

# 3: Review 1

## Genesis 1–50 and the World

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### Introduction

When people discover that I am an Old Testament specialist and I am in a church situation, they often ask me, “Do you ever speak from the New Testament?” Immediately that reveals that they think the Old Testament is inferior to the New Testament. There is a problem when we talk about *Old* Testament and *New* Testament, because immediately you are creating a separation within the Bible itself. Sometimes we talk about a canon within the canon. We don’t usually refer to it in this sense, but that is what we are doing. We are elevating one part of the Bible over another part of the Bible, as people focus on the New Testament to the exclusion of the Old. As a result we find much harm coming to the church.

First of all, we truncate theological perspectives. Another thing that happens is that certain ethical issues are left hanging, because the New Testament doesn’t address all topics, and the Old Testament fills in the gaps. We also lose the thread of our historical story. It really doesn’t start with Jesus—it started with the Creation. It goes to Abraham, it goes through King David, then down through the exile and on into the New Testament period.

This negative view toward the Old Testament may also be seen in the fact that we publish the New Testament by itself; people that read that New Testament forget that the Old Testament even exists. Some theologians claim that the church even forgets that Jesus is Jewish, thinking that he is a Christian, a Gentile. This negative view, as we discovered in the first Module, was exacerbated by Marcion. He deliberately threw out the Old Testament and part of the New Testament as well, to fit his theological views. We find this happening today also. Harnack, the great church historian, especially in the area of theology, said that it is time for the church to get rid of the Old Testament.

How do we correct this attitude toward the Old Testament? In the Module 1 readings and also in Kaiser’s readings, we saw that we need to unify the whole Bible. Filbeck does it in a certain way in the reading you have in this lesson. He separates the biblical period into three parts: the first part is

Genesis 1-11 (1994:44). In the first module we called that the prologue to the Bible. Then he says from Genesis 12 to Acts 2 is the second phase. The third phase is Acts 2 to the end of Revelation.

Then he puts an arc over these three sequences, and says: This is the Bible. So he connects everything together; everything flows together. Filbeck was a missionary in Thailand; he doesn’t refer to much of what we have been doing at the U. S. Center for World Mission. He takes his ideas from other sources, but he comes out with the same conclusions.

The Bible is concerned with people. Abraham is always mentioned in a context of people. When we talk about people, we talk about language diffusion. When you talk about language diffusion you are talking about people on the run—they are moving, there is action going on. People are visiting, they are journeying to distant places. And if you have people on the move, you have people mixing together, so you have a melting pot situation. When you have people mixing together you have cultural exchanges and the exchange of ideas.

People are on the move for different reasons. Sometimes it is economic reasons: trading, marketing. We also find people on the move because of military conquest. Sometimes the conquerors are pushing out the ones who have been conquered and people are fleeing. Sometimes other people are migrating because of military pressures upon them. Then also you have the pressure of the environment: drought, famine, catastrophes—and people move on.

All this interaction of peoples goes back seven, ten millennia—perhaps even older. In the magazine *Archaeology*, March-April 1995, there is an article about the “Sintashta Petrovka” culture. This goes back to 2000 BC, the time of Abraham. This culture is proto-Aryan and it is the first prehistoric culture that we know about to spread across the entire steppe area of southern Russia and even into China itself, from the Ural Mountains into the Tien Shan Mountains of Western China. Within this culture there’s another sub-group found in the Tarim Basin of North China. This is a very

interesting sub-culture because within it are found horses buried, so it's a culture based on the horse trade.

It seems that these people invented the chariot, and by 1500 BC the chariot was spread all over Mesopotamia and even into Central China. Here you have an invention that quickly diffused throughout that part of the world. It's also interesting that these people seemed to have their origins in northern Europe. The textiles they used for their clothing come from northern Europe. The pottery that they used seems to be Celtic in its origin. How did those people come from that far away, settle in Northwest China, and then diffuse some of their own inventions throughout the world?

