

The Patriarchs

Israel's founding fathers—Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the 12 sons of Jacob (Israel)—are known as the patriarchs. The word *patriarch* comes from a combination of the Latin word *pater*, meaning *father*, and the Greek verb *archo*, meaning *to rule*. A patriarch is thus a ruling ancestor who may have been the founding father of a family, a clan, or a nation.

The idea of a binding agreement between God and humankind came before the time of the patriarchs, being first expressed in the time of Noah (see Gen. 6:18; 9:8-17). The growth of the Hebrew nation was promised specifically to Abraham in the patriarchal covenant (see Gen. 15; 17), along with the provision of a land in which Abraham's offspring would dwell. Since several generations elapsed before this situation developed, the covenant with Abraham must be regarded as promissory. The promises made to Abraham established the concept of a people descended through Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who would be in a special historical and spiritual relationship with God.

Abraham, or Abram as he was called in the earlier chapters of Genesis, was a ninth-generation descendant of Shem, a son of Noah. Abram's father, Terah, was born in Ur of the Chaldees, as were his brothers, Nahor and Haran (see Gen. 11:26,28).

At an early period Abraham had testified that God was the Most High God (see Gen. 14:22), the righteous Judge of humankind (see Gen. 15:14), and the Guarantor of the covenant of promise. He experienced close communion with God (see Gen. 18:33; 24:40) and worshiped Him consistently to the exclusion of all other gods. His fidelity and obedience were characteristic features of his personality and made this renowned forefather of Israel (see Rom. 4:1-4) an example of the way men and women are justified before God.

The line of descent by which the covenant was to be perpetuated consisted solely of Abraham's son Isaac; through him the covenant promises were continued. Isaac's name is generally thought to mean *laughter*, but it possibly also conveys the more subtle sense of *joker*. It commemorated the occasion when both Abraham and Sarah laughed at God's promise to provide them with a son in their old age (see Gen. 17:17-19; 18:9-15).

We have very little information about the maturing years of Isaac except that he was used as the supreme test of Abraham's faith in the covenant promises. Under the patriarchal system the father had the power of life or death over every living person and thing in his household. At the very moment Isaac's life was about to be taken, his position as covenant heir was safeguarded by the provision of an alternative sacrificial offering (see Gen. 22:9-13). The circumstances attending his marriage to Rebekah afforded Isaac great comfort after the death of his mother (see Gen. 24:67). Isaac earnestly prayed to God for covenant heirs, and in due time Rebekah became pregnant with twins when Isaac was 60 years old. Esau grew up to be a hunter, while Jacob followed the more sedentary lifestyle of his father by

supervising the family's flocks and herds, moving with them when it was necessary to find fresh pasture (see Gen. 25:27). Isaac unfortunately provoked sibling rivalry by favoring Esau above Jacob. The former brought his father tasty venison, whereas Jacob's culinary expertise seems to have extended only to preparing lentil soup (see Gen. 25:28-29). In a moment of desperate hunger, Esau traded his birthright for some of Jacob's soup, thereby transferring to his brother a double portion of Isaac's estate as well as other rights.

In old age Isaac's sight failed, and when it became apparent that Esau might inherit the extra birthright provision after all, Rebekah conspired with her favorite son, Jacob, to deceive Isaac into blessing him rather than Esau. The success of the scheme made Esau extremely angry. To escape his vengeance, Jacob fled to Mesopotamia on his father's instructions. Before he arrived, he received a revelation from God that confirmed his inheritance in the covenant. Jacob later encountered the family of Laban, the son of Nahor, and in due course married two of Laban's daughters. After some years' absence Jacob finally returned to Mamre, where his father was living, and along with Esau buried Isaac when he died at the age of 180 years.

Isaac's life, though less spectacular than Abraham's, was nevertheless marked by divine favor. He was circumcised as a sign of covenant membership and owed his life to timely divine intervention as a youth (see Gen. 22:12-14). He was obedient to God's will (see Gen. 22:6,9), a man of devotion and prayer (see Gen. 26:25), and a follower of peace (see Gen. 26:20-23). He fulfilled his role as a child of promise (see Gal. 4:22-23).

The life of Jacob, the last of the three great patriarchs, was marked by migrations, as had been the case with his ancestors. Although he lived successively at Shechem (see Gen. 33:18-20), Bethel (see Gen. 35:6-7), and Hebron (see Gen. 35:27), Jacob was basically a resident alien who did not have a capital city.

Just before Isaac's death, God appeared again to Jacob (see Gen. 35:9) and renewed the promise of his new name, Israel. Jacob resided in Canaan thereafter and left only when a famine overtook the land. His son Joseph invited Jacob and his other sons to live in Egypt. As his life drew to a close, Jacob, like his father, Isaac, became blind, but he blessed his sons by means of a spoken last will and testament, after which he peacefully died. His body was embalmed in the Egyptian manner, and he was buried in the cave of Machpelah along with his ancestors (see Gen. 49:30-50:13). Despite his apparent materialism, Jacob was a person of deep spirituality who, like Abraham, was highly esteemed by his pagan neighbors. Despite his fears he behaved honorably and correctly in dealing with his avaricious father-in-law, Laban, and was equally consistent in fulfilling his vow to return to Bethel. Jacob trusted the God he had seen at Peniel to implement the covenant promises through him, and when he died, he left behind a clearly burgeoning nation.

The date of the patriarchal period has been much discussed. A time before 2000 B.C. (early Bronze Age) seems too early and cannot easily be supported by reference to current archaeological evidence. Some scholars have suggested the Amarna period (1500-1300 B.C.), but this presents problems for dating the exodus. The same objection applies to a late Bronze Age (1500-1200 B.C.) period for the patriarchs. The least likely date is in the Judges period or the

time of King David. All of these dates do not allow time for the patriarchal traditions to have developed and for Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to be fitted realistically into an already known chronology. A date in the middle Bronze period (2000–1500 B.C.) seems more promising because of contemporary archaeological parallels and because many of the Negev irrigation systems date from that period.

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