

### 4.3. A short tour of the Pentateuch

Right, I know that I have said this before and that I repeat myself, but the important thing is not to know how the Pentateuch was formed but to know the texts that are part of it. We do not seek to discuss the different theories but to enjoy the stories that have been bequeathed to us by tradition. Stories that tell us about God and his relationship with a human group that serves as a model of what God wants to do with all humanity and offers us the response, not always positive, that that human group, Israel, gave to God. These stories speak to us of faith and hope, of suffering and fidelity. So, nothing better than to stop and calmly visit some passages. So, let the trip begin!

#### 4.3.1. Abraham, the struggles of faith

*To begin with:* Let us familiarize ourselves a little more [if possible, because his story is one of the best known in the Bible] with the figure of Abraham and his life. To do this I ask you to read his story calmly. You can find it in the book of Genesis 12:1 to 25:18. As you read it, underline, or write down all the verses in which the promise of Abraham's descendants appears. Not only the explicit promise but also those verses that somehow show you how Abraham and his family react to God's promise. Then reread those verses you have underlined and write down your impressions. What has Abraham's attitude taught you, what does it tell us about God and how does it apply in the daily life of a person living in Barnsley in the 21st century?

Abraham [in Hebrew: אַבְרָהָם] is no stranger to the average Christian; we have all read his story, learned from him in Sunday school, heard more than one sermon about his life, and may even have read some of the books that have been written about him. Abraham is the father of faith, we say. Here is a summary of his life: The Bible introduces us to Abram without further explanation and without referring in detail to his past. All we know is that he was a descendant of Shem and that he lived in what is now Iraq with his family. God appears to him unexpectedly and speaks to him. Probably the story about who Abram was and why God seemed to know him so well and be so pleased with him was too long for the biblical author to pick it up. So, this is what the Bible tells us about Abraham. In Genesis 11,26 we learn that he is son of Terah and brother of Nahor and Haran. This is the first time Abraham's name is mentioned in the Bible, of course, at this point his name is still Abram and not Abraham. From chapter twelve onwards he becomes the main figure until his death in chapter 25,8. We know that he is married to Saray and that she is barren [Gen. 11,29-30]. He leaved his country, Ur, with his father Terah, his nephew Lot, and his wife [Gen 11,31] to go to Canaan but they settled in Haran and never made it to Canaan. Who would have imagined that from such dark origins one of the greatest protagonists in the history of Israel and Christianity would dawn! And all this by the grace of God who operated through the faith and obedience of Abraham. We know the end of the story, but for him who lived it in the first person, it certainly was not that easy.

##### 4.3.1.1. *The Call of Abraham Genesis 12,1-4*

*"Yahweh said to Abram, 'Leave your country, your family and your father's house, for the land I will show you. I will make you a great nation'".* This is the starting point of

Abraham's journey, a journey that is not just spatial transit, from one place to another, it is also a spiritual journey [from promise to promise] and of maturity as a person [from states of euphoria to states of dysphoria]. We are then told that Abram did as God commanded. Had it not been for God's call, Abraham's life would not have reached us. He would have continued with his father's task and would not have gone from being a prosperous obscure shepherd. Genesis 12:1-3 represents a turning point in Abraham's life, but also in the historical narrative that we had seen in Genesis until then. From now on, we move from an interest in universal history to focus on an individual and his family, which will later become a people. We move, then, from the universal to the local, from the general to the concrete. Note that Abram's choice is not solely for his own benefit: Abram is chosen so that he can bless the rest of the human family. Verse 2 ends with these words: "I will bless you"; and verse 3 ends with a promise: "In you shall all the peoples of the earth be blessed". By "all the peoples of the earth" the Bible refers to chapter 10 of Genesis, which lists the seventy ethnic groups that, according to the ancient Israelite perspective, make up humanity. And here it is worth recalling something that has already been said above [Unit 3.6]: The Old Testament is a book that deals with the salvation and blessing of all human beings. The only thing that makes the Jews special is that their ancestor Abram was chosen by God so that the whole world would be blessed. That has always been the divine mission of Abram's descendants.

For the writer, in this short section, which contains an order and two promises, the origins of the future people of Israel are found. The order serves to highlight the theme of the land: to abandon one's own land in order to walk towards the one that God promises. This order also implies God's radical authority over the individual. It was not a question of whether or not Abram wanted to leave, whether it was easy to leave his land and move to a new place of residence, or whether he felt like it. He had to change his country not by his own desire but by divine command. However, God not only demands but also promises something as a reward for obedience. First of all, He promises a great offspring to a man married to a barren woman. In those days there was no way Sarai could be a mother. But, in addition, God promises Abram a personal blessing ['blessing' and 'bless' appear 4 times in these two verses]. His prestige, his reputation, his fame will be so great that when someone wants to bless others, they will use the formula: "God bless you as he blessed Abraham." Finally, through him, God will bless all the peoples of the earth. The story ends by saying succinctly that Abraham did as God commanded.

