

Write a biography of Abraham answering the following questions:

- a) Discuss key events in the life of Abraham showing how they develop his understanding of God and his life of faith.**
- b) How did Abraham become ‘the friend of God’?**
- c) What do we learn about prayer and discipleship through the life of Abraham?**
- d) Did Abraham always get it right? What did he learn from his mistakes?**
- e) How did God use Abraham?**
- f) Why is the Bible silent about Abraham’s thoughts and feelings? How can we understand how he feels? How can we understand how he felt the experiences he went through?**

The biblical account of Abraham depicts this Patriarch as a man of great stature and faith. The Bible does not give a descriptive account of him, but we know through reading the scriptures that he was credited with being a righteous man of God, because he believed in every word of God and was willing to follow Him to any length at any cost:

‘By faith Abraham, even though he was past the age – and Sarah herself was barren – was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the countless as the sand on the seashore.’¹

Abraham, as Walter Brueggemann suggests, is presented as ‘the perfectly faithful man’ who, through reliance primarily on the name and word of his God, ‘inverted his life’. The call of God is fully embraced. And this is where the history of Israel and the Jewish nation began: through Abraham’s seed.

¹ New international Bible, ‘Hebrews 11: 11

‘Abraham is offered as a model for the faith of Israel (as Heb.11 attests). But taken alone, that model is unconvincing. In that presentation, Abraham seems to be almost plastic’²

Faith is not always easy for Abraham, and Genesis, particularly 12:10 – 20 and 13: 1 – 18, indicates this. Will God keep, as Brueggeman suggests,

³“his outlandish promise or will the sojourning man and woman be able to trust the promise.”

The promise being:

“I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and will be a blessing. I will bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all people on the earth will be blessed through you.”⁴

So if we look at the account of Abraham, one of the great iconic figures of the Hebrew Bible, what are the key events of his life?

The Call of Abraham

We see this in Genesis 12. He leaves the city of Ur which was part of the Mesopotamian civilization. According to John Drane, ⁵ ‘the original home of Abraham could have been situated in ‘the land of the Chaldeans’. This would have been much nearer to Haran in North Syria. The important factor is that God is calling him out of the Mesopotamian civilization where there was worship of the moon god Sin. And according to Drane:

‘There is certainly plenty of evidence to suggest that Abraham and his family were originally pagans’⁶

² Walter Brueggemann, ‘Genesis’, John Knox Press 1982:105

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid:106

⁵ John Drane, *Introducing The Old Testament*, Lion Publishing 1987:40

⁶ Ibid

Here a man, who scholars believe was pagan, is told to drop everything, to leave his family and his old life, because God calls. Nahum M. Sarna suggests:

‘Since this was not the kind of promise that could possibly be fulfilled in the lifetime of the recipient, it was something that had to be accepted on faith’⁷

The magnitude of Abraham’s task and his acceptance of it indicate how much he is a man of faith and that God is slowly developing his understanding of who He is and His promise of a great nation

Abram arrives in Canaan and the Lord gives a promise that to Abram’s offspring He will give this land; so He tells him to build an altar (see Genesis 12:7)

Abraham in Egypt

Genesis 12:10 tells of a famine and Abraham goes to Egypt. The Egyptian Pharaoh takes Sarai, Abraham’s wife in, as he is deceived into thinking that she is Abram’s sister. The Lord afflicts Pharaoh and Pharaoh releases Sarai and Abraham to leave Egypt, as he fears what might happen if he doesn’t adhere to Abraham’s God.

Abraham and Lot Separate

In Genesis 13 Abraham leaves Egypt

‘So Abraham went up from Egypt to Negev, and his wife and everything he had, and Lot went with him.’⁸

By now a wealthy man, Abraham has acquired herds and livestock. Lot had the same.

‘But the land could not support them while they stayed together, for their possessions were so great that they were not able to stay together’⁹

There is almost a quarrel between Abraham’s herdsman and the herdsman of Lot, Abraham’s nephew. Abraham chooses not to argue over the land (Genesis 13:8)

⁷ Nahum M. Sarna, ‘The Heritage of Biblical Israel’, 1996:100

⁸ Genesis 13:5 Hodder & Stoughton 1984:14

⁹ ibid

John E. Hartley explains:

Because the Canaanites and Perizzites dwelt in the land at the time, Abram and Lot had to take their presence into account. Recognising the potential danger of the situation, Abram went to Lot to make sure there was no quarrelling between them or their herdsmen since they were brothers or relatives¹⁰

This develops Abram's understanding in faith. He avoids strife and allows Lot to choose the whole plain of the Jordan. He believes that if God has promised him a nation, the promise will be fulfilled, and so he trusts God enough to give his share to Lot.

