The Promise-Plan of God and the Patriarchs
(Genesis 11:10-50:26)

We are now moving from what is referred to as the primeval history to the story of the patriarchs of Israel (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (with a focus on Jacob’s son Joseph in Genesis 37, 39-50)). Gordon Wenham and Paul House help by setting the stage for this transition in the drama of Scripture.

With the call of Abraham in 12:1-3 the book of Genesis arrives at its focus of interest. The opening chapters of the book cover long stretches of time very quickly, but from chapter 12 the pace slackens and the narratives become much more detailed. Instead of relating events that affected the whole human race, the book now focuses on the life of one family, the descendants of Abraham. The sheer volume of material, more than 80 per cent of Genesis, devoted to this family shows where the interest really lies. Here are explained the origins of the nation of Israel, and more particularly of the 12 tribes that made up the nation. It tells too of the basis of the claim to the land of Canaan: the Lord promised it to Abraham in a series of visions. For the writer of Genesis, the story he tells in chapters 12-50 is therefore of vital importance: it makes up the core of the book.

Like the second exposition in chapters 2-11, the core of Genesis consists of three major narratives separated by two short genealogies.

**Structure of Genesis 12-50**

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In the previous chapter we briefly considered the pattern of these headings and noted that the person mentioned in the title was the head of the family during the period the title covers, though it is usually his sons who are the main actors in the story. Thus chapters 25-35 ‘the generations of Isaac’ deals with the era between the death of Abraham (25:11) and the death Isaac (35:29), in other words the latter years of Isaac. However, throughout this period Isaac was elderly and fairly inactive (see ch. 27) and most of the action takes place between his sons Jacob and Esau. A similar situation prevails in chapters 12–25, whose action mostly occurs before the death of Terah, but in these stories Abraham is the chief actor. Likewise chapters 37–50 tell of Jacob’s later career, an era in which his sons make most of the running.

The stories of Abraham, Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers, thus constitute the three key narratives of Genesis. Not only do they all have a similar title, but many of the episodes within them seem to run in parallel. All have a divine revelation to the main actor near the beginning of the story, which foreshadows how the plot will develop. Abraham is told to leave home (12:1), Rebekah that she has two nations in
her womb (25:23), while Joseph has dreams in which his family bow down to him (37:5-10). Each of the principal actors, Abraham, Jacob and Joseph, has to leave home. Each main story ends with a burial at the ancestral grave of Machpelah, near Hebron (25:9–10; 25:29; 50:13–14). There are quite a number of other parallels between the stories, which suggest that the writer wanted to point out the similarities between the careers of the patriarchs.

Theologians have often noticed parallels between the life of Jesus and people or events in the Old Testament. For example, Jesus was forced to flee to Egypt and then returned to his homeland, which Matthew compares to the exodus (Matt. 2:15 quoting Hos. 11:1). His 40 days of temptation in the wilderness are compared to Israel’s 40 years in the wilderness. These parallels between different parts of Scripture are traditionally called typology. It is striking that we have the same phenomenon within the book of Genesis itself. We have noted already the parallels between Adam and Noah, but those between Abraham, Jacob and Joseph are even more striking. There are also parallels between the lives of these patriarchs and the subsequent history of Israel: in other words the patriarchs are not simply individuals in their own right but embodiments of the nation. Modern literary study pays close attention to such parallels, because they indicate what the writer was especially interested in and help to highlight the similarities and differences between different characters and show the development of the theme. (Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch, V. 1, Gordon J. Wenham, pp. 35–36)

If Genesis 1-11 highlights the creation of earth and humanity, then in a very real sense Genesis 12-50 emphasizes God’s creation of a special clan, or nation. This group of chosen people plays several strategic roles. First, their election is the key to solving the sin problem related so unrelentingly in Genesis 3-11. Second, they provide a visible symbol to the world of God’s forgiving grace to sinful human beings. Third, they demonstrate the necessity of commitment and adherence to the one Creator God. Fourth, they illustrate the necessity of exercising faith in their relationship to the Lord.

These chapters mark the beginning of canonical texts that can be dated with some historical precision and illuminated with details from extrabiblical sources. Most scholars agree that, broadly speaking, the patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) lived about 2100-1700 B.C. Some experts argue for later dates, but these claims are unlikely given the preponderance of contrary evidence. This ability to link text and history not only expands interpreters’ knowledge of biblical backgrounds but also shows how theology was hammered out in the midst of both everyday life and earth-shattering events. Theology marked human lives then as well as now.

Genesis 12-50 can be divided by the appearance of its major characters. Abraham dominates the scene from the first mention of his name in Genesis 11:26 until his death in Genesis 25:11. Traveler, warrior, thinker and all-to-human struggler for faith, this father of the Israeliite people begins the process of initiating a single nation and salvation for all people. Though Isaac, Abraham’s son, is also a vital character, it is Isaac’s son Jacob who dictates the story line in Genesis 25:19-36:43. This enigmatic man fathers twelve sons who become the twelve tribes, or clans, of Israel. One of these sons, Joseph, acts as the central figure in Genesis 37:1-50:26, though the tenacious
Jacob remains in view until 50:14! Each of these individuals, their wives, their children, their friends and their enemies provide a panoramic yet personal view of how faith, work, comedy and tragedy interact in history and theology.

By the close of the tower of Babel account, human sin’s scope and depth ought to concern even the most dispassionate reader. After all, sin is indeed universal and corrupts even the human race’s technological achievements. It seems logical for another universal solution, such as the flood, to emerge, but God opts for a different approach. God works through Shem’s line until Abram appears, then elects him to bear the hope humans need to find relief from their guilt. This telescopic approach to a problem will appear again and again in the Scriptures as the canon unfolds.

