

Unit 2 Introduction

The Four Patriarchs

An elderly leader of a family is sometimes called a patriarch. While we don't usually use the term, we may call one of our grandfathers or great-grandfathers who came to the country and began the family a patriarch. The patriarch of the nation Israel was a man named Abram. He and his wife Sari lived with his father Terah, brother Nahor and wife Milkah, and grandson Lot, at Harran (Genesis 11:27-32).

First Patriarch: Abraham

God called Abram, later Abraham (17:5), to leave Harran and go to the land of the Canaanites. He promised to bless Abraham and make his descendants a great nation (12:1-3). Abraham obeyed and took his wife Sarah and nephew Lot, along with his servants and possessions to the land of Canaan.

Abraham pitched his tent at Hebron, and built an altar to God (13:18). Abraham and Sarah were very wealthy, with one exception. They had no son. Abraham complained to God that he had no son to be his heir. God promised, however, that he would have as many offspring as there were stars in the sky (15:1-5).

God was faithful and when Abraham was 100 years old and Sarah 90, she gave birth to a son, Isaac (21:5-7). God later told Abraham to take his son to a mountain where he was to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering (22:1-2). After three days travel they arrived and Abraham took Isaac up on the mountain. When he took the knife to slay Isaac, an angel called to Abraham to stop him. He had proven that he feared God. In response, God promised again that He would bless Abraham and make his "descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky" and by them "all nations on earth will be blessed" (w. 9-18).

Second Patriarch: Isaac

After Sarah died (23:1-2), Abraham sent his "senior servant," with several camels loaded with gifts, back to Harran to find a wife for Isaac (24:1-11). The servant met Rebekah, the granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor, at a spring. She drew water for his camels and he gave her a gold nose ring and two gold bracelets. Rebekah hastily took him to her brother Laban. The servant explained to Laban that his mission was to find a wife for Abraham's son Isaac. When asked if she would be willing to marry Isaac, Rebekah answered, "I will go. . . Then Rebekah and her attendants got ready and mounted the camels and went back with the man." When they arrived at Hebron the servant "told Isaac all he had done." Isaac took Rebekah into his tent and they were married (w. 12-67).

For 20 years Rebekah was childless. Isaac prayed to God for a son and Rebekah became pregnant; however, it was a difficult pregnancy. Two boys were wrestling within her. Rebekah asked God why there was such struggling. He said, "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the elder will serve the younger" (25:23).

The first born was hairy and red. So they named him Esau, which means "hairy." The second came out grasping the heel of the first. He was named Jacob, which means "he grasps the heel," an idiom for "he deceives" (w. 24-26). Esau grew up to be a "skillful hunter," but Jacob stayed at home. Once when Esau went out to hunt Jacob cooked some stew, knowing that Esau would return hungry. When Esau came back to camp he was famished and asked Jacob for some stew. Jacob demanded Esau to give him his birthright if he wanted the stew. Esau, dying of hunger, took the oath, "selling his birthright to Jacob" (w. 29-34).

When Isaac grew old and nearly blind he asked his son Esau to go hunt for wild game and prepare him some "tasty food" so that he could give him a blessing. While Esau was hunting Rebekah dressed Jacob in some of Esau's clothes and prepared a meal for him to take to Isaac. Jacob, the trickster, deceived his father into giving him the blessing. When Esau returned and found out what Jacob had done, he was determined to kill Jacob after their father died. Rebekah heard that Esau threaten to kill Jacob, so she asked Isaac to send Jacob back to Harran and her brother so that he could marry a woman from there (27:1-46).

Third Patriarch: Jacob

Jacob left Beersheba to go to Harran and stopped for the night at a place later called Bethel. That night God promised to be with him, to give him "descendants like the dust of the earth," and to bring him back to this land (28:10-15). Jacob continued on his journey and came to a well located near Harran. There he met Rachel the daughter of Laban. When he introduced himself she ran and told her father about Jacob. Laban hurried to meet Jacob and took him to his home for he was "my own flesh and blood" (29:1-14).

