt 34:10).² In fact the clearest biblical example of the relationship between a prophet and God is seen in the relationship between Moses and Aaron when taking the message to Pharaoh (Ex 4:15-16; 7:1). He is the model for all prophets to come:

- Moses' distinctive and intimate relationship with God, with frequent encounters in the wild grandeur of the Sinai landscape; God communed with him uniquely 'mouth to mouth' (Num 12:8);
- Moses' distinct prophetic role is seen in the fact that he was the messenger who brought the terms of the Sinai covenant to the people; he is the 'lawgiver' of Israel, laying the essential foundations for its future life.

² Do you think that Moses would appear on any spontaneous list of prophets written by the average Christian?



Revelation of the divine name

□ Whose authority?

The most important events in Moses' life prior to the Exodus itself were the two occasions when God spoke to him and revealed the divine name. The first incident was at the 'bush that burned' (Ex. 3:1-ff.); the second followed his initial rebuff from Pharaoh (Ex. 6:1-ff.). On both occasions he is:

- Reminded of God's promise to their fathers;
- Assured that God knows of their present bondage;
- Commissioned to take the Hebrews into a land 'oozing with milk and honey';
- When Moses asks whom he should say has sent him the reply that God gives is the most profound revelation of the divine name in scripture; a key moment in salvation history. Remember that a name is always a revelation of character.

□ Sacred letters

The two scriptures (Ex 3:14; 6:2-3) need to be studied together. Moses is told that 'Yahweh' has sent him. In Hebrew we have just four consonants YHWH, called the 'tetragrammaton'. We are uncertain of the pronunciation as vowels were only written down much later. To make sure this sacred name was not misused the vowels from 'Adoni' (Lord) were inserted, making the hybrid name Jehovah'.

□ Form of the verb 'to be'

While much is uncertain, what we do know is that the name is linked to the verb 'to be'. Further, it is the name of a person and not a title like the other names for God. The name emphasises God in personal terms. Nevertheless, we are left with the difficulty of how to translate this powerful, abstract and liquid phrase. There are a number of possibilities:

- There are those that emphasise God's 'being'; 'The One who is'; 'The One who will be', or 'The Eternal One';
- There are those that emphasise God's 'activity'; 'The One who causes to be', 'I will be what I will be', 'He who causes to come into existence'.

Perhaps there is no satisfactory translation; this only emphasises the profound nature of God and the importance of this moment of revelation³.

Exodus and history

□ Date of the Exodus

This is one of the complex and disputed subjects of Biblical studies, with conflicting and uncertain evidence in both scripture and archaeology. Suffice it to say that there are two possibilities; a date in the 15th century BC. and a date in the 13th century BC. The majority of scholars opt for the date in the 13th century on the strength of archaeological evidence tying in with biblical statements. There are scriptures that seem to demand a 15th century date but both archaeology and later biblical chronology then become difficult (especially

³ Note God's style; revealing his character (name) in just four letters, and we no longer know how to pronounce it or how to translate it!



the period of the Judges); a date around 1290 BC. seems to be the most acceptable for the Exodus **'Way Out'**

The 'Exodus' itself is prepared by the series of 'ten plagues' that reach their climax in the death of the Egyptian 'firstborn' and the celebration of the 'Passover Meal'.

We see in the plagues a blending of human freedom and God's sovereignty. Pharaoh hardened his own heart (Plagues 1-7), but by the eighth plague [locusts] we are told that he was so locked into this pattern of behaviour that 'the Lord had hardened his heart' (Ex 10:20). So God's purposes are sealed without his violation of freewill.

Why did the plagues take place? There appear to be three reasons:

- To execute judgment upon the Egyptians;
- As a 'sign' to the Hebrews that God was with them;
- To make the Egyptians willing to let the slaves go free.

There is no event in scripture that has left its mark as clearly as 'the Exodus'⁴. It is referred to time and again, and its symbolism recurs throughout the Bible, frequently in the New Testament. It is the clearest picture of 'salvation' (individual and national) within the context of history, and it prepares our understanding for the all-embracing salvation brought into being by Jesus.