At first Abram seems as ordinary as any of the other persons named in a genealogical table (11:10-32). In Genesis 12:1-9, however, he becomes the focal point of God’s dealings with the human race. Through an act of direct, personal revelation the Lord commands Abram to leave his homeland and his father’s house (cf. Gen 2:24) and go to an unspecified location he will be shown (12:1). In response to Abram’s act of faith, God promises certain blessings: Abram will become a great nation (12:2), which is quite a pledge to a man whose wife has already been identified as barren (cf. 11:30); Abram will be blessed with a great reputation (12:2); Abram will be blessed with protection (12:3); Abram will bless all nations (12:3). The blessing of a homeland implicit in 12:1 becomes explicit in 12:7, where God tells Abram that Canaan will belong to his “seed,” or descendants. Clines summarizes these blessings as heir/nation, covenant/relationship and land. Each of these deserves brief treatment.

First, Abram will receive a replacement for the household he leaves in response to God’s summons. Obviously he must act in faith to gain this particular blessing. Thus both divine promises and human obedience make the blessing occur. Since all subsequent blessings are dependent on this initial faithful response, none of the promises are unconditional in the sense that Abram need do nothing to inherit them. Though the realization of this promise requires several centuries, as will be seen, from this point forward Abram and his progeny believe the land is theirs by divine right. Emphasizing the land here indicates that the earth, or land, may finally be inhabited by people willing to obey Genesis 1:26-31.

Second, the pledge of a great nation means that God may begin redeeming sinful humanity by calling a single individual but fully intends for that number to grow. Thus not only will a childless, barren couple birth a nation, but also the morally barren world will flourish again. As is the case with the land promise, Abram must wait what will seem to him an interminably long time. Perhaps more than with any other single promise, Abram struggles to believe this blessing will ever materialize or to allow God to deliver on the pledge in a timely fashion.

Third, the mention of a great name, or reputation, highlights the spread of Abram’s influence to a world that needs to imitate his faithfulness. God’s name will honored as Abram’s is honored, so the blessings of his fame will enhance God’s reputation as well.
Fourth, God’s protection insures the new nation’s future. Abram himself need not fear those who wish him harm, for God will protect the chosen man and his family. The Lord’s guardianship guarantees that only those who can overthrow the Creator can destroy Abram. More immediately, as Abram journeys toward the land God will show him, he will pass safely. Just as in Genesis 1:26-27 and Genesis 3:21-24, the Lord pledges to sustain those whom he has created, called and made promises to.

Fifth, the notion of all nations being blessed by Abram seals God’s plan for worldwide renewal of human beings. All persons are infected with and affected by sin. The results of this fact have been catastrophic. Now God identifies an individual through whom the Lord’s plan can be revealed. Abram’s faith can replace Adam and Eve’s doubts about God’s commands, can offer further insight into how evil’s head will be crushed (cf. Gen 3:15), can begin the process of magnifying Shem’s God (cf. Gen 9:26) and can reverse the international pride and chaos surrounding the Babel episode. What remains to be seen is how this promise comes true, which places it on the same footing as the other four.

God’s choice of Abram also initiates the ongoing practice of divine election. Perhaps God elects Noah, too, but the text at least hints that in Noah’s era the Lord has no one else to choose. Here God selects Abram from people like himself, though Abram may indeed have possessed special qualities for the task given him. Still, the Lord chooses Abram the same way God determines to create the heavens and earth, out of the sheer freedom that comes from being the unique, all-sufficient, self-contained God. The Lord also chooses that which is good, that which benefits creation. Election here does not exclude or condemn anyone. Rather it works exclusively as a benefit to a world that has no intention of doing what is right. Election in this case proves God’s merciful kindness to the world, not just to Adam.

(Old Testament Theology, Paul R. House, pp. 71-73)

What many think is the most critical passage not only for the patriarchal age, but for the whole drama of Scripture is God’s calling and promise to Abram. It is found in Genesis 12:1-4 and it is quoted below within its context, Genesis 11:27-12:5.

27 This is the account of Terah. Terah became the father of Abram, Nahor and Haran. And Haran became the father of Lot. 28 While his father Terah was still alive, Haran died in Ur of the Chaldeans, in the land of his birth. 29 Abram and Nahor both married. The name of Abram’s wife was Sarai, and the name of Nahor’s wife was Milcah; she was the daughter of Haran, the father of both Milcah and Iscah. 30 Now Sarai was barren; she had no children.

31 Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there.
Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran.

1 The LORD had said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you. 2 "I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. 3 I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."

4 So Abram left, as the LORD had told him; and Lot went with him. Abram was seventy-five years old when he set out from Haran. 5 He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Consider the reflections of Bruce Waltke, Gordon Wenham, Paul Williamson and Christopher Wright on this passage.

This scene is the thematic center of the Pentateuch. …

The call of God to Abraham is the sneak preview for the rest of the Bible. It is a story of God bringing salvation to all tribes and nations through this holy nation, administered at first by the Mosaic covenant and then by the Lord Jesus Christ through the new covenant. The elements of Abraham’s call are reaffirmed to Abraham (12:7; 15:5-21; 17:4-8; 18:18-19; 22:17-18), to Isaac (26:24), to Jacob (28:13-15; 35:11-12; 46:3), to Judah (49:8-12), to Moses (Ex. 3:6-8; Deut. 34:4), and to the ten tribes of Israel (Deut. 33). They are reaffirmed by Joseph (Gen. 50:24), by Peter to the Jews (Acts 3:25), and by Paul to the Gentiles (Gal. 3:8).

The expansion of the promise of 12:1-3 from individual to nation to universal salvation is the essential movement of Scripture. The Bible is a missionary guide: concerned with bringing salvation to all the families of the earth. Abraham as a blessing bearer of salvation is an anticipation of the blessing-bearing Christ. When Christ ascends into heaven, he extends his pierced hands, hands that blessed infants and gave sight to the blind, to bless his church (Luke 24:50-53).

(Williams: A Commentary, Bruce K. Waltke with Cathi J. Fredricks, pp. 208-209)

Within the book of Genesis no section is more significant than 11:27-12:9. It serves both as an introduction to and summary of Abraham’s career. It looks forward to the later patriarchs and beyond them to the nation of Israel and the Davidic monarchy, the great nation that will inherit the land of Canaan. It also looks back to the primeval history, announcing the divine intervention that will bring blessing to all the families of the world, whose history hitherto has been overshadowed by divine judgments from Eden to the flood to Babel. But in Abraham all the nations of the world will find blessing. Abraham’s obedience to the divine call, forsaking his homeland and family for the worship of the Lord in the land of promise, stands as an example and an
 incentive to all his descendants to follow suit. This will bring blessing on themselves and to the world.

