

# OpenTheo

## The Family of Abraham: Part 42—Our Story?

May 17, 2019



### Alastair Roberts

In this, the final part of my series on the story of the family of Abraham, I discuss what relevance it might have for us today.

My blog for my podcasts and videos is found here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/>. You can see transcripts of my videos here: <https://adversariapodcast.com/list-of-videos-and-podcasts/>.

If you have any questions, you can leave them on my Curious Cat account: <https://curiouscat.me/zugzwanged>.

If you have enjoyed these talks, please tell your friends and consider supporting me on Patreon: <https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>. You can also support me using my PayPal account: <https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>.

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

## Transcript

Welcome back to this, the 42nd and the final episode in my series on The Story of the Family of Abraham. Our study to this point has taken us through 40 chapters of the book of Genesis. It has taken us about 25 hours, and now we find ourselves, as it were, at the very summit of the mountain of Genesis, able to look out over the whole of what we have read through to this point, and maybe see some of the overarching themes on the itinerary that has led us to this particular vantage point.

Yesterday, or in the last episode, I looked at the way in which the typology and the motifs of Genesis continue in the rest of scripture. But here I want to focus particularly upon the themes that are most prominent within the book of Genesis itself. Consider some of the lessons that we can learn from this book itself.

One of the things that we see from the very outset is that God deals with a people, not merely or primarily with individuals. Many people, when they read these stories, read them as discrete narratives of single episodes that are all amalgamated together in this larger text, but they don't really belong together. There's not an overarching story taking place.

There are just a series of episodes that befall various ones of the patriarchs. Now, as we've looked through this, I hope that I've proved that wrong. I hope that you see in the story of Abraham the seeds of what happens to Isaac and to Jacob and to Joseph and all these other characters.

Likewise, I hope that you've seen that there are key events that occur that ricochet through the story that follows. So the blessing of Isaac's blessing of Jacob over Esau is something that has consequences many years down the line. It's connected with the switching of Leah and Rachel, of Rachel and Leah.

It's connected with the rivalry between the two sides of the family, the children of Leah and the handmaids and then the children of Rachel. It's connected with the story of Joseph being sent away by his brothers into slavery. And in all these different ways, a single event in the past and all the events that helped contribute to that event occurring has consequences.

It ripples out in the history that follows. And in this rippling out of the history, we see that all these other characters are rendered, are implicated in what has originally happened. They all become affected by that action that Jacob and Rebecca did.

Following these threads of the narrative, I think what we also notice is that God is redeeming the events of the past through these many different characters. God is setting the story of the family right, not just detached individuals, but he's restoring the family and the broken relationships, the broken history that it has within its past. He's restoring it, redeeming it, setting it back on track and establishing it towards a future destiny.

God is forming a people. Now, when we often think about our stories as Christians, we think about ourselves very much as detached individuals, about what God is doing in my particular life, about how God saved me as an individual. But yet, if we follow the book of Genesis, what it might suggest to us is the value of thinking about the many different ways in which God has worked in the history of our families, of our communities, of our churches, of our friends and the context in which we find ourselves to bring us to this point.

That we are not just detached individuals, but we are part of a much larger story, ultimately the story of Abraham. It's the destiny of the whole people that's being played out here. And as we've noted, particularly in the last episode, we see in embryo the

whole history of Israel is being played out in different ways.

The exodus is anticipated. All these later events in Israel's history, the story of Esther, the story of Daniel, the story of the kingdom and David, the story of Solomon, the story of the judges, and all these stories are playing out themes that are originally introduced in the book of Genesis. So Genesis is about the destiny of the people, the charged events that occur to a set of people that are deeply interconnected.

It's also a response to a problem. At the very outset, we observed that the story of Abraham is introduced against the backdrop of the events of Babel. People who tried to build a tower to heaven and who tried to make a name for themselves, to make their own name great.

And what we see in the story of Abraham is God making the name of the people great. God forming a ladder between heaven and earth, a ladder where there can be communication between these two realms. And this occurs through people who are willing to lay down their own name for the name of others and ultimately for the name of God.