Those first three verses of chapter 12 contain three blessings that contain very concrete promises, which throughout the following chapters will mature and be transformed, gradually, into covenants: [A] a great people; [B] a great name; and [C] a blessing for all. What distinguishes a promise from a covenant is the same as distinguishing the engagement ring from the wedding ring. The first symbolizes a firm hope, a solid intention; the second symbolizes an unwavering commitment.

#### 4.3.1.2. *The long journey to the fulfilment of the promise: Genesis 12,5-25,18*

We know that the promises were fulfilled, but the road to fulfillment was neither short nor easy. There were multiple crises along the way that made it necessary to renew the promise. In the chapters dealing with the life of Abraham we see that God has to renew the promise of the offspring and the land on several occasions. God has promised Abraham in Ge. 12:2 that He would make him a great nation. But how? Sarai was barren. Some exegetes argue that Abraham thought that the promise would be fulfilled through the descendants of his nephew Lot. If that is true, Abraham would not have understood at first the promise God was making to him, which referred to a son of his flesh and blood. This fact would help to understand why, when he arrived in Egypt, he allowed Sarai to be taken to Pharaoh's palace [12:10-20]. If the promise was to be fulfilled through Lot Sarai, she was not necessary, the important thing was to save his life.

No doubt, if Abraham expected the promise to be fulfilled through Lot, it must have been a very hard shock for him when Lot decided to separate their ways to avoid the fights between their shepherds [chapter 13]. But that episode ends with God renewing the promise: "I will make your descendants like the dust of the ground: when men succeed in counting the specks of dust on the ground, then they will be able to count your descendants!". However, despite the separation, it is possible that Abraham still considered Lot his heir because when Lot is captured, Abraham organizes an expedition to free him [chapter 14].

The separation of Lot and Abraham is part of a larger process by which God separates the direct descendants of Abraham with Sarah from the other lines of descendants. First from the offspring of Nahor, his brother, [from whom the Arameans come 22,20-24] when he leaves Ur. Then from Lot [13:5-18], afterwards from the descendants of the children he had from his marriage to Keturah [25:1-6, according to tradition they are the origin of the Arabs], and finally from the Ishmaelites, descendants of Ishmael, the son Abraham had with Hagar [25:12-18].

In chapter 15, God speaks to Abraham again and tells him not to lose hope because "*your reward will be very great*". Although the text does not specify what that reward is, from Abraham's response it is clear that he understands that the reward is the son he longs for, but Abraham's response also shows that he is in a moment of weariness and emotional weakness: "*I go childless ... See, you have given me no descendants...*". And at this moment God reiterates his promise to Abraham again [15:5] and it seems that on this occasion something changes within Abraham that makes him understand that his heir will be his own son and not his nephew [Lot] or his servant. The author marks this change with the words he adds after God's promise to Abraham: "'Look up to heaven and count the stars if you can. Such will be your descendants'. Abram put his faith in Yahweh, who counted this as making him justified".

However, chapter 16 does not seem to offer much hope, it begins by saying: "Abram's wife Sarai had borne him no child". Sarai herself admits her sterility [16:2] and therefore seeks a solution for herself, a legal solution: to have children through her slave Hagar. This is how Ishmael was born [16:2-15]. This seems to be the fulfillment of the promise

made by God. But this solution does not go far; Sarai herself makes it totally impossible when she forces Hagar to flee with Ishmael. So, this does not seem to be the fulfilment of the promise.

But again, in chapter 17 God makes a new promise to Abraham [17:4-6]: *“Here now is my covenant with you: you shall become the father of a multitude of nations. You shall no longer be called Abram; your name shall be Abraham, for I make you father of a multitude of nations. I will make you most fruitful. I will make you into nations, and your issue shall be kings”*. Within that same discourse God offers Abraham the solution: Sarai will cease to be barren and will give him descendants [17,15]: *“God said to Abraham, “As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her Sarai, but Sarah. I will bless her and moreover give you a son by her. I will bless her, and nations shall come out of her; kings of peoples shall descend from her”*. Abraham tells God that he is content if He looks after Ishmael's life [17:17-18]. This answer is loaded with skepticism. He is already an old man, so is Sarah, she surrenders to the nature of things. He does not see how it can be that Sarah becomes pregnant, so he clings to Ishmael. God listens to Abraham and without worrying insists that he will give him the promised son within the year, Isaac, and that he will also bless Ishmael [17,19-21]. After these words from God, Abraham once again demonstrates his faith; God has asked him to circumcise all males, as a sign of the covenant. The patriarch complies with the order without hesitation [17:23-27].