There was action, diffusion going on in the world. Of course, God is in charge of all this diffusion. Another example of people is in Genesis 1-50, where you find the development of civilization. You find military conquest, military adventure, and a pluralistic religious expression. Abraham is in that mix, and we find him in contact with many different people groups. W. Foxwell Albright has suggested that perhaps Abraham was a donkey caravaner, plying the trade route, engaging in commercial activity. The scholarly world hasn't picked up that idea too much, but it's a possibility.

Why was Abraham traveling so much? Certainly there were military problems and a famine, perhaps; but there were other reasons as well. How did he make his living while he was doing these things? Whatever it was, he was on the move, mixing, engaging in conversation. There was a free flow of ideas and commercial activity, of politics and religion. Language and cultures became intermixed. The ancient Near East was a boiling cauldron of commercial activity. And it is God who brings order upon this swirling strand of human activity that we find. It is within this context that we find God's plan, and Abraham's role within that plan.

It starts like this (Gen 12:1b): "Abraham! Get yourself out of your country!" God's command! It involved a missionary mandate as we have seen. God is in charge of what was happening and Abraham was to go. God was to bless him and he was to be a blessing to all the nations of the world. It was the missionary command: People need God.

One way that the older testament describes sin is as chaos. When people come to God, their affairs become ordered, and the creation that God created was an ordered creation. It had harmony, it had

proportion to it; and when people get re-oriented toward God, they find harmony and proportion and order in their lives. Of course, sin brings just the opposite. So what do we find happened? There was a flood. There was a Tower of Babel. There were broken relationships, and this disorder that we find in the universe means that we need to find a way to bring order into it. Thus God gives a missionary command.

The book of Genesis and Abraham's life in particular bring the unfolding plan of God into the forefront. Abraham worshipped idols, and God brought him out of that idolatry. Abraham exhibited a life of faith, a life with a purpose. Paul said about Abraham that he was the first one to be the purveyor of the gospel. As Abraham mixed into the fabric of his society, God was revealed to the peoples he came in contact with. As a result of this we find that a stream of blessings came upon Abraham's life. There was order that entered into the flow of time, and into the idea of society, and into the rhythm of the universe.

One reading in this lesson is by Johnson. He is an evangelical, and a professional historian. As you read Johnson you discover that here is history that sounds like a novel. It is exciting, it is very well written, and above all, he takes the Bible as a serious source of history. He integrates everything that surrounds the Bible into a wonderful narrative. Other authors have focused more specifically on the ways cultures intermix, the movements of people through many geographical regions, from China to the Near East, to Northern Europe, to North and South America.

One ingredient to this whole mix is the religious exposure that all these actors in human history bring with them. In the modern world we find nations that don't want that free give-and-take of ideas. They close off their societies so that they're one-dimensional. You don't find that in the ancient world. You have a multi-dimensional society wherever you look. Where people travel, they take their religion with them. Religion shows us a people on the move.

In our own day we hear a lot about the information highway. This is just one more way to exchange our ideas, especially perhaps our religious ideas. In March 1995 Billy Graham had his crusade in Puerto Rico, using this concept of the information highway, with 65 countries participating. There were 45 message translators right on the spot in Puerto Rico to translate that message into the major languages of the world. In addition, there were over 200 more translators spread throughout the world

in key spots to translate the message into more local languages and dialects. Thousands of locations received this message by TV, by video, by radio. The whole world was involved in a religious exchange that was taking place.

As you read, let your imagination spin you into that topsy-turvy world of Abraham, where there are cultural transference, language diversity and religious diffusion as people bartered along the trade routes. These trade routes are the high tech of yesterday. They broadcast the glory of God to the nations about 2000 BC. And it is still happening today.

## Review

### 1. Briefly explain the impact that Genesis 1 and 2 have on theology, science and missions.

First of all, let's look at *theology*. Genesis 1:1 says: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." This immediately brings to our attention the idea that God is universal; He rules over and controls all that he created. Everything in heaven and everything on earth is under the authority of God.