Within these chapters, we also see what it means to be the chosen people, not to be a people that is merely about self-aggrandizement, about dominance and ruling over all the others, but to be a blessing to the nations. God is using Israel as his firstborn. Israel as his firstborn is going to be the means of bringing healing to the nations.

And by the very end of the book of Genesis, we already see that this is in motion. Through the work of Joseph, Egypt has been blessed. And as Egypt is blessed, we see what God had intended for Israel starting to take effect.

That God always wanted Israel as his firstborn to be the means to bless other nations, not just to hoard or benefit from the blessings that he gives just for themselves. Rather, it's for the whole world. And they are the firstborn by which the 70 nations that we see in chapter 10 of the book of Genesis will be restored.

It also means, it's also a story of bringing salvation through the lost or the expelled son. Reading through the story, there are key figures who have to go out of the home, as it were. People like Ishmael, who has to leave and go into the wilderness.

The story of Isaac, who has to be sacrificed on Mount Moriah. The story of the story of Jacob, who has to leave his home and flee from his brother Esau. And all these characters, and Joseph most particularly, all these characters are lost sons.

And yet, these lost or expelled sons are the means by which salvation is brought to the whole people. It's a story of a God who hears oppression. As we read through the story, we can see Exodus theme starting to emerge very early on.

In chapter 12, Abraham has, there's a famine in the land, and Abraham and Sarai go down into the land of Egypt. And within the land of Egypt, Sarai is taken by Pharaoh, and God plagues Pharaoh. And they're given great gifts as they leave.

And then they go to the promised land. They wander throughout the promised land and win a great battle within the land. And this introduces some Exodus themes in chapters 12 to 14.

In chapter 15, God says that the descendants of Abraham will be strangers in a foreign land, and they will be oppressed, afflicted, and will serve there for 400 years. And then when he awakens from his deep sleep, we have the story of Hagar. And there we have in the story, you'd expect the Exodus themes to concentrate on the characters of Abraham and Sarai.

But at that point, they don't. Rather, they focus upon this character who's an Egyptian maidservant within the house of Abraham and Sarai. And as we follow the story of Hagar, we see that God is a God who hears the voice of the oppressed.

Now, many people read the story of Hagar, and they're troubled by the fact that it seems that God has these chosen people, Abraham and Sarai, and then they act in a way that really badly hurts other parties, particularly Hagar and Ishmael. And they're just seen as collateral damage for a moral lesson for the people of God. So Hagar is just the mistake of Abraham and Sarai.

And then they've learnt their lesson, they can pick themselves up, brush themselves off, and move on in the story. But yet, as you look through the themes of the book, you realize that that's not the case. That Israel has to enter into the story of Hagar and Ishmael for them to set that history right.

They cannot just move away from that history as if nothing had happened. They may not have experienced the wounds of Hagar themselves, but that history is not forgotten. And God eventually will put Israel themselves in the position of Hagar.

Hagar was a servant afflicted in the house of Abraham, and Abraham's descendants will be afflicted and will serve in the house of Egypt, Hagar being an Egyptian. In the story of Joseph, we see these themes. I've remarked upon the way in which in the story of Joseph, there are a cluster of references and allusions to chapter 21 of the book of Genesis.

As Hagar and Ishmael are sent out from Beersheba, and they wander in the wilderness and the water runs out, and then he's cast down below a shrub, and then she goes a distance so she will not see him die, and all these other events that occur. And eventually they go down into Egypt, and he marries a woman in Egypt. This is what happens in the story of Joseph.

Joseph's story plays out the story of Ishmael. He becomes a new Ishmael, and it's not surprising that he is taken by Ishmaelites down into Egypt. In Egypt, he finds himself under a cruel mistress who, like Sarah, Sarah in the case of Hagar, seeks to expel him, who acts in a way that accuses him.

He's making a... that accuses her husband, he brought this Hebrew in to make a mockery of us, to laugh at us. It's exactly the same way that Sarah speaks about Ishmael, that she sees him laughing, Isaac, and that's a threat to the status of her son, of her son, so she tells Abraham to cast out the bondswoman and her son. But yet God listens to the voice of the oppressed, and Israel must enter into the experience of the oppressed if they are going to redeem their own history.

