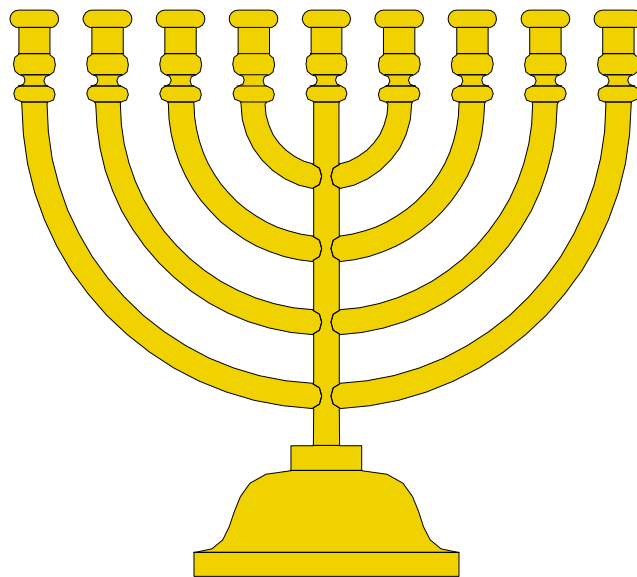


Framework For Faith

Introducing the Old Testament

by
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Unit 1

Diocese of Hereford

Contents:

Session 1 - God of the Fathers	page 3
Session 2 - God Alive	page 8
Session 3 - Privilege and Obligation	page 13
Session 4 - Living as the People of God	page 18
Session 5 - O Worship the King	page 25
Session 6 - In a Foreign Land	page 32
Session 7 - Back to the Beginning	page 37
Session 8 - Hope for the Future	page 44

About 'Framework For Faith'

This introductory course in Christian belief was produced in its original form by an ecumenical committee in Gloucester and used in the Diocese of Hereford from 1993. The material has now been extensively revised and put into a new format, but remains available for group study by people of every Christian denomination or none.

In its revised form the course has two short units which can be covered in three sessions each, entitled 'An Approach to the Bible' and 'Understanding the Bible' (in preparation). The six 'full' units still consist of eight sessions each, and are now as follows:

An Introduction to the Old Testament
An Introduction to the New Testament
The Spread of the Gospel
The Church since the Reformation
Christian Ethics
Christian Worship

The following have contributed to the course in its revised form:

The Rev. Dr. Richard France
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Session 1 **God of the Fathers** - **The Patriarchs**

Before the Session: Skim read as much of Genesis 12 -50 as you can, in a modern version.

These stories provide **the first chapter of Israel's theological history**. (Note the change of scale from the universal (in chapters 1 -11) to a single family clan.)

1 **WHAT SORT OF LITERATURE IS THIS ?**

If we read the text as 'theology through history,' we shall not be surprised that for many decades the central question has been: 'Is this authentic history?' In other words, did it actually happen?

On the one hand -

- † the written account is obviously much later than the events it describes and no-one was keeping a diary...
- † no single character can be identified from sources outside the Bible

On the other hand -

- † archaeology has illuminated the world of the Bible. Texts from Mari on the River Euphrates in the 18th century BC show a nomadic life similar to that of the patriarchs. Social and legal customs in Genesis are close, though not identical, to those described in the 14th century Ebla texts from Syria.
- † research has shown that oral traditions can be handed down accurately for very long periods. Ancient material (poems, laws, stories) has been recognised, embedded in the text we have.

None of this proves it 'actually happened': but there is general agreement that ancient memories are preserved here.

2 **SOME QUESTIONS OF HISTORY**

Who were the Patriarchs?

The Septuagint does not mention 'Ur of the Chaldees', but both Hebrew and Greek versions of the Bible agree that Abraham and Laban came from Haran in northern Mesopotamia. They were probably part of the migrations of 'Amorite' peoples and of Semitic stock.

They are also referred to as 'Hebrews' - usually by their enemies, in Egypt. This is sometimes taken to identify them with the people known as 'Apiru', who seem, however, not to be an ethnic group but a class of society throughout the Middle East - rootless labourers in towns or raiding pastoralists.

When did the Patriarchs live ?

The *early 2nd Millennium BC* (i.e. between about 2000-1750) seems quite a likely setting

- † Mesopotamia was unstable with migrations moving westward.
- † Egypt was enjoying prosperity under the Pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom - so trade and travel would flourish.

The lifestyle of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob suggests that they were only partly nomadic, spending much of their time in semi-permanent settlements near sizeable towns, but wandering considerable distances with their flocks in the dry season. They may well have combined this with trading. This lifestyle fits what we know of Western Semites in the early 2nd millennium BC.