The link between the primeval and patriarchal history is achieved not only in the word of promise; the opening biographical details (11:27-32) also contribute to this end. They serve to introduce us to Abraham and his family, so that we know who we are meeting in the following chapters, in particular, Sarah, Lot, Nahor and Milcah. It highlights the central concerns of the patriarchal stories: Sarah’s childlessness and Abraham’s willingness to leave home and family in response to God’s call.

At the same time, 11:27-32 is the last, albeit, expanded, element in the genealogy of Shem. Abraham, we are reminded, is not merely the father of the faithful, but a son of Shem, who was in turn a son of Adam. This passage, then, by linking the patriarchs with the primeval history, gives the call of Abraham a cosmic setting: the Lord who summoned him to leave Ur of the Chaldaeans is also the creator and judge of the universe revealed in the opening chapters of Genesis. The promise of universal blessing to the nations is given by the sovereign Lord who had determined their times and their habitations (Acts 17:26; cf. Gen 10).

In this oblique but quite deliberate way the theological significance of Abraham is emphasized. If to human eyes he appears only as a landless wanderer, the divine call and his obedient response gives his life story an abiding importance that surpasses even the imagination of the author of Genesis.

The divine call and Abraham’s response are eloquently summarized in 12:1-9. Briefly and simply, these paragraphs tell of the Lord’s command to Abraham to leave home, the journey that Abraham undertook in obedient faith, and the acts of worship that followed his later experiences. He is portrayed as traversing the land of promise from end to end. Symbolically taking possession of it, lingering at the holy places, he has time to build altars and pitch his tent, and to call on the name of the Lord.

These words of promise and acts of faith set the tone for the whole Abraham story: they are at once programmatic and typological, that is, they reveal the divine plan for Abraham. He is to father children, inherit a land, enjoy divine protection, and be a source of blessing to the world. This story is typological in that it is the first in a series of episodes in which God speaks and the patriarch usually responds in faithful obedience, a pattern repeated many times in Genesis, not just in the Abraham cycle but also in the Isaac and Jacob cycles as well.  

(WBC, Genesis 1-15, Vol. 1, Gordon J. Wenham, pp. 281-282)

Genesis 12:1-3 is clearly a pivotal text in so far as the book of Genesis is concerned. Heralding yet another stage in God’s dealings with humanity, it is set against the backdrop of the primeval prologue in general, and the Babel incident in particular. These three verses fix the agenda not only for the patriarchal narratives, but also for the rest of the Pentateuch and beyond. Therefore, this divine speech to Abram is one of the most important revelations in the whole of Scripture. Indeed, it has been well described as the Bible’s Magna Carta. Here we find a synopsis of the divine agenda in which God’s rescue plan for humanity is revealed. The necessity of such a rescue mission has been underlined repeatedly in the preceding chapters, in which the escalating spread of
sin and judgment has been traced from the Garden of Eden to the Tower of Babel. But here in Genesis 12 God’s redemptive plan is at last revealed. It has been hinted at in the previous chapters, but here it is disclosed most fully. As the apostle Paul puts it, here God announces the gospel in advance to Abraham (Gal. 3:8).

It may thus be concluded that Yahweh’s speech in Genesis 12:1-3 anticipates two quite distinct prospects linked by a logical progression: the first section (Gen. 12:1-2c) focuses on national blessing promised to Abraham; the second section focuses on international blessing promised through Abraham. While clearly distinct, these two promissory goals are nevertheless related by the fact that the blessing promised in the second part of the divine speech is in some way dependent upon the promise related in the first; that is, Abraham’s role as a mediator of blessing is contingent upon his being a recipient of blessing. Moreover, its climactic position at the end of the speech indicates that ‘The primary motive behind the call of Abraham is God’s desire to bring blessing, rather than cursing, upon the nations of the earth. The promise that Abraham will become a great nation … must be understood as being subservient to God’s principal desire to bless all the families of the earth.’ Thus, while Yahweh’s purposes primarily interest Abraham and the nation that will derive from him, ultimately they have a much wider concern: ‘all the families of the earth’ (Gen. 12:3 ESV) who, through Abraham, will also experience blessing. In other words, God’s plans for Israel were always subservient to his universal purposes, his plans for all the families of the earth.

(NSBT, Sealed with an Oath: Covenant in God’s unfolding purpose, Paul R. Williamson, pg. 77, 84)

Popular understanding of Christian mission would tend to locate its origin more or less simultaneously with the origin of the Christian church. Didn’t Jesus say that his disciples should wait for the empowering of the Holy Spirit before setting off to preach repentance and forgiveness to the ends of the earth? And didn’t the coming of the Holy Spirit also launch the church at Pentecost? The two things are joined by verbal Velcro in the way Luke ends his Gospel and begins the Acts of the Apostles.

This instinctive conjunction of ecclesiology and missiology is valid, of course, but any reader who has not just joined our journey at this point will not be surprised to hear that the link must be traced much further back than Pentecost but right back into the Old Testament. The New Testament church may have been birthed that day, but the people of God in history go back to Abraham. And as Paul was fond of pointing out to all and sundry, any person of any nation who is in Christ is thereby also in Abraham.