It's a very powerful and resting theme. What else do we see? That God is a God who deals with the wounds of the past. In this case, it may be seen as a skeleton in the family history, in the... it's the story of... the story of Hagar is well back in the story of the family of Abraham, hundreds of years ago by the time that Joseph comes on the scene.

But yet that story is not forgotten, and God deals with those wounds of the past. Events from the past recur, things happen again in a way that put people in the same position. The history is replayed until it is set right, and God is dealing with the deep wounds of history.

And we often think about history as something we just have to endure and get through, and we'll forget things with time. But God sets things right. The other thing that we see in it is the importance of, and the ongoing work of, forgiveness.

In the story of Joseph, most particularly, we see this, and reconciliation. We see it in the story of Joseph, where he is shot at by the archers, his brothers, and he's afflicted by them, he's bitterly treated by them. But yet he does not seek vengeance, even when the power is in his hand.

He's placed in the same position, but he does not strike back. And this is the means by which the family is restored. The reconciliation, brothers being brought back together.

We can think about the story of Rachel and Leah, and Rachel's action towards Leah concerning the Mandrakes of Ruben, as I discussed that in chapter 30. This is a powerful story of reconciliation. Likewise, the story of Esau and Jacob in chapter 33, the reconciliation that occurs there.

Joseph and his brothers. These are how the wounds of the family will be healed, as people are reconciled, as Judah intercedes for Benjamin, as Joseph and his brothers are brought back together. The history is healed, and things are set right.

It's a story of hospitality and fruitfulness. In chapter 18 and 19, we see two juxtaposed stories. Stories in which angels come to two different people, first to Abraham, and then

to Lot.

And it's stories of hospitality, the extravagant hospitality of Abraham, as he kills the fatted calf and prepares this wonderful meal. This wonderful meal is prepared for the three guests. And in chapter 19, a similar preparation of a meal, and leavened bread and all these other things.

But there are contrasts. One of them is a story of hospitality, leading to the declaration of fruitfulness at the tent door. The other is a story of failed hospitality, of the daughters being suggested that they're going to be thrown outside.

And then it's a story in which all this goes awry. Rather than fertility and fruitfulness, we have a fertile woman being made as barren as salt, and we have incest occurring within the family of Lot. And so there are juxtaposed stories.

The vicious and violent inhospitality of the Sodomites, and the extravagant hospitality of Abraham. And the contrast between these two things, by the hospitality of Abraham, he receives the blessing and he is blessed and will be made fruitful. Whereas the Sodomites are wiped out and they are rendered barren.

It's a story of sinfulness and the spread of sin and its insinuation into every single part of our lives. Within this story, we see several different examples of sinful patterns that recur. We see fall events.

We saw that in the story of Hagar, of the woman who seeks to be built up by Hagar, of Sarai, and then taking Hagar, giving her to her husband, her husband listening, heeding the voice of his wife, and taking Hagar. Hagar's eyes being opened, Sarai losing her glory in the eyes of her maidservant, and then all the events that occur from that. The angel of the Lord encountering Hagar as she hides and saying, where have you come from? Oh, what are you doing, Hagar? And inquiring of her and then the judgment.

In all of these ways, we see this fall playing out in that intimate setting. We see it again in the story of Esau and Jacob, as Esau, Edom, Adam is connected with the forbidden food. We see it in the story of, we see it also in the story of Potiphar's wife.

We see it in various other places where these events recur and go awry. And we see that human sinfulness afflicts even the chosen people. And in many ways, this is not a people that seems apt for their status.

There are some ways in which you might think Abraham as someone who is hospitable, as someone who is concerned to build up the name, probably of his dead brother. These are all things that might seem to mark him out in a positive way for that calling. But yet in so many other ways, we can see the faults and the failings and the flaws and the way in which God will have to draw straight lines with very crooked sticks.

These are stories of broken, of flawed, of sinful people, but sinful people by whom God is going to make his name great. This is a remarkable story for that reason. We see it as an account of God's power to redeem even these people that seem lost.

The family is in such a tangled mess as you work through the story of Abraham's family. So many things go wrong. And it seems the more that God works with them, the more that it goes wrong, the more entangled and messed up the history becomes.

