

GOD'S BIG PICTURE, Part 3

Israel: Abraham to Solomon



ISRAEL (Genesis 12-Malachi) – *The pattern for the Redeemer; Hope through the Old Covenant*

The period from around 2000 to 400 BC covers the remainder of the OT and details God's special relationship with the physical descendants of Abraham, the nation of Israel. This study considers the historic reality of this period.

ABRAHAM (2000 BC) – the Abrahamic Covenant and the Promises

The importance of Abraham and God's promises to him for redemption history cannot be over-emphasised. God's covenant with Abraham is gradually unfolded in three chapters of Genesis – 12, 15 and 17. It includes three great promises:

- 1) *A people* – a great and numerous nation will come from Abraham (12:2; 13:16; 15:5; 18:18; 22:17)
- 2) *A land* – the land of Canaan will belong to Abraham's descendants (12:7; 13:15,17; 15:7,18-21; 17:8)
- 3) *A blessing* – Abraham will be blessed all nations will be blessed through Abraham (12:3; 17:4-6; 18:18; 22:18)

Although it may not have been obvious to Abraham at the time, based on Genesis 18:18 and 22:17-18 and the NT references to God's promises to Abraham we can identify two different aspects of the fulfilment of these promises:

- a) *National* – the promises of a people and a land concern national Israel.
- b) *Spiritual* – the promise of blessing to all nations through Abraham may have a national significance (it could be argued that the nations have been greatly blessed by the contributions of the Jewish people) but its fulfilment is primarily spiritual. Abraham would become the "father of the faithful". His own salvation was based on the grace of God received through faith, on the basis of which God counted him righteous (Genesis 15:6 – perhaps the single most important verse in the OT – it is quoted three times in the NT, in Romans 4:3, Galatians 3:6 and James 2:23). The extension of Abraham's personal blessing to all nations is also the basis of the promise that many nations and kings would trace ancestry from Abraham (see Paul's use of Genesis 17:4-6 in Romans 4:17). Covenant theologians claim that the promises of the land and a people also took on a spiritual meaning with the coming of Christ and have been transferred to the Church. Others claim that God still has special plans for Israel (see *Part 6*).

Why did God choose one nation?

- (i) *To show other nations His power and goodness* – so that they would recognise Him as the true God. In Exodus 19:6 God describes Israel as a "kingdom of priests", meaning that they should be a witness to other nations and bring them to know Him. This did happen in some cases (e.g. Rahab, Ruth, the Queen of Sheba, Naaman). See also Deuteronomy 4:6-8 and I Kings 8:41-43.
- (ii) *To receive God's words* – so that they would be written down and passed on through the generations. In Romans 9:4 Paul speaks about Israel's role in receiving the covenants, the law and the prophetic promises. Through God's revelation given to Israel we are able to trace the history of redemption and to understand the significance of Jesus the Christ.
- (iii) *To produce a Saviour for all nations and to provide a pattern for Him* – the ultimate way in which all nations would be blessed through Abraham's seed. In Romans 9:5, we read that: "from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ". Jesus had to be born from one nation, and through the history of Israel God was preparing the ground for Him to come at the right time (Galatians 4:4). Israel's religious system was also given by God as a pattern for the significance of Christ (see Hebrews 8-10). Through the Law, with its emphasis on holiness and its provision of sacrifice we discover that we are sinners and need forgiveness, but that sin must result in death and so we need a perfect sacrifice to die in our place. The Temple, priesthood and sacrifices are the pattern that was fulfilled in Christ. They speak of heavenly realities and of the ministry of Jesus, the High Priest and the one sacrifice for sins forever.

So, God's choice of national Israel was not to exclude other nations from salvation or to give salvation to all Israelites. Only those who have faith in Him were true inheritors of the promises to Abraham (see Romans 9:6-9).

MOSES (1500 BC) – The Sinaitic Covenant and the Law

The period of the leadership of Moses and Joshua is the next great stage in the development of God's plan for Israel for three reasons:

- 1) **The Exodus** – The people were redeemed from Egypt by God. The Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea were the defining historical moment when God formed the descendants of Abraham into a nation. They would be His people because He had redeemed them. Redemption was the basis for their relationship with Him.
- 2) **The Covenant renewed with the addition of the Law** – The covenant at Sinai (Exodus 19-24) built on the Abrahamic covenant. Abraham's descendants had multiplied beyond an extended family to become a nation and were about to enter the Land, so God revealed how the nation was to be governed and how they were to worship Him. The Law was all-encompassing, including rules for personal morality, laws to govern the nation and regulations concerning festivals, the priesthood, offerings and the Tabernacle. Israel was to be a "theocratic nation", ruled under the authority of God's Law. Obedience was necessary to keep the covenant.
- 3) **Entering the Land** – under Joshua the people entered the land of Canaan and had tremendous initial victories over their enemies.

Why did God give the Law?