On this scenario, there would be some anachronisms, however: Philistines, Chaldeans, Arameans are mentioned in the text and only appeared on the scene much later - to say nothing of camels! And not all the sites mentioned, such as Beersheba, were settled in this early period. Names, customs and lifestyle could equally well fit the early years of *the 1st Millennium*. This is the heyday of the Kings of Israel, when these stories were probably edited. The style of writing, particularly the story of Joseph, seems like the sophisticated literature of the royal court.

Many scholars believe that the writer(s) have 'read back' into the ancient stories the situation of their own day e.g. Edom was now subject to Israel, so Esau must be subject to Jacob. They point out that the Abraham/Isaac/Jacob story cycles each have different themes and locations, so are the links between them artificial ? Were they rather 'eponyms' - the heroes from whom the different tribes might later be said to take their names (cf. Genesis 19:36-38).

If the stories are 'late inventions', however, other questions arise:

- † why would a writer portray religious customs so very different from his own beliefs?
- † why would he show the ancestors in such an unfavourable light?
- † why claim kinship with the Arameans, now a major enemy of Israel?
- † why do other, definitely later, name types not appear in these stories?

SO - nothing is proved ! And even if it were, it would demonstrate only the age of the stories not that they are 'historical'.

The Patriarchal stories are family stories with a timeless quality. (Compare for example the Joseph story with Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son). ***Was the writer really concerned about these traditions he had inherited being 'historically accurate', in the sense we use that phrase today?***

3 ANOTHER WAY OF LOOKING AT THESE CHAPTERS

In recent years, the emphasis has shifted to '**theology through story**'; and the central question is 'What is the meaning of the narrative' ?

From this perspective, it is possible to say that Genesis 12 - 50 (and indeed right through to Joshua) is all about *Promise and Fulfilment*.

The **promises** are set out in Genesis 12 immediately after Abraham's call from God:

- † his descendants will be a great nation
- † they will be given a land
- † this will lead to blessing for the nations

The promise theme is repeated 7 times in various combinations (chapters 13,15,22, 26, 28, 32, 35). Ch 28 adds an extra promise: the continuing presence of the LORD

The Patriarchal stories are concerned with the promise of descendants.

There are constant setbacks:

-Will there ever be a son? -Is the mother-to-be in danger? -Will the son survive?

-Which brother will succeed? -Will famine wipe out the family?

God constantly takes the initiative, carries the promise through.

Human beings rebel, disbelieve, undermine the promise - but cling to faith.

There is always tension between promise and disbelief(e.g. Sarah, ch18).

Relationships are cryptic and variable (e.g. Jacob).

The Land is shown to Abraham, but possessed by the Canaanites (12.6). - Will they ever be able to settle? -Have they turned their backs on their land by going to Egypt (15.12-20)

FAITH IS NOT JUST BELIEVING THAT GOD EXISTS, BUT TRUSTING HIM TO FULFIL HIS PROMISES.

5 WHAT DID THE PATRIARCHS LEARN ABOUT GOD?

- † He exists not as an abstract idea, but in their experience, communicating and acting.
- † He shapes the events of human existence, calling and caring for his people.
- † He is not tied to a particular locality but goes with his people and has close personal ties with each clan (The 'God of Abraham', the 'Fear of Isaac', the 'Mighty One of Jacob'*)
- † He is invisible and cannot be worshipped as an image. i.e. - *he is both transcendent* (invisible, powerful, not to be manipulated) *and immanent* (personal, involved, caring).

6 HOW DID THEY WORSHIP GOD?

- † **They had no priests** - the Father of the clan offered prayer and sacrifice. Animal sacrifice was rare.
- † **They had no images** - sacred stones marked where God appeared sacred trees marked eventful places but these objects were not worshipped.
- † **They had no prophets**- there is direct communication with God
- † **They had no Law** - God's covenant with Abraham has no conditions
- † **They had no code of ethics**- morals are just the results of prudence (especially Jacob !)
- † **They used various names for God-**
 - in one strand of Genesis, God is called YHWH (translated as the LORD).* But Exodus 3 & 6 tell us God did not make himself known as Yahweh until the time of Moses
 - other names for God often begin with EL (the Canaanite name for their high god): El Shaddai = the Mighty God eg Gen. 35. 1; El Olam = the Eternal God eg Gen. 21. 33

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Section 1 Questions

Group Discussion

- 1 What sort of history do you think this is ?
Does it matter, for example, whether Jacob was a direct descendant of Abraham or not?
- 2 What do we learn about Abraham as a model of faith in chapter 12? (compare Hebrews 11.8-22).
- 3 Think about the (near) sacrifice of Isaac (Ch. 22). What is the significance of this story in the unfolding of promise and fulfilment?

Private Study

Re-read the story of Joseph. It is written as a racy adventure tale!

- 1 What do we learn about God?
- 2 What do we learn about making sense of the events in our lives?