Jacob loved Rachel and worked seven years to gain her in marriage. On the wedding night Jacob entered the wedding chamber. However, Laban placed the older daughter in the chamber and in the morning Jacob realized he had married Leah. The trickster and been tricked. At the end of the wedding week, Laban gave Rachel to him. While Rachel was not able to bear children, Leah gave birth

to Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah. Rachel then gave her servant Bilhah to Jacob and she gave birth to Dan and Naphtali. When Leah became barren for a time, she gave to Jacob her servant Zilpah and she gave birth to Gad and Asher. Then Leah became able to give birth to Issachar and Zebulun. Eventually God enabled Rachel to give birth to Joseph. These children would grow up to become the tribes of Israel (29:22—30:24).

After Joseph was born, Jacob asked Laban to release him and his family in order to return his homeland. Laban refused for he knew that Jacob was blessed by God and that the flocks of sheep were greatly increasing. When Laban and his sons were away, Jacob told his wives that that he had a dream in which God told him to go back to his native land. They all also agreed to go. “Then Jacob put his wives and children on camels and he drove all his livestock ahead of him along with all the goods he had accumulated” (31:10-18).

Laban and his sons caught up with them, but God had warned him about mistreating Jacob (w. 22-24). The two of them took stones and piled them up to make a witness that neither of them was to ever cross over it. No descendant of Abraham was ever to return to Harran (w. 45-53).

As Jacob and his family moved further south in the land of Canaan he sent messengers to his brother Esau, hoping that the two might be reconciled. Jacob decided to spend alone the night before Esau arrived, but he was attacked by another man. They wrestled until daybreak. Jacob would let him go until he blessed him. The man said that his name would change to “Israel” because he had “struggled with God and with humans and have overcome” (32:22-32). The next morning Esau arrived and the two brothers were reconciled (33:4).

Fourth Patriarch: Joseph

Israel loved Joseph, the son of Rachel, “more than any of his other sons,” and they began to hate him. Joseph had dreams that he would rule over his brothers. When he told them the dreams, they hated him more (37:3-11). Israel sent Joseph to see if his brothers who were tending the flocks were well. When they saw him coming they decided to kill him and tell their father that he was slain by “a ferocious animal.” Midianite merchants came by and they decided to sell him into slavery. The Midianites bought him for twenty shekels of silver and took him to Egypt and sold him to the Egyptian, Potiphar (w. 12-36).

God blessed Joseph not only with the ability to interpret dreams, but also to manage work. Potiphar saw that God blessed him and placed him in charge of his household. Potiphar’s wife tried to seduce Joseph, but he rejected her. In anger she then accused Joseph of attempting to rape her. Potiphar placed him in prison. The warden also saw Joseph’s ability to manage and he made him “in charge of all those held in the prison” (39:1-23).

Joseph not only had dreams, God also blessed him with the ability to interpret them. Two years later Pharaoh had a dream that no one was able to interpret. The chief cupbearer, who had been in prison, told Pharaoh about Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams. Joseph was brought before Pharaoh and he helped Pharaoh to interpret the dream God had given him. Then Joseph suggested that Pharaoh appoint gifted men to manage both the years of abundance and famine. Pharaoh perceived Joseph’s ability and placed him in charge of his palace and his people. Thus, Joseph becoming second in authority only to Pharaoh (41:1-40).

Not only Egypt, but also Canaan was affected by the famine. Israel sent his sons to Egypt to buy food to keep his family alive. When the brothers were ushered into the presence of Joseph, he dealt harshly with them in order to see what type of men they had become. Israel decided to send the sons a second time to buy grain, but they refused to go unless Benjamin, his youngest son and Joseph’s brother, went with them. When they returned, Joseph made himself known to his brothers. He explained that God had sent him ahead of them so that they would not perish. Then Israel and all his family went down to Egypt. When Israel died, the brothers feared that Joseph would take revenge against them. They went to him and asked him to forgive them. Joseph responded by saying, “Am I in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives” (50:15-21).

The main person in the story of the four patriarchs is the God who promised to bless them, make their nation great, and bless those who blessed them. God increased their number and brought them down to Egypt to save them. What happened four hundred years later is another story.

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