So as we turn to think of the people whom God has called and created to be the agent of his mission, that is where we must begin too. Arguably God’s covenant with Abraham is the single most important biblical tradition within a biblical theology of mission and a missional hermeneutic of the Bible. We are going to see that it generates a vast, arching trajectory that carries us from Genesis 12 to Revelation 22. So it well deserves the two chapters afforded it here. First we explore in chapter six the meaning of God’s election of Abraham and his descendants as the vehicle of blessing to the nations, and what is entailed in that original great commission. Then in chapter seven we trace the paradoxical duality of the covenant’s universality (it is for the blessing of all nations) and particularity (it is by means of one nation). Both poles of the paradox have important missional implications.
Moving along the pathway of the Bible’s grand narrative we come to the exodus. Theologically we move from election to redemption. Missiologically we move from the man for all nations (Abraham) to the people redeemed to be God’s priesthood in the midst of the nations (Israel). The exodus stands as the primary model of God’s redemption in history, and chapter eight explores its rich multidimensional relevance. But even redeemed people still live on this planet and are susceptible to the social and economic effects of human fallenness. God’s law takes this into account, and the jubilee year provides an example of God’s comprehensive concern for human well-being through restorative mechanisms. Chapter nine explores its rationale and missiological implications, and takes it as a case study for reflection on holistic mission.

The people of God are constituted within a covenant relationship with him. This too is an overarching biblical theme that provides a skeletal framework for the Bible’s grand narrative. Chapter ten surveys the span of the great covenant articulations from Noah to Christ and asks how they affect our understanding of the mission of God.

Having been chosen, redeemed and called into covenant relationship, the people of God have a life to live—a distinctive, holy, ethical life that is to be lived before God and in the sight of nations. This too has crucial missional relevance, for as we will see in chapter eleven there is no biblical mission without biblical ethics.

This then is the unifying theme of the six chapters in this part of our book—the people of God, created and commissioned for the mission of God. (The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible’s Grand Narrative, Christopher J. H. Wright, pp. 189-190)

Christopher Wright commented on the covenant God made with Abraham. This is not the first covenant mentioned in the Bible. God also made a covenant with Noah and all of creation in Genesis 6:17–22 and in Genesis 9:8–17. The notion of covenant is an important theme that runs throughout Scripture. Paul Williamson provides the following perspective on this important idea and practice in Scripture.

The ‘covenant” concept is one of the most important motifs in biblical theology. As well as being reflected in the traditional title of the two parts of the Christian Bible, the Old and New Testaments (i.e. covenants), the covenant idea looms large at important junctures throughout the Bible. The concept underpins God’s relationship with Noah, the patriarchs, Israel, the Aaronic priesthood, and the Davidic dynasty. It is also used with respect to God’s relationship with the reconstituted ‘Israel’ of the future. Therefore, while ‘biblical’ and ‘covenant theology’ are not synonymous, the covenant concept is undoubtedly one of the Bible’s core theological themes.

The Hebrew term for covenant, berit, is of uncertain derivation. It is commonly connected with beritu, an Akkadian noun meaning ‘bond’ or ‘fetter’. Others associate it with the Akkadian preposition birit, meaning ‘between’. Still other suggested sources are the Hebrew roots meaning ‘to eat’ and ‘to select’, which associate covenant with the ideas of eating together (cf. Gen. 26:30; 31:54) and election respectively. Here, as elsewhere in biblical theology, contextual usage of a word is more important in
determining meaning than etymology. Actual usage of the term (occurring some 285 times in the OT) suggests that it conveys the idea of a solemn commitment, guaranteeing promises or obligations undertaken by one or both covenating parties. While the term applies predominantly to divine-human commitments, it is also used of various agreements between humans (cf. Gen. 21:22-24; 1 Sam. 18:3; 1 Kgs. 5:1–12; 2 Kgs. 11:17), including marriage (Ezek. 16:8; Mal. 2:14; Prov. 2:17), and even in a figurative sense for solemn commitments made with oneself (Job 5:23; 31:1; 41:1–4; Is. 28:15–18).


Stephen Dempster summarizes the stories of the three patriarchs and the story of Joseph. Interspersed within Dempster’s comments are comments from Tremper Longman and Gordon Wenham.

The genealogy of Shem and the call of Abraham: land, descendants, universal blessing

At this point, the genealogy of Shem is resumed after the false quest for a sem (Gen. 11:10-26). This ten-member postdiluvian genealogy follows the line of Peleg and beyond, and again it emphasizes name. It mirrors the ten-member prediluvian Sethite genealogy, whose last member saved the world from deluge, an Adamic figure with whom a covenant with creation was made. Just as Adam to Noah were ten generations, so is Noah to Abram. After the arrival of Abram on the scene, a new genealogical formula begins a narrative devoted to this man named Abram, who is described as such an inauspicious bearer of promise. His brother dies, his wife is barren and, as far as the ancient world is concerned, he is a ‘no-name’, whose father dies shortly after making a migration from Ur to Haran with his family (Gen. 11:28–32). What a pathetic sight is this man, trudging the dusty Mesopotamian roads, whose journey has come to a dead end northeast of Canaan. How could it be possible that one without such promise could hold so much promise?

As mentioned before, Johnson (1969: 253) has shown that ‘the biblical genealogies are closely attached to their contexts and to the narrative in which they occur in regard to the language, structure, and theology’. This is certainly true in the above examples. A further point he makes is that there are a variety of purposes for the use of linear genealogies in the biblical narrative, one of which is to exhibit ‘a sense of movement within history toward a divine goal’ (1969:60). The purpose of this goal is not left to the imagination but is spelled out explicitly in the subsequent narrative, despite what seems like an inauspicious beginning.

The previous millennia can be described in eleven chapters (Gen. 1–11); the next twenty-five years occupy ten chapters! In the narrative world, it is as if the world has been waiting for this moment, the arrival of Abram, the tenth from Noah. In the opening text the key theological pronouncements are declared, and they involve geography and genealogy. Abram is told to leave the world of Babel so that he can have God’s piece of geography. Moreover, he and his barren wife, Sarai, hold the key to the promise, as they will be shown that land and, what is more, they will become a
great nation through which all families of the ‘adama will be blessed (Gen. 12:1–3). This indicates not only the genealogical dimension to the promise but also a royal one, as the promise to become a great nation assumes a political and regal destiny. This point will emerge later in an even more powerful form, as Abram will become the father of a multitude of nations and his wife the mother of a royal dynasty (Gen. 17:6, 16).