This is a sharp contrast to the whole idea of the ancient Near East. There you have a picture of the gods fighting with each other; they are quarreling over who should do what, they scheme and plot and they murder. They tell lies, they destroy, they are petty, they are immoral. In effect, they are very limited in what they can do. Against this backdrop the idea of one God is revolutionary in the context of the ancient Near East. Our God is not like the gods of the ancient Near East or of Egypt.

Not only is there the idea of one God in control, but this God who controls the universe is a good God. He gives grace and blessings to His creation and desired that this creation be perfect. Yet he did not imprison His creation—He gave man a free will so that man could also be creative, express ingenuity and moral goodness. In the ancient Near East, the gods were controlled by magic, by incantations. But the Creator God of the Old Testament cannot be controlled; he can only be requested to do something. You could also talk in this area about the image of God, in which God created man. That could also be part of your answer.

The second area is *science*. In the previous lesson you had a reading by Jaki on science in the Old Testament. In that article he talks about the Judeo-Christian heritage being conducive to a true

science. The backbone of this idea is that God is universal. He encompasses all that there is, and in doing that, we find that God is orderly, that He is rational, He is creative. And that which He created also reflects His nature; that is, it is orderly, it is creative and rational. So the universe is constructed by a divine plan of order and not by chance.

This enables man to investigate the creation and to find that order. If it were by chance, everything would be hopeless. You would never have anything that could be investigated; you could never predict anything. The British philosopher Whitehead was not a friend to Christians at all. But he concurs that it is the Christian world view that made science possible.

Francis Schaeffer also picks up this theme: how science came out of the Reformation and its stress on the sovereignty of God. He also warns that modern science is losing that Christian world view; therefore we are in danger of losing science. The ability to try to explain how things operate will just become technology, creating and inventing things to help us solve certain problems. Most of the world's societies have not had a true science. It only comes out of the world view that we find in the Bible.

The third area mentioned was *missions*. There is missionary emphasis inherent in the statement: "In the beginning, God created." God exists. God is alone in His existence. There is no other God that has sovereignty over that which He created. There are no Fates, like you find in Egypt, that controlled the gods. He is alone. If this is true, then He alone is to be worshipped. If the world is not to be conceived as some Being within itself, as some kind of eternal matter, then we must proclaim the good news that God gives us; and Israel is to be part of that process, as well. Will they understand the message about creation?

Societies that have a multiplicity of gods have a problem trying to placate all these gods. They just cannot keep up and they always live in fear, they are always behind. So the idea of one God being preached to the world is a liberating message. Once these people groups that are polytheistic in nature grasp the concept of monotheism, then they can find liberation. They will be ready to embrace the good news of Jesus Christ in the gospel. So creation is a *mission* message, and we find it right in the beginning of the Bible.

## 2. What unique aspects of society would one expect to arise from followers of the Abrahamic covenant? (Remember, the covenant is repeated five times.)

There are many different possible models here. You could go to the Davidic kingdom and say it is an example of this unique society. Or you could go to the period of the Judges and say it was a theocracy that expresses some of that. Or you could go to the Mosaic society, and show how it worked.

But the track that we intended for you to take was to look at the covenants made with Abraham and God and ask: How does this affect his life and what kind of a society would arise out of that? First of all, it would be totally *monotheistic*. If you go to Moses, if you go to the period of the Judges, if you go to the Kingdom period, the Israelites are not totally monotheistic. But as far as we can tell from the record, Abraham's little tribal group is totally monotheistic. Abraham was a convert from polytheism, and therefore he was very unwilling to go back into that. He had strong reasons not to. So we find almost no hint in the biblical record of Abraham being concerned with idols and idolatry in any way.