The route of the Exodus is another uncertainty. The main reason for this is that, while the Bible provides clear names of all the places, Sinai has never had a settled population to establish them and their location is now lost. Even the identification of Horeb/Sinai is uncertain. Tradition identifies 'the mountain of the Lord' as Jabel Musa (2244m.) at the tip of the Sinai Peninsula. However, there are also strong arguments for identifying it as Jabel sin Bisher, half way down the Red Sea coast, taking the route through the centre of the peninsula.

Covenant and Law

□ Threshold of revelation and relationship

On a day now unknown, a group of Hebrew people, escapees from Egyptian labour camps, known to one-another as the 'children of Israel', stood before the austere slopes of Mount Sinai. They had no idea of the significance of what was about to take place, that one of the greatest moments of history was about to break upon them, and God the Creator, the one who had shown his salvation to them in the Exodus, was about to establish an unbreakable relationship with them out of the sheer grace of his heart (cf Dt 7:6-8)

□ Call to Covenant

God calls the people to covenant (Ex 19:3-6). In his initial statement to Moses he sets the scene and lays out the terms perfectly in a few pungent sentences.

⁴ it has been estimated that the imagery of the Exodus occurs 30% more times in the whole of scripture than any other single image



'Covenant' is a fundamental biblical concept. The Hebrew word is *berith* the root of which seems complex, containing the ideas 'a bond', 'a fetter', 'to cut' and 'to eat', all of which are significant. It implies an 'unending' relationship between God and people, sealed by 'sacrifice' and concluded by the sharing of a 'meal' to illustrate the 'harmony' it has created. It is the linking of two parties who were previously unrelated; ie. there could never be a *berith* between two family members as they are already related by blood.

These opening verses of the Sinai Covenant put the whole *berith* idea into biblical perspective:

- It is God who takes the initiative (v4). He does it freely; he is not under any obligation to act in this way (v5). The mystery of election;
- The picture is that of a conquering warrior issuing terms to a people he has brought to surrender. There is no sense of a 'bargain'. He reminds them of what he has done for them, they are in his debt (v4);
- He demands 'obedience', central to Israelite covenant faith (v5);
- They are to be a 'kingdom of priests' and a 'holy nation' (v6); these are unique terms in the Hebrew Bible. They speak of Israel's universal mission; they are prophetic of the New Covenant also.

□ Holiness and Covenant

The seriousness of covenant making is seen in the demands made on Israel to prepare for the event (Ex 19:7-25). The biblical word for 'holiness' is *qadosh*, which has the sense of 'belonging to' and 'separate from'. This awesome event called for them to be separate from daily things as the terms would lead them as a nation to be 'different from' the world because they 'belong to' God. God's 'separateness' is also emphasised. Holiness is the displaying of God's character in their lives because they belong to him.

□ Heart of the Covenant

The Covenant is made upon the basis of the words of Yahweh (20:1-17). The Covenant establishes their relationship with God, but it requires 'instruction' (Torah – Law) to understand how that relationship is to work out in practical terms. The Law is a revelation of the character of God to Israel. It is limited both by language, understanding and the ability to obey it. But it is the first step towards that which reaches its fullness in Christ.

Of course the whole Law (from Ex. 20 through to Num. 10, and all of Deuteronomy) makes up that 'covenant instruction'. But the heart of the Covenant and the 'Torah' are found in quintessential form in what the Hebrew calls 'the Ten Words', popularly known as 'the Ten Commandments'. Originally they would have been ten, two word, phrases that have become expanded by oral tradition. Why 'ten' commandments? We don't know - possibly to make them easily remembered on the fingers of two hands!

□ Keystone of the Covenant

As the Covenant is sealed by sacrifice, accepted by the people, and concluded by the eating of a meal (Ex. 24:1-18), we need to remember just how central it is to everything that lies ahead:

- It will shape the social and spiritual life of the nation;
- It will be the basis to which all prophets and reformers make their appeal;
- It is the standard against which the nation and individuals are judged;



- Though it has limitations in its present form it is never disregarded; it is given 'real meaning' in the New Covenant.

Questions and Reflections

1. How were the 'founding families' both children of the promise and yet children of their times? Give two examples.
2. The events imagery and meaning of the Exodus dominate biblical thinking across the testaments. Why do you think this is?
3. What is the significance of 'covenant' in biblical thought?

Reading and Resources

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