Abram’s acquisition of a great name forms one of the central elements in the story. Unlike the builders of Babel, who sought a name by constructing a colossal building. Abram’s name will be made great by God’s building him into a great nation that will bless the nations that have just been enumerated (Gen. 10) and that are now living in exile under divine judgment. That nation later becomes Israel. At the beginning of Israel’s history, then, is the fundamental fact that it has been made for the benefit of the world. Israel’s calling is fundamentally missiological; its purpose for existence is the restoration of the world to its pre-Edenic state. Genesis 12:1–3 is thus ‘the aetiology of all Israelite aitiologies’, showing that ‘the ultimate purpose of redemption which God will bring about in Israel is that of bridging the gulf between God and the entire human race’ (von Rad 1966: 65).

Gordon Wenham explains how God’s promises serve as a key to thinking about the narratives in Genesis 11:10–50:26.

After a quick sketch of Abraham’s family background introducing his nephew Lot and his childless wife Sarah, the narrative rushes forward to the defining moment in Abraham’s life, God’s call to him to leave his homeland and family and move to an unspecified country that he would inherit. In our rootless and mobile Western culture we may easily miss what a drastic step this was. But in ancient society your family and tribe defined who you were: to break away was to lose your identity and security, for your extended family was your protection if anything went wrong. In Abraham’s case he was being asked to leave the most sophisticated and affluent part of the Middle East, Ur of the Chaldees, in modern times, southern Iraq, for the unknown ‘land that I will show you’.

It was a momentous step for Abraham personally, but Genesis sees his call as a giant leap for mankind. In its exposition we read of two cycles of human failure. The first man Adam failed and that led eventually to the flood. The only righteous survivor of the flood and second father of the human race, Noah, also slipped and the whole race again fell under judgment at the tower of Babel. But now Abraham is promised: ‘in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.’

Genesis 12:1–3 are the first words God has spoken to man since the flood. Traditionally they are referred to as the call of Abraham, but they are much more than that: they sum up the theme of Genesis, if not the whole Pentateuch. In this call the Lord promises Abraham four things: 1) a land, 2) numerous descendants (‘a great nation’), 3) blessing, that is protection and success, 4) blessing of the nations.

The storyline of Genesis, especially the Abraham story, is frequently punctuated by God speaking to the patriarchs. A casual reader could see these words as simply
repetitious, but a careful inspection shows this is far from true. Each statement of the promises develops them in some way, either increasing their scope or underlining their validity. It is also important to consider the circumstances in which they are given: there is a clear tendency for promises to be reaffirmed after an act of faith or obedience on the patriarch’s part. For example, in chapter 13 after Abraham has generously offered his nephew Lot the choice of the land so as to defuse the dispute between their herdsman, the Lord appears to Abraham and enlarges on the promises. Similarly the last and most dogmatic statement of the promise to Abraham comes after he has demonstrated his total commitment to God’s demand in chapter 22.

Though God’s words are obviously of central importance in Genesis, they are built into a narrative that is essentially about human action, so it is important to ask what the connection is between the promises and the plot. David Clines defined the theme of the Pentateuch as ‘the partial fulfilment – which implies also the partial non-fulfilment – of the promise … to the patriarchs’ (Clines 1978, p. 29). In other words the events in Genesis all relate to the promises: sometimes things happen that show the promises being fulfilled, the patriarchs enjoy divine protection, children are born, or pieces of land are acquired. But at other times there are delays, or even setbacks, as for example when Jacob and all his descendants leave Canaan, the promised land, for Egypt. This is why Clines has defined the theme as the partial fulfilment of the promises. The problem of childlessness illustrates this very well. The first thing we learn about Sarah is that she is childless (11:30). Abraham is then promised descendants (12:2), but ten years pass and nothing happens (16:3), so they try for a child surrogate marriage, which is successful. But another 14 years go by and still Sarah has no child (17:1). She is 89 and past menopause (17:17; 18:11), but eventually after two specific promises (17:9; 18:10) she conceives and Isaac is born (21:1–2). Rebekah, Isaac’s wife, had similar problems conceiving: she had to wait 20 years before her twins, Jacob and Esau, were born (25:20, 26). Finally Jacob’s wife, Rachel also had great difficulty conceiving: her sister Leah had seven children before Rachel bore Joseph (30:1-23). Modern readers of these stories tend to be so surprised by the ages of these parents, which like other figures in Genesis may have a symbolic dimension, that they fail to see the writer’s interest in these stories. They show the promise being fulfilled, but painfully slowly. But the persistent reader will see ever greater fulfillment as the story progresses. By the end of Genesis Jacob’s extended family consists of seventy persons. By the beginning of Exodus they are so numerous that the Egyptians embark on genocide to protect themselves, while a few years later the Moabites, scared by their number, summon the most potent prophet in the Near East to curse Israel. But of course both attempts fail (Exod. 1: Num. 22–24).

The promises and their fulfillment explain how the plot of the Pentateuch subsequently develops. But why is Genesis 12–50 prefaced by the protohistory of Genesis 1–11? The promises to the patriarchs have been described as a ‘reaffirmation of the primal divine intentions for man’ (Clines 1978, p. 29). In other words what God promised to Abraham is what he intended for the whole human race at the beginning. As Genesis portrays history, initially the whole human race, i.e. Adam and Eve, was in the Garden of Eden. There they enjoyed God’s rich supply of all their needs, including land, food and fellowship. This is more or less what Abraham was promised in Genesis 12 and
other places. Also, as soon as mankind was created in two sexes in 1:28, they were told, ‘Be fruitful and multiply.’ This corresponds to the promise to Abraham that he would have innumerable descendants. But as a result of Adam and Eve’s disobedience, they were ejected from the garden, they forfeited God’s presence and provision, and were told that every pregnancy would bring pain. With the call of Abraham, the ideals of Genesis 1 and 2 are resurrected, and Abraham is assured that in him ‘all the families of the earth shall be blessed’ (12:3). The long-term vision of Genesis, if not the whole Old Testament, is that ultimately the reign of sin will be broken and the world will become what its Creator originally intended. In Abraham mankind sets out towards this goal.