And there are some points where it just seems completely lost. For instance, in chapter 38, by that point, Joseph is sent down to Egypt, presumed dead by Jacob. Reuben has tried to usurp his father's role.

Benjamin, with Benjamin going to be killed as well. We have Judah going away from his brothers, going down and marrying a Canaanite. And two of his first, his two firstborn sons dying.

And Tamar being left as a widow, and he not giving Sheila to Tamar. And his family is just going down to the grave. Jacob is going down to the grave in mourning.

His two other third and second born sons, Simeon and Levi, have enacted extreme violence against the people of Shechem. He's hated by the people of the area in which he lives and works. And in all of these ways, it seems utterly lost.

And yet, God is able to bring redemption from that story. And as we read through this, we're seeing something of God's goodness and his power to save people that seem entirely lost, to save families that seem entirely lost. Now, we often just think about individuals being saved.

But God is saving a family here, a family that seems to have drunk deep of the cup of tragedy. And there seems to be no way back for them. But yet God restores that family.

And by that family, not just that family will be blessed, but all the nations of the world will be blessed through that family. It's also a story of providence and a God of history. We often can read these stories as just, as I said, one episode after another.

But yet, as you follow it and see the whole thing as a unified account, what you notice is what Joseph draws attention to when speaking with his brothers, of God's intent throughout the whole story. That these are not just detached events, but this is part of a unified intent of God to bring about a people for himself. A unified intent of God to restore what has been broken.

And a unified intent of God to bring salvation and deliverance, not just to Israel and the descendants of Abraham, but to people around the world, to the Egyptians, so that they are saved from the famine too. In many of these cases, what we see in these stories is just one level of something that is revealed to be far deeper when we look deeper, when

we look further. As we look at these stories further, we begin to see that it's not just the intent of the brothers in the events of Dothan that matter.

It's the intent of God. What is God doing in all of this? We can think about Jacob, and what does Joseph think, and what do the brothers intend? How is Reuben, and how is Judah, and how are the other brothers involved in all of these events? But then when we step back and we look at the overarching narrative, we see that ultimately the most important thing is what is God doing through all of this? And what we see God doing is preparing a people, preparing salvation, forging a people that are prepared to be the chosen people, that know what it means to be the chosen people, that being the chosen people is not a matter of being just in dominance over others, of having all the blessings hoarded for themselves, but it's a son that's cast away for the life of the world. It's Joseph going down into slavery in Egypt.

It's Isaac being sacrificed on Mount Moriah. It's Jacob leaving the house of Isaac and Rebecca, and fleeing from his brother and serving under Laban. These are the stories through which God brings his salvation, and through those people he builds them up, and through them people are saved.

It's a story, when we understand it in that way, it's a story of what it means to live as a pilgrim. Someone who lives not by the basis of building up your own name, of trying to establish your own history. Now we saw in the story of Babel by which the story against which background the story of Abraham begins, they were trying to make a legacy for themselves, a name for themselves, some great monument that would stand the test of time, and that would bear testimony to their name, to their power, to their ingenuity, to their technological mastery.

But yet God is going to form a people that bear his name, and as they bear his name they need to live by faith. And living by faith is not building up your own name, but being willing to lay down your name, being willing to lay down your legacy, being willing to lay down all the things that would seem to make you great. The story of Abraham, as we follow through it, is such a story.

It's a story that begins with forsaking his past, leaving father and mother, leaving his father's house, leaving his country, and leaving the land that he had grown up in, and going to a place that God will tell him. It ends with him having to give up his future. Sacrifice your son, sacrifice the son that you love, your only son, give up your future, and depend entirely upon me.

And as we follow it through we see as he does these things, ultimately his name is made great, not through his mastery, not through the flesh, not through his ingenuity, not through his military might, not through any of these things, but God makes him great through promise. And as he lives by faith, and as he sacrifices past and future, placing everything in God's hand, God takes those things and builds them up. Living like a



pilgrim then is living as someone who is not trying to take charge of their own story.