Some have thought (and according to Galatians and Romans some first century Jews believed) that the purpose of the Law was to provide a means for people to earn right standing with God. This is a misunderstanding of what the Law was really for. Jesus' teaching

reveals the futility of hoping to earn salvation through keeping it. Only by a righteousness greater than the Pharisees, who were renowned for their Law-keeping, could a person hope to enter God's kingdom (Matthew 5:20). The requirements of the Law can be summarised in two commandments: to love God with our whole being and to love our neighbour as ourself (Matthew 22:37-40). When we honestly measure ourselves we realise we cannot hope to earn salvation through our own efforts. What, then, was the purpose of the Law? The Law was given in the context of God's redemption of Israel through the Exodus on the basis of His grace alone. The covenant relationship with Israel already existed before the Law was given. Within that relationship the Law had three purposes:

- (i) *To reveal what God is like* – The Law reveals God's character. Through it we realise that He is both holy (He is always perfect, always does right and cannot tolerate sin) and loving (He wants to live with His people and to be known and worshipped by them).
- (ii) *To show the people the best way to live* (Exodus 20:1-17 / Psalm 119:105) – The Law expressed God's love for His people and their love for Him. It was not given to make life more difficult but to show the best way to live and to protect Israel from the harmful results of sin. If the nation kept God's Law, their society would be just and fair for all people, and would shine to the other nations.
- (iii) *To teach people that they needed God's forgiveness for their sin* (Romans 2:1-3:20) – The Law would keep the people from sin and harm by teaching them what was right and wrong. Its ultimate purpose was to show people that they fell short of God's standard and needed God to forgive them for their sins. The Law also showed that sin cannot be ignored, and that it can only be forgiven on the basis of a sacrifice. The Law contains a balance of punishment for sin and provision for forgiveness. It was not simply a rule to live by, but a lesson to lead people to a deeper dependence on God.

DAVID (1000 BC) – The Davidic Covenant and the Kingship based in Jerusalem

Moses was given clear guidelines for how a king should be appointed in Israel and how he should rule (Deuteronomy 17:14-20). The king was to rule over a theocratic kingdom, under God's authority and for the sake of the people as their servant. The period of the Judges demonstrated the need for a clear national leader who could unite Israel's tribes as one (Judges 21:25). Sadly, when Israel did ask for a king it was not because they recognised that he could lead them to be faithful to God but because they envied the other nations and wanted to become powerful (I Samuel 8). God initially gave them the king they asked for in Saul. He started out with promise but was destroyed by his desire for popularity and his taking on himself the role of priest as well as king (I Samuel 13). God replaced him with David. The Davidic covenant of II Samuel 7 (it is not called a covenant in that chapter, but God's covenant with David is referred to in Psalm 89:3 and Jeremiah 33:21) confirmed that David was the chosen king and that his line should be kings forever. The Davidic covenant was necessary to cement the kingship in the nation. David conquered Jerusalem, making it his capital, and he later the Ark of the Covenant there (II Samuel 5-6). This was a powerful indication that his rule was to be under the rule of God. Solomon built the Temple in Jerusalem, and the city (also known as Zion) became the symbol of the place from which God ruled. Solomon was given wisdom from God, and in his early reign Israel was famous for its wealth and good government (I Kings 10).

David and Solomon were the high point of Israel's national history. David was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22 – despite his many failings he showed constant humility, repented of his sins and trusted in God's plan for his life), but Solomon, whose reign started so well, later had a divided heart. The women he loved influenced him to engage in worship of other gods, and as a result God declared that the nation would be divided, although for David's sake this would not happen until after Solomon's death (I Kings 11:9-13).

Three Covenants – one "Old Covenant"

The three covenants in this period (Abrahamic, Mosaic and Davidic) are distinct, but they are also cumulative. Together they form the entirety of what can (with the benefit of hindsight from a NT perspective) be called the "Old Covenant" (see II Corinthians 3:14).

The Old Covenant with Israel was developed by God in three stages through the agency of three great leaders. Each of them received additional aspects of the covenant, all of which point to Christ, and each had a successor who received the initial fulfilment of one of the three promises given to Abraham. The following table summarises these ideas:

Person	Date	Given	Scripture	Successor	Messianic significance
Abraham	2000 BC	Promises: Nation, Land, Blessing	Genesis 12,15,17	Jacob – received the initial aspect of the promise by having 12 sons who became the 12 tribes of Israel. Jacob was the beginning of the fulfilment of the promise of a nation.	Jesus is the seed of Abraham through whom all nations are blessed.
Moses	1500 BC	Law	Exodus 19-24	Joshua – received the initial aspect of the promise by entering and conquering the land. Joshua was the beginning of the fulfilment of the promise of the Land.	Jesus is the ultimate prophet like Moses. He fulfilled the Law in His sinless life and sacrificial death.
David	1000 BC	Kingship	II Samuel	Solomon – received the initial aspect of the promise by reigning in peace on David's throne, building the Temple and witnessing to the nations. Solomon was the beginning of the fulfilment of the promise of blessing to the nations.	Jesus is the ultimate Davidic king who will reign forever over God's people and will extend God's blessing to all nations.

The fact of the successor in each of these cases is worthy of further consideration. Perhaps it is indicative of the fact that no one person could represent Christ, even in one of the aspects of His fulfilment of the promises. Perhaps we can see in it an indication of the fact that Christ would come twice – once in apparent defeat to die on the cross and again in victory. Abraham, Moses and David all died without completing what they longed to – Abraham died in the land with only one son to continue the promise; Moses died outside the land; David died without building the Temple. In each case the successor had greater triumph – Jacob had a small nation already descended from him and could bless his 12 sons; Joshua entered the Land; Solomon built the Temple his father had planned. Or perhaps we are simply intended to see in this pattern the faithfulness of God who continues His promises from one generation to the next.