But the path is far from straight: the key actors seem to meander towards it, not stride towards it. …

Now back to the summary of the narrative that Stephen Dempster provides.

**The divine answer to the human plight**

Against the dark background of the Table of Nations and the fiasco of Babel, the blessing of Abraham is clearly an answer to the fundamental problem of the human condition. Just as Lamech’s hope for a removal of the curse was answered through his son Noah, so Terah’s son Abram will be the agent of blessing for the world. As Wolff (1974: 54–55) has noted, the word ‘blessing’ occurs five times in the three verses of the call narrative (12:1–3), in sharp contrast to the five-fold curse mentioned in chapters 3–11 (Gen. 3:14, 17; 4:11; 5:29; 9:25). Moreover, the text implies that there will be opposition to the plan of blessing but that this attack will be defeated: ‘I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you.’ This same text is echoed near the end of the Torah, when Israel begins its conquest march to the promised land after wandering in the wilderness for forty years. The curse of the prophet Baalam presents a formidable threat to the fulfillment of the promise of land. Baalam, a religious mercenary, has been both bought and brought by Moab to curse Israel before it enters Canaan. But even this adversary recognizes Israel’s destiny by protesting, ‘How can I curse what God has not cursed? How can I revile what God has not reviled?’ (Num. 23:8). And he later admits that those who bless Israel are blessed and those who curse it are cursed (Num. 24:9; cf. Gen. 12:3). The powers of darkness have been temporarily defeated.

**The Abram story: geography and genealogy**

Succeeding narrative stresses both geography and genealogy. There are scholars who believe these themes to be secondary and not original, but surely von Rad’s insight is more accurate when he states that the twin themes of land and posterity ‘run through the whole like a cantus firmus’ (1963: 31). In fact, some scholars maintain that, in the narrative of chapters 12–22, beginning with God’s call for Abram to leave Mesopotamia and ending with his call to sacrifice Isaac, the text can be neatly divided into themes of land and seed. Chapters 12–15 underline the former and conclude with God’s making a divine oath to Abraham, and chapters 16–22 highlight the latter and
close with another divine oath. While there may be a general thematic orientation to these sections, it is not absolute.

Focus on land

In the first half of this section Abram and Sarai wander through the land growing older by the chapter and thus losing whatever remaining human potential they ever had for a child. When he first reaches Canaan, Abram has a vision from God that emphasizes both geography and genealogy. He is told that this land to which he has come will be given to his descendants. He promptly builds an altar, moves further south and builds another one, calling upon the name of the Lord (Gen. 12:5–9). This resumption of true ‘worship’ (Gen. 12:8) places Abram squarely in the lineage of Seth (Gen. 4:26), whose descendants were marked by such activity.

Abram is faced with a critical choice soon after arriving in the land (Gen. 12:10–20). A famine in Canaan forces him to depart for Egypt. Abram seems to be acting in fear rather than faith as he jeopardizes the promise of land through his actions. Likewise, his fear of losing his own life forces him also to endanger the promise of seed. He passes off Sarai as his sister to ensure his own personal safety. She is then taken to the Pharaoh’s harem, which imperils the promise of seed. The Lord rescues Abram and Sarai and they return to Canaan (Gen. 12:10–13:1).

Back in the land of promise, Abram nearly fails again as he endangers the promise of land by offering it to his nephew, Lot. Abram’s and Lot’s flocks have outgrown any common grazing space. Lot chooses the well-watered plain of the Jordan instead of the land of Canaan. After this decision, God announces to Abram that he will possess the land as far as he can see in all directions. It will be given to him and to his innumerable descendants. He is told to walk through the land – its length and breadth, for the land is to be given as God’s gift. In response Abram promptly builds an altar and calls on the Lord’s name (Gen. 13:14–18).

By this time Abram has built altars in Shechem, Bethel and Hebron. There has not been any mention of the future holy site of Jerusalem. This may seem surprising, but the strategy of the narrator is to delay the visitation of this site until a climax is reached. There are two such climaxes in the Abram story. In both, the site appears after Abram has just saved his nephew and his family from destruction. In the first instance Abram is a military hero who rescues Lot and the people of Sodom and Gomorrath from Mesopotamian marauders (Gen. 14), and in the second he is a spiritual hero who saves Lot from God’s judgment of these same cities (Gen. 18–19). In the first example, after Abram defeats the Mesopotamian armies, Melchizedech the king of (Jeru)Salem meets him. This king honours Abram by giving him bread and wine and then pronounces on and on God a blessing. In this way Abram’s blessing is linked with God’s blessing.

Genesis 14 is the first text in the Tanakh that features kingship and war. Ten kings are mentioned, nine of whom engage in war and one of whom, the king of (Jeru)Salem, is associated with the divine blessing and shalom. Abram is portrayed as a conquering warrior who is able to defeat the five Mesopotamian armies with only 318 servants. Abram is a vastly superior ‘king’ because of the obvious supernatural help that he
receives. After the victory Abram and the Creator both receive a similar blessing from Melchizedech. Abram and the Creator are mentioned not only in the same breath but in the same way. Moreover, Abram’s blessing is bestowed by the Creator of heaven and earth, who was first mentioned in Genesis 1:1. The blessing of creation is now transferred to the arena of history, where the Creator’s global purposes are being achieved. The most high God, the Creator and conqueror of chaos, is at work defeating the enemies of Abram, giving this aged nomad regal dominion and authority over the kings of the nations. God’s programme with and through Abram is to restore the original conditions of creation described in Genesis 1–2 (Gen. 14:19–20). The fact that the blessing is given by someone who originates from what will become the holiest site in the Bible is significant. Jerusalem emerges as a geographical source of blessing for Abram; later it will surface as a source of universal blessing!