Secondly, the descendants of Abraham would be a *people with a mission*. First of all, God promised Abraham a land, and they have a goal. They are a goal-oriented society and this is bolstered by coming of the promised son to Abraham. This would even increase their faith that they could achieve the goal of gaining the land. They would be characterized as a society that was optimistic, because they knew that God was working in their midst.

Also we find out that they are a people that would live out their faith. Abraham wavered in his faith but he always came through. We see his faith in action. As he was involved in the rescue mission of Lot, two different times in two different situations, as he was involved in going to and fro throughout the land, as the world saw that Sarah at her late age was given a son, these things would be talked about. People would see it and observe and say, "Yes, Abraham really has faith in his God, and his God comes through for him."

We also see that Abraham was to be blessed and to be a blessing to others. He has a faith that is on a worldwide order. It is not only for himself, but it is for others as well. It would be hard to believe that Abraham's life was not talked about in the circles in which he traveled. You can see that from

Abimelech's relationship with Abraham. Abimelech was very familiar with Abraham's God, and knew what He was all about.

The third idea is: there would be a strong *sense of justice*. Abraham was raised in the culture of the ancient Near East where they had law codes. The primary factor behind those codes was justice. You have this idea all through these societies—not so much in Egypt, but in the rest of the ancient Near East. Some of the law codes were in existence during the time of Abraham, roughly 2000 BC. It is part of his heritage. So Abraham is to act in a manner that is just to others.

Justice is seen in his taking care of Lot, his nephew, against the four kings that captured him—Abraham went to the rescue. This idea of justice is so prominent that God does not allow Abraham's possible injustice to happen when he passes off Sarah as his sister. God intervenes so that harm wouldn't come to those that Abraham might wrong. This concept of justice is prominent.

Furthermore, there is the idea of *being a blessing*: "bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you" is justice in reverse. Other people are to interact with Abraham in a just way. You get the result of what you do. Abraham was protected through God's justice as a protective blanket.

In the ancient Near East it was common to take your enemy's name and put it on a pot. You go to the shrine, give it to the priest and he does his little ritual. Then you take the pot and break it over the altar, and say, "Let it be so to my enemy!" You don't find that with Abraham. He is not a vengeful person.

You also find, finally, *the cessation of child sacrifice* in the case of Isaac. The surrounding culture was very prone to sacrifice humans as part of appeasing the gods. A covenant was sealed by sacrifice, and that sacrifice had to be an honorable one—you couldn't give just anything. In the Genesis 22 covenant, the demand is for a supreme sacrifice to seal that covenant. That would be Isaac. But God intervenes by providing His own substitute, saving human sacrifice for His Son Jesus Christ who would take away the sin of the world.

**3. Speculate on how Abraham became a believer and review the religious and missionary aspects of Abraham's journey. What was the missionary importance of communication and trade systems in the ancient world?**

Your speculation would involve Abraham as a trader, starting in Ur, going up to Haran. Haran was a donkey caravan city and it was a trade center; that is where Abraham and Laban and his people were. Surely they ran into people who believed in the one true God.

As you trace his journeys down into Canaan, he first stopped at Shechem, which is a special point in Abraham's history. Why did he go there? Well, there were some Yahwist people there who worshipped the one true God. Then he went down to Jerusalem, and met Melchizedek. There is a religious trail you can follow with Abraham, expressing his deeply religious being. He wasn't religious in private. Religion was talked about in the market place. It would not be done in secret, but it would be done in the open, as with Melchizedek, for example.

Abraham went down into the Negev, to Egypt for

business and other purposes. Again his life would be on trial before those people he came into contact with. We find that Abraham even prayed for the women in his life. He prayed for Abimelech's women to have their wombs opened so they could have children again. He was testifying, witnessing to his faith. Abraham spread his Elohistic culture and his faith to those with whom he came in contact.

**References Cited**

Filbeck, David

1994 *Yes, God of the Gentiles, Too: The Missionary Message of the Old Testament*. Wheaton: Billy Graham Center.