It's someone who recognises that God is ultimately the author of all things, and that to live faithfully towards him, to put your story, to entrust your story and your life to God's hand, even if that seems to be losing everything, that God will ultimately restore and establish you. And this is a way of living that goes far beyond the examples that we might have from the philosophers and the psychologists and therapists and all these other characters that we might think about. Living as a pilgrim is a very different sort of thing, living by faith in a God who is the author of history.

This is what we see in the story of Joseph perhaps, in a very particular way, providence comes to the forefront there. In the story of Abraham it's trust and loyalty that we see, the significance of living by trust in God. In the story of Joseph it's God's providence and God's overarching rule of the life and history of Joseph and his family.

And looking through all of this then, it's also a story of death and resurrection. At so many points in the story it seems that there is no chance of life. The deadness of Abraham's body and of Sarah's womb, the death of Jacob as he has to leave his family and go into this land where he ends up being reduced to servitude.

It seems all is lost, it seems that the plan to get the blessing for himself, all these things had come to naught and now he was completely lost and everything had gone wrong. The story of Jacob has a number of other such moments. We might think about the events in chapter 37 when it seems like he has lost his firstborn son or his favoured son and all his other sons seem to be going off the rails.

He no longer can trust them by a few chapters later and when they seek to bring Benjamin down it seems like the last straw. There's no hope left. In the story of Judah when years of his life are whiled away in unfaithfulness and it seems that there is nothing left and then something happens.

He repents and confesses and things turn around. This is a story of Joseph being thrown into a pit and then thrown into another pit and languishing there, seemingly forgotten but yet being raised up again and as he is raised up people are saved by him. This then is a story in so many ways that should ring with New Testament themes.

We talked about a ladder from heaven to earth. We talked about the lost son, the son being cast out and salvation being found through that lost son. We've talked about living as a pilgrim, living by faith.

We've talked about providence and a god of history that even in the wickedness of human actions, the most wicked of human actions, that God's salvation can be wrought. As Peter talks to the people on the day of Pentecost he declares this truth in Acts chapter 2. He declares that in Acts chapter 2 he says, This is a story that we have heard before.

Not to the same extent, this is the full expression of the theme but this theme is present within the book of Genesis and anyone who reads that story carefully and comes to the story of the New Testament, the story of Christ, should hear all the themes that were first introduced within those pages coming to their full and complete expression.

You should feel your heart stir as you look through the book of Genesis because it's all there. It's all there, softly, softly presented and yet you know where it is headed. And this story is a story of the God who hears oppression.

It's the story of the God who sets right the wounds of the past. It's the story of the God who brings fruitfulness through hospitality. It's the story of the God who does what his people do in this book, as the story of Joseph for instance, in going into the position of oppression and bringing salvation from there.

That Christ becomes a servant for us. That Christ comes to the point of greatest shame to the cross stripped naked and rejected and expelled from his people and yet in that position it's from there that he brings salvation. This is then a story that we should recognise.

It's a story that belongs to us. It's a Christian story and as we read through the Old Testament we should read it as Christians, not just in a way that imposes things upon a text in an awkward and clumsy manner, but those who read the text on its own terms and recognise within that text, read on its own terms, profound resonance of these themes that we know to be the themes that are revealed and fulfilled in Christ. Thank you so much for listening to this.

It's been a pleasure to go through these chapters with you. I've found as I've been looking through these chapters in this book over the last month or two that it has been in the back of my mind throughout and I've constantly been thinking about how this sheds light upon various issues that I'm thinking about on different subjects. It's a wonderful and exciting book with so much potential to teach us and to change us.

I highly recommend that you look into this book in more detail. There is lots more to dig up there, lots more to discover. I've just brushed the surface here with some of the themes that I've mentioned.

There are many further ones and I'd like to see you mention some of them in the comments below if you're interested in participating in the discussion there. Thanks again for listening. If you have any questions please leave them on my Curious Cat account.

If you'd like to support this and other podcasts and videos like it, please do so using my Patreon or my PayPal account. At some point in the future I would like to start a series on the book of Exodus continuing these themes and showing how they spread on in the

story of Scripture. Lord willing I'll be back again tomorrow with another question and answer video but until then thanks for listening and God bless.