Genesis 15 concludes the first section of the Abram narrative, by repeating once more the dual themes of genealogy and geography. Abram is reminded that he will have a child, yet he asks the Lord to substitute his servant Eleazar for the promised heir (Gen. 15:2–3). This domesticates the wild promise of God by viewing it from a strictly earthly horizon. God rejects his request and directs Abram’s gaze beyond the earth to the heavens to find the horizon of his expectations. The innumerable stars represent his countless children (Gen. 15:4–6). He finally believes this wild promise, and this act is counted as a righteous deed. The promised seed will come.

The theme of land naturally follows, since a great number of children require a living space. This theme is evoked by a question from Abram. He has been dwelling in the land for a number of years and wonders how and when he will possess it. God makes a covenant with the patriarch by means of a sacrificial ritual. He states that the promise of land possession will be delayed some 400 years because Canaanite sin is not yet ready to be judged. This promise of blessing to Abram and curse for the Canaanites loudly echoes Noah’s blessing of Shem and curse of Canaan after the flood. In Abram the divine goal of history is being worked out.

Abram’s action is part of a covenant ceremony that guarantees the promise made by means of an oath. In such a ritual animals are slaughtered, their carcasses are divided and the parties of the covenant swear to a pledge (in this case the granting of land) between the dismembered animals, which graphically illustrate the consequence of covenant violation. After Abram performs the ritual, he falls asleep and has a vision of God passing through the animal segments as a blazing fire. God explains that the possession of the land will be delayed. Abram’s descendants will become slaves in Egypt, will be delivered and will later possess Canaan (Gen. 15:12–17). It is then stated that God cut a covenant with Abram ensuring that the land would be given to his descendants (Gen. 15:18). Consequently, God curses himself if the descendants do not possess the land.

Abram has thus begun the journey of faith in response to the call of God; his faith has faltered by going down to Egypt and lying about his wife. He tries to domesticate the promise. Nevertheless, he has triumphed in his faith. God has made a covenant with him and sworn an oath that the patriarch’s descendants would receive the land.
Focus on descendants

The second section (chs. 16–22) shows Abram years older, stumbling again at the promise, attempting to domesticate it once more. With the passing of a decade there has been no sign of fulfillment. His wife encourages him to have a child through her much younger servant Hagar. Abram listens to her and fathers Ishmael. But it is a wrong decision (Gen. 16).

The theme of incredulity at the wild nature of the promise now dominates the storyline. The word ‘laughter’ runs through it as a leitmotiv. Time has moved relentlessly on and the ticking of the biological clocks of the aged couple has rendered impossible the birth of any descendant. Abram is ninety-nine and his wife is eighty-nine; they are no closer to having a child than when they started their ‘absurd’ journey twenty-four years earlier (Gen. 17:1).

At this point there is a revolutionary new beginning, signaled by startling transformations. God changes Abram’s name to Abraham and commands him to be circumcised along with all the household males (Gen. 17:5, 10). The promise of seed is reaffirmed to Abraham. The new name, Abraham, demonstrates this forcefully: Abraham is to be the father of a multitude, the father of many nations. What is in view is not just a new nation but a new humanity! The echoes of Genesis 1 resound.

God adds an obligation to the covenant already made with Abraham, for he tells him ‘to walk before me and be perfect.’ The sign of the covenant is circumcision – the removal of the foreskin of the male genital organ. Just as the rainbow (the sign of the war bow pointing in the sky) reminds God of his promise to preserve creation from another judgment by flood, so circumcision (the sign of the knife in the flesh) is to remind him of his promise of descendants in the face of the curse of sterility and death (Fox 1994). The knife that threatens curse is in fact the promise of life. And if it borders on exegetical myopia not to see this rite with its emphasis on seed in the context of the promise of descendants to Abraham (Gen. 12:1–3), then the same is true when the context is expanded to include the promise of seed that provides hope for the human race (Gen. 3:15).

The fecund and regal nature of the covenant is shown by renaming Abram as Abraham (‘my father is exalted’ to ‘father of multitudes’) and Sarai as Sarah, a name that signifies royalty (‘princess’). She is to be the mother of many nations as well as the mother of a royal dynasty (Gen. 17:16). Abraham and Sarah will produce heirs for the throne of creation. Three times in this text the double use of the adverb ‘exceedingly’ occurs, stressing the fertility of this royal couple (me’od me’od, 17:2, 6, 20; Klein 1979: 130).

By now this all seems too much for a budding centenarian! Previously, he had been told that he would be the father of a great nation, not just nations. Given his present condition, his new name seems absurd, and any surgery on his genital organ (circumcision) has come much too late to help him produce children. The whole scene is so patently outrageous that Abraham domesticates the promise again and pleads with God to accept Ishmael as the seed of promise. When the answer is negative, Abraham
cannot contain his laughter: ‘God just can’t be serious!’ God’s response is to ensure that the old man will never forget the outrageous promise; he must name the firstborn of many descendants Isaac (‘laughter’, Gen. 17:7–9). The joke is on the old man.

If this has seemed hilarious to Abraham, it is equally ridiculous to Sarah. After her husband and the males of the household have been circumcised, three visitors appear. When they have been shown hospitality by the aged couple, they announce the imminent birth of Isaac to Abraham. Sarah chuckles to herself as she eavesdrops on the conversation. Like husband, like wife. The visitors rebuke her and predict that the birth will occur within a year (Gen. 18:1–15).

The laughter is intended to highlight the shock of the divine gift. This is something that could not be calculated on the trajectory of any human scheme of possibility. But something like this should not be that surprising to anyone who has followed the storyline and the overarching importance of the seed of the woman established in the preceding chapters, especially in Genesis 3–11. When the crucial seed arrives there should be something in the text that arrests the audience’s attention. This not even the bearers of the seed could imagine happening. It is almost a reminder of the chaos and darkness that preceded the creation in Genesis 1. Abraham and Sarah, in their old and decrepit bodies and in their unbelief, represent that chaos. Into that death and curse will come the ‘laughter’ of life.