Abraham rescues his nephew Lot - Genesis 14

Again Abraham is revealed as a man of great faith when defeats a ¹¹coalition of four kings from the East who have taken his nephew Lot captive. On his return Melchizedek, who was the priest king of Salem, comes out to meet him and blesses him. Abram gives a tithe of the spoil.

Through Kedorlaomer's campaign against the Dead Sea (vv.1-12), Abram's defeat of these troops and the meeting with priest – King Melchizedek, we see how his faith is strengthened and he is prepared for the promise that God has made.

God's Covenant with Abram - Genesis 15

Here God appears twice to Abram giving him special promises. The first time he receives two words using a prophetic formula according to Hartley (see vv.1, 4 – 5). The second time Abram falls into a deep sleep and God tells him of his descendants' future. (See vv.12 – 16) By revealing these prophecies to Abram God is reaffirming the promise of an heir (verse 4)

Abram believed God credited him as righteous and it is Abram's faith which becomes the basis of God's covenant with him.

The term "credit" according to Hartley,

¹⁰ John E. Hartley, 'Genesis' New International Commentary' 2000:143

¹¹ John E. Hartley, 'Genesis', Hendrickson Publishers, INC 2000:170

'Implies some type of official action; that is God declared Abram's belief to be the basis for his having full understanding of God's presence.'¹²p.156

The dialogue between Abram and God indicates almost a father and child relationship, which develops Abram's understanding about faith.

We then see in verses 1 -6 that Sarai gives Hager to Abram. The angel of God instructs and blesses Hager and Hager responds and gives birth to Ishmael, which some scholars see as the seed of Islam.

Abram, meaning 'exalted father', becomes Abraham meaning 'father of a multitude'. A change of name was a way to develop his understanding and his life of faith and change of character and destiny. God was showing that He was going to fulfil His promise to make him fruitful at eighty eight, and that He is to be Abraham's God.

The covenant of circumcision in Chapter 17 develops Abraham's understanding of God and symbolised the ¹³close bond between God and Abraham's seed.

God changes Sarai's name, meaning princess, to Sarah which again is a pronouncement of faith. God is changing her destiny from being a barren woman to being the mother of Israel. He is saying to her that her seed will be blessed. She is promised a son at the age of eighty. He is to be called Isaac.

The next key events could be summarised as

- a. the three visitors who promise Sarah the child in a year,
- b. The warning that Sodom will be destroyed
- c Abraham's plea for Sodom and ultimately its destruction,
- d. Isaac's birth (Genesis 21:1-8)
- e. Hager and Ishmael sent away (Genesis 21 8 -20)

¹² Ibid

¹³ John E. Hartley, 'Genesis', Hendrickson Publishers, INC 2000:170

f. God tests Abraham with the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22)

g. Abraham's death (Genesis 25:7-11)

The following events indicate that God is the deliverer. Abraham had to believe that at one hundred years old and Sarah at eighty, God would fulfil His promise and bless them with a son. It is again a test for Abraham's faith to offer his son as a living sacrifice. It is contradictory, as God forbids any kind of human sacrifice and yet Abraham trusts that if God has promised him a nation then that is true, and he is ready to do whatever God asks. There is a child-like faith to it. Victor P. Hamilton comments:

'to carry through the divine imperative is sufficient evidence that he is committed to God. It is obedience which does not hold back even what is precious, when God demands it, and commits to God even that future which he himself has promised'¹⁴

How did Abraham become the 'friend of God'

By trusting in and obeying God, Abraham made himself His friend. In Genesis there are countless examples which show that, by following God as Abraham did, he received His favour

Compare this with John's Gospel where Jesus says to his disciples,

"¹⁵you are my friends if you do what I command'

Abraham did everything God commanded him to do, without exception. Abraham's faith and compassion helped gain him the name of 'a friend of God'.

