

The Biblical Metanarrative #2: Abraham, Israel and the Law

BACKGROUND

Prior to the introduction of Abraham into the biblical storyline, there is only anguishing news. The perfect world God had created with humanity as his crowning achievement had been thrown into disarray through humanity's rebellion. The Rebellion was quickly followed by murder, followed by a proliferation of evil and violence, so much so that God grieved of having made humans and judged the world through a catastrophic flood. Then soon after the deliverance of a small subset of humanity, people rebelled again in a major way, seeking to build the Tower of Babel and so try to exalt their will and beliefs above God's purposes.

ABRAHAM (c. 2000 BCE)

1. God sovereignly chose Abraham to reverse the downward spiritual and moral spiral, intending to bless the families of the world through him (Gn 12:1-3, 7; 13:14-17).
2. Abraham on several recorded occasions responded to God in faith and obedience, believing what God had told him and acting upon it. God in return credited Abraham's faith as righteousness (Gn 15:4-7; cf. Ro 4:23-24; Gal 3:7-9).
 - This foreshadowed the basis upon which God already planned to justify all people who would believe his testimony regarding his Son, Jesus, who would die for our sins.
3. God "cut" a covenant with Abraham, guaranteeing that he would bless Abraham's offspring by giving them the land in which Abraham sojourned (Gen 15:8-10, 17-18).
 - God's intention was to grow the nation of Israel in this land and prepare them for the coming of his Son into the world, who was to be born from Abraham's descendants.
4. Abraham's task was to faithfully transfer the knowledge of God to the next generation in his household, so that they in turn might do the same for their offspring.

Genesis 18:19 (ESV) *“For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice, so that the Lord may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.”*

5. God’s test of Abraham to sacrifice his promised son, Isaac, resulted in God’s oath:

Genesis 22:16–18 (ESV) *“By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies, and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice.”*

- God was revealing that like Abraham, he would willingly offer his own Son as a sacrifice. God’s Son would die for our sins and make possible the reconciliation to God of everyone everywhere throughout history who would turn to God through Jesus.
6. In summary, Abraham was called and blessed to set apart a people (future Israel)...
 - To preserve the true knowledge of God and his purposes.
 - To be the mediators of God’s blessings for all peoples and all nations.
 - To be the people through whom the Redeemer-Messiah-King would come.

ISRAEL

1. Israel was brought forth as a nation in fulfillment of God’s promises to Abraham and his descendants. Their destiny was contingent upon their covenant obedience.

Exodus 19:5–6 (ESV) *“Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”*

2. Israel was called to be God’s treasured possession.

3. Israel was called to be a holy nation set apart from all other nations.
 - They were to hold to God’s truth versus pagan false beliefs (Dt 12:29-31; 18:9-12).
 - They were to live moral, godly lives, not like the immoral pagan peoples (Dt 9:4-6).
4. Israel was called to be a kingdom of priests.
 - This was an echo of humanity’s original design and mandate to be kings and priests of the creation. In a post-Rebellion world, they were to be a kingdom of priests on behalf of all nations. Like Abraham, they were called...
 - To preserve the true knowledge of God and his purposes.
 - To be the mediators of God’s blessings for all peoples and all nations.
 - To be the people through whom the Redeemer-Messiah-King would come.
5. Israel was placed in a land that was situated to expose the ancient Near East to Yahweh.

THE EXODUS

1. God’s deliverance of Israel out of the bondage of slavery in Egypt (the Exodus) is the first major reference to God’s redemptive purposes in the biblical story.
 - The story of the Exodus is prominently embedded in Israel’s Law, festivals, Psalms, etc.
 - The Exodus reveals God’s character and heart toward Israel and humanity as a whole.
2. God’s redemption of Israel from Egypt was holistic in scope.
 - God delivered them from spiritual ignorance and bondage. (Consider Ex 3:11-15 in light of Egyptian polytheism.)
 - God delivered them from political, social, and economic oppression. (Consider Ex 3:7-10 in light of Ex 1:8-22.)

- God’s purpose was that they might know, serve, and worship him, and that this would be emblematic of what he desired for all peoples of all nations.
3. The Exodus serves as a template for God’s promised future deliverance for humanity.
 - The prophets, looking back to the Exodus, speak of a new day when God’s redemption of the world will be like the Exodus, but will be even greater in scope and will eclipse it in scale (Is 43:14-21; Jer 23:5-8).
 - The prophetic hope of the Old Testament involves God’s promises of “justice without oppression,” “economic fruitfulness without exploitation,” “freedom from violence and fear,” and “perfect obedience to YHWH based on total forgiveness” (C. Wright, *The Mission of God*, IVP Academic, 2006; 274).

THE LAW

1. God gave the Law to Israel through Moses, who was a type of Christ.
 - Jesus was the greater prophet who instituted a greater covenant (Gn 18:15-19).
2. The primary purpose of the Law was to preserve the true knowledge of God and his purposes of redemption, and so tutor Israel and humanity (Gal 3:24).
 - From the time of the initial Rebellion until Moses, most people were without a clear understanding of God, his holiness, his design and purpose for humanity, our corrupt deviation from that purpose, and our need for atonement and redemption (cf. Gn 6:5-8; Eph 4:18).
3. The Law included the following important revelations of God’s plan for reconciliation:
 - The incredible holiness and exacting justice of God.
 - God’s immutable standard of perfect obedience springing from faith as a condition for humanity to walk in relationship with God.

- The terrible sinfulness of humanity.
 - God’s desire nevertheless to have a loving relationship with humanity, both individually and as a community.
 - Humanity’s desperate need for atonement, as well as our own incapacity to provide it ourselves, or even to define how it should be accomplished.
 - God’s definition and acceptance of an appropriate sacrifice as an atonement for humanity’s sin, which then paves the way for our relationship with God.
 - The necessity of repentance and faith as the foundational response to God’s revelation concerning the truths listed above.
4. The Law was never the basis for entering or meriting a relationship with God.
- Prior to the giving of the Law, Abel was accepted by God, Enoch walked with God, Noah found favor with God, and Abraham was credited by God with righteousness.
 - God had already redeemed Israel for himself in the Exodus (especially through the blood of the Passover Lamb) prior to giving them the Law at Sinai.
 - The Law was a covenant for those accepted by God on the basis of faith, with clearly stipulated terms of loyalty toward God. Obedience to the Mosaic Law was to spring from hearts of faith in a repentant people who had already been chosen by God. It was not a system of merit for the unsaved.
 - The consistent teaching of Israel’s prophets in later years emphasized that no one was saved through the mere ritual observance of the ceremonial aspects of the Law. Faith toward God manifested in obedience to the Law, including the moral precepts and principles of social justice, which were what pleased God.