In chapter 18 we find the repetition of the promise God had made to Abraham in chapter 17. Exegetes attribute it to the different documents that the final writer or editor has used. Whether this is the case or not, it adds drama to the whole story. God appears to Abraham in the Oak of Manre and tells him again that within the year he will be the father of a son [18,10]. This time it is not Abraham but Sarah who is skeptical: *“Now that I am past the age of childbearing, and my husband is an old man, is pleasure to come my way again!”* But God is bothered by Sarah's laughter and tells her so [18:13-15], though I would say that God is trying to make Sarah see that He can do anything. However, the next thing we are told is not that Sarah is pregnant or that the child is about to be born, thus fulfilling the promise. Rather, it is the opposite. The King of Gerar falls in love with Sarah and takes her home [it seems that the author of the passage, the Elohist, conceives Sarah still young and beautiful]. In other words, Abraham is left without a wife. How will the promise be fulfilled? Again, God comes to the rescue and Sarah is returned to Abraham. Will the promise be fulfilled? Will Abraham have a son at the age of one hundred and give birth to a son Sarah at the age of ninety?

The answer is found in chapter 21 [1-8] where the birth of Isaac is narrated. With this account and that of Ishmael's dismissal [21:9-21], the fulfillment of the heir's promise begins to take place. If the birth of Isaac confirms what was announced in 17:15-21 and 18:10-14; with the expulsion of Ishmael the question of the heir is definitively cleared. Isaac will be the continuator of the descendants of Abraham [21,12]. Isaac was for Abraham much more than a natural gift; he was the fruit of a miracle of God, the true son of the promise, in whom all divine salvation was enclosed. The divine promise will also reach Ishmael, although in a different way, and he will be the father of the desert

tribes [21:17-18]. After the birth of Isaac and the dismissal of Ishmael, it seemed that the problem of Abraham's succession was definitely over. However, the hardest crisis was yet to come. And that crisis would not be caused by any human being but by God himself.

*"Take your son," God said, "your only child Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah." There you shall offer him as a burnt offering, on a mountain I will point out to you.* With these terrible words, chapter 22 begins. This chapter leads us to accompany Abraham on the most dramatic and intense journey of his long life. It is the culmination of Abraham's spiritual journey. Abraham must sacrifice his son, the one he had waited so long for, whom he probably loved more than his flesh. In Isaac were placed all his expectations and hopes of having a descendant as God had promised him. What will happen now with the promise? How could God throw away everything he had told him since he commanded him to leave his land? The answer to all these questions can be found at the end of the story [22,12]: *"Do not raise your hand against the boy," ... "Do not harm him, for now I know you fear God. You have not refused me your son, your only son".* Abraham renounced human logic and put his faith, perhaps for the first time entirely, in God's promise. Everything is in God's hands, "He will provide". By accepting to sacrifice Isaac he renounces the very fruit of the promise and proves that his faith is authentic. Abraham's obedience seems to lead him to lose everything, in chapter 12 we saw that obedience leads him to leave his land and leave everything behind. God asks him to renounce his past, now he asks him to renounce his future. However, it is precisely that obedience that leads to the final fulfillment of all promises. Finally, God solemnly renews the promise through an oath. This is the most solemn promise of all that God has made to Abraham, for only in it does Yahweh swear as a token of guarantee. *"I swear by my own self-it is Yahweh who speaks-because you have done this, because you have not refused me your son, your only son, I will shower blessings on you, I will make your descendants as many as the stars of heaven and the grains of sand on the seashore. Your descendants shall gain possession of the gates of their enemies. All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your descendants, as a reward for your obedience"* [22,16-18]. The truth of these words is what chapter 25 seeks to prove when it lists the descendants that Abraham had with Keturah. Through these six sons, Abraham becomes the father of Assurians, Latusians, Lemians, Midianites and other peoples [25:1-4], not to mention the sons he had with other concubines [25:6] and the Ishmaelites with their twelve chiefs [25:12-16]. Abraham, hoping against all hope, has become the father of many peoples.

The Jews knew that animal sacrifices were not in themselves of much value to God. Why did God ask for these sacrifices then? Where did they get their power from? The answer they gave is extremely interesting, the power of the sacrifices stemmed from the "quasi-sacrifice" of Isaac. Abraham's obedient acceptance of giving up his only son to death and Isaac's willingness to die for obedience and love did have value in God's eyes. And since that "quasi-sacrifice" took place at the future location of the Jerusalem Temple, some rabbis taught that the animal sacrifice was simply a re-presentation of Isaac's "sacrifice," the only one that was truly powerful in God's eyes. Does this ring any bells for Christians?