"Faith acts in obedience and then proves reliability of promise. It rests everything on the reliability of God's word and character."¹⁶

And this is what Abraham had, obedience.

We can learn a lot about prayer through reading Abraham. An example of this is Abraham's pleas for the people of Sodom - then God spares his nephew. David Jackman states:

¹⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, 'The book of Genesis' WM.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co 1995:112

¹⁵ The Gospel of John, chap 15:14, 'Holy Bible', Hodder & Stoughton', 1984:1083

¹⁶ David Jackman Abraham, 'Believing God in an Alien World, Inter - Varsity Press 1987:23

“All true prayer is persistent. Abraham’s dialogue with God is marked by a blend of humility with boldness” ¹⁷(see chap 18:26 – 33)

His love and compassion for the lost is a quality we as Christians should have for people in our prayer. We need to acquire in every area of our lives the faith and trust Abraham had.

Abraham’s integrity made him a good disciple. He avoided strife and God was able to work through him because he relied on every word of God (See Genesis 14:20). He gives a tenth of his income. He trusts that God is his provider who will supply every need.

But Abraham did not always get it right. We see in Genesis 12:13 that he lies about Sarah being his sister. This could have cost him his life, but God has his hand on him and allows no harm to come to him. But certainly, if you could call this a mistake, would have acquired Abraham more wisdom and trust more in the God Almighty. It shows that he was human and how we all fall short of grace.

There is another example in Genesis 15 where Abraham has not seen the promise of a son, asking God if his servant is to be his heir. Here he lacks trust - a mistake we all fall into. However as Jackman discusses:

‘the way through frustrations is always faith¹⁸’.

And through these trials Abraham’s relationship with God is strengthened along with his faith and character. He becomes a great figure of the Hebrew Bible. God used Abraham to fulfil his purpose for the Messiah. Calling Abraham to follow Him, would be the start of the Jewish race, where God could set him apart to follow one God. Israel will come out of his seed and through Israel the Messiah will come to restore Israel and mankind from their destruction.

The Bible is silent about Abraham’s thoughts as we need to feed on the word of God, not on description; though learning about faith and sheer tenacity, we discover that God is the

¹⁷ David Jackman, ‘Abraham’ Inter – Varsity Press, 1987:126

¹⁸ Ibid:71

perfection of faith. If he promised to give Abraham a son and make him 'numerous amongst the stars', then ...we must believe God, whose sovereignty would later be demonstrated when he took our pain and suffering on a cross.

Descriptive accounts of Abraham's feelings would make it difficult for the modern reader to have a clear understanding of how he had to have faith, because they could be relying solely, from a cerebral view point. The reader needs wisdom from the Holy Spirit. If we look at the account of Abraham we see that he is a man of integrity and compassion. The message is a message of faith and we can use our intellect and heart to understand what he may have felt without needing a detailed summary of feelings. Also, because the account would have been handed down through the oral tradition, they would have not known exactly how he felt as they would have not lived with this patriarch. (Also wisdom is needed when reading scriptures from God himself.)

To understand Abraham, we need to seek God's wisdom. We need to have a soft heart and see beyond the scriptures and ask and what was it like for this man to have such faith. We can't imagine what it must have been like to be asked to sacrifice his son. He trusted in God and God kept his promise.

In summary I empathize with Abraham in many ways. Ten years ago we lost a baby after a long pregnancy. I can understand the pain that Abraham felt when he couldn't have a child. God promises restoration and yet the child has been a big issue in our life.

Ur was his home, yet he had to leave it. I had to leave my family because of the hell I was going through. Abraham let his nephew go. I had to let my parents go to avoid strife and abuse. Abraham must have felt that God had abandoned him. I do know that God is sovereign and if we trust Him, like Abraham, we will reap the reward in the end. Like Abraham we need to trust, follow and obey and most importantly to love the way God has loved us. To conclude:

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for."¹⁹

¹⁹ Hebrews 11:1, Holy Bible, Hodder & Stoughton'1984:1209

If Abraham hadn't listened to God, he would have stayed in Ur, perhaps never would have had Isaac; the Nation of Israel would not have been born nor the birth of Jesus happen. We will never know. But what we must do is trust God and if necessary be ready to surrender our worldly possessions to follow His calling and see God's miraculous works in our life.