One thing that is worth reflecting on when we read Abraham's journey of faith is that the greatest difficulties do not come to Abraham from God's command but from His promise.

Let us recapitulate in a simple outline what we have said:

PROMESAS	CRISIS	SOLUCIONES	DIFICULTADES	CUMPLIMIENTO
Initial promise [12.]	Sarah in Egypt [12,10-20]			
Promise [13,16]	"I go childless" [15,2]			
Promise [15,4-5]	Sara is sterile [16,1]	Agar begets Ishmael [16,2-3]	Hagar disrespects Sarah	Ishmael [16,15]
Promise [17,4-6]				
		God turns to Sarah [17,15-21;18,10-15]	Abraham's distrust [17,17] Sara's distrust [18,2]	
	Sarah and Abimelech (20,1-14)			
				Isaac [21,1-8]
	Loss of Ishmael [21,9-14]			
	Isaac's Sacrifice [22]			
Promise [22,16-17]				
				Final fulfillment: numerous offspring [25]

Peachy, isn't it? Well, what we have done with the issue of the offspring can be done with the issue of the land. It would be excellent if you could spend some time re-reading the story of Abraham but now from the point of view of the promise of the land. The outline we have followed for the promise of the descendants can be used as a guide to study the promise of the land. Do you dare? Go ahead, I am sure you can.

#### 4.3.1.3. *God's sense of time: "A thousand years a single day" [Ps. 90,4]*

At the head of this section there is a quote from Psalm 90 which, later, will be used by the Apostle Peter in his second letter [3,8]: "*There is one thing, my friends, which you must never forget: that with the Lord, 'a day' can mean a thousand years, and a thousand years is like a day*". From the story of Abraham, we can learn a lot about the way God does things. Certainly, the first thing we observe is that God is not in a hurry. He does things when the time is right. He is patient, he does not rush. He prepares his children carefully, without rushing. He gives them the time they need until they reach the point where they can accept and be agents of what God does or wants to do.

This apparent slowness or even passivity of God became difficult for the people of Israel who often complained that God did not act or care for his people. Isaiah's contemporaries, for example, told the prophet about God's times in history [Isaiah 5:19]: "*Quick! Let Him hurry His work so that we can see it*". In the story of Abraham, we are taught that God is always on the road with us and that he constantly reminds us of his covenant and his promise. His help sometimes takes time, but it comes at the right time when we can get the most out of it without harming ourselves.

The texts show us how Abraham evolves as he has moments in which his discouragement in the face of the passing of time and the complications arise. But in those moments God always appears at his side renewing the promise and with it the hope, until the fulfillment of what God has promised comes. A transition in Abraham's character takes place. His knowledge of God and of his will becomes deeper; that is why he is able to lead Isaac to sacrifice without questioning what God is asking of him. At that moment, his trust in God is complete and he has no doubt that in one way or another the promises God has made to him, God will fulfill them. But it was necessary in the process to reach the point where Abraham depended exclusively on God and not on his desire to have offspring. The son could not be his God, a false god, an idol, so he had to be sacrificed as a false image of God. Abraham, by obeying God, showed him that in his heart there was room for only one god, the God of Abraham, the God of the promise. In any case, the story of Abraham teaches us a fundamental truth: God has his own rhythm, and that rhythm rarely coincides with our desires and haste. But that does not mean that his promises are not being fulfilled. Abraham has much to teach us in that regard.

#### 4.3.1.4. *Abraham as example*

The author/compiler of the story of Abraham presents us with the patriarch as a model that every good Jew [and I would add every Christian] should imitate. But he is not a model in the usual manner of the hagiographies [lives of saints] of Christianity. Abraham is presented to us as a person of flesh and blood, with his virtues and his defects [which are not hidden or minimized at any time]. The patriarch is presented to us in his greatness and in his miseries, in his acts of bravery and cowardice, in his moments of triumph and in his failures, when he has faith and when he doubts. Abraham's exemplarity, which every Jew must imitate, is his relationship with God. Abraham, with his obedience to God, will be in charge of restoring the ruptures produced in humanity

and of which the first eleven chapters of the book of Genesis speak to us, although, as we see in the biblical account, this obedience will mature little by little. However, the essence of the relationship between Abraham and God does not lie in Abraham's obedience but in God's vocation [election]. The story, as told in the book of Genesis, makes clear how often God speaks, guides, and makes promises to Abraham. Isaiah aptly calls him the "friend of God. Is not this something to which we too aspire?