A crucial scene immediately follows, which describes the role of the seed that Abraham and Sarah will have (Gen. 18:16–33). The seed will be not only an individual but also a nation that will effectively do God’s plan for the nations. This plan is called a ‘way’, one that is marked by truth and justice. Since Abraham will educate his seed in this way, he will be able to help to direct the future of the world (e.g., Sodom’s destiny). Abraham can intercede for the nations and be involved in the salvation of the world. He is invited to become involved in the divine council.

‘Involved’ is a euphemism for Abraham’s next move. He knows about both the wickedness of Sodom and the justice of God, and pleads for the city. He dares to argue with God for the sake of Sodom. Abraham’s argument is based on a conception of justice shared with God that would not permit the righteous to be destroyed along with the wicked. At first he questions God as to whether he could allow fifty good people to be destroyed along with the rest of the city’s evil population. When he receives a negative answer, he continues by ‘raising the stakes’, reducing the number of the righteous until he feels he can go no further. He receives the divine guarantee that the city will be saved if only ten righteous people remain in it.

Abraham intercedes for an entire city on behalf of ten righteous individuals. His prayer is not enough to save the city – only a righteous man and his two daughters. To some of the members of the family, the looming divine judgment seems absurd, a fact that unifies this material with the previous storyline in chapters 17–18.

But from a larger perspective the radical nature of Abraham’s intercession is seen. Abraham – the father of nations – pleads for the salvation of the city on behalf of its righteous. His prayer does not succeed in saving the city but it does save the righteous.
There is a suggestion in the text that Abraham’s role (and by implication his seed) will have consequences for the salvation of the nations. (Perhaps there is an allusion here to a future seed of Abraham who will intercede to the point of giving up his own life so that the wicked – not the righteous – can be spared (Is. 53).)

The disaster upon Sodom in this second half of the Abraham narrative parallels the salvation of the city and Lot’s family in the first half. There the outcome was followed by the reiteration of the divine promise and an emphasis upon Abraham’s faith.

A subsequent chapter emphasizes the arrival of the long-awaited seed. As if to underline this birth, the fact of fulfillment is repeated: ‘Yahweh visited Sarah just as he had spoken; Yahweh did to Sarah just as he promised’ (21:1). In verse 3 there is a dramatic build-up of suspense before the name of the child is given: ‘Abraham (1) called the name of his son, (2) who was born to him, (3) whom Sarah bore to him, (4) Isaac.’ This four-fold reference is important, since a similar description occurs in the next chapter in a far different context (22:2). The child is named Isaac (‘laughter’), not now as evidence of disbelief in the divine promise, but because of the incredible joy brought to an old woman whose womb was as good as dead! New life from death evokes laughter. The earlier focus on doubt is swallowed up in the joy of the astonishing new life in the midst of death.

No sooner are the birth and early childhood of Isaac described than the scene shifts to the most severe crisis in the narrative. God requires Abraham to sacrifice his son as a burnt offering (Gen. 22:1–2). The text juxtaposes the height of blessing (the birth of the seed) with the depth of the curse (the attack upon the seed). Isaac, who has caused so much laughter, will now cause so much pain. And here the irony is that the one who seems to be the perpetrator of curse is the author of blessing – God himself. So much for the innumerable progeny! And Abraham thought God would curse himself if he did not fulfil the promise.

There are two foci in this remarkable text: the child of promise and Abraham’s amazing faith. As many scholars have observed, echoes of the original call of Abraham to leave Mesopotamia reverberate in the narrative. But now Abraham’s journey is to move into more unexplored territory, a locale known as ‘Oblivion’ (Crenshaw 1984:29). It is found on a mountain that is later linked to Jerusalem (2 Chr. 3:1). The place from which Abram was blessed by the Most High God is now a place where curse seems pronounced. And the young lad’s death will be the death of the old man too.

The command to kill Isaac echoes his birth by presenting another four-fold description of the child: ‘Take (1) your son, (2) your only son, (3) the one whom you love, (4) Isaac’. The longed-for and hoped-for descendant has arrived, and the father is told to take him to the site where he had received the blessing from the Most High God. Now he must take this child of promise to Mount Jerusalem, which might better be named Mount Doom. Blessing and curse are juxtaposed in bold relief. Yet, at the climactic moment there on the mountain, God becomes the provider again. God provides (ra’a) a sacrifice. He has shown (ra’a) Abraham the land and has provided (ra’a) for him a sacrifice. He has blessed him from Jerusalem twice. For the first time God promises Abraham that, in addition to blessing the world through Isaac, the aged patriarch will
possess the gates of his enemies; that is, he will decisively defeat the enemy by taking him at his most vulnerable point (Gen. 22:17). In the context of [the] story of Abraham and Israel this text certainly means one thing: that the nascent Israelite nation will have military success. But in the context of Genesis 1–11 that military success has much wider theological ramifications. For the real enemy is the serpent, and to transfer appropriately the expression ‘to take the gate of the enemies’ in this sphere would mean to strike a blow to the serpent’s head.

But the text’s canonical trajectory points forwards as well as backwards. For it contains very specific terminology and symbolism that are used later in the canon. The fact that it is Jerusalem where this sacrifice is offered is hardly incidental. It is certainly also significant that the sacrifice functions as a substitute for the child of promise. Similar sacrificial terminology occurs in only two other places: the first sacrifice at the tabernacle (Lev. 8–9) and the annual sacrifices used for the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). It as if the Day of Atonement institutionalizes for the public community this private experience of Abraham and Isaac (cf. Walters 1987). Israel is also spared the knife.

While the issue of genealogy has been treated effectively, the matter of geography is still urgent. Abraham now has a sign that he will be a great nation, the child Isaac. What about the land? And what about the future of Isaac in the land? Genesis 23 deals with the first question and Genesis 24 with the second.

In Genesis 23, Abraham purchases a grave for Sarah, his recently deceased spouse. The detailed description of the transaction in the presence of witnesses shows the importance of this text’s contribution to the storyline. If the birth of Isaac provides Abraham with positive proof of God’s promise of descendants, the purchase of the cave of Macphelah supplies corresponding evidence for God’s promise of land. As von Rad (1976:249) observes, this text describes ‘a fact central to Israel’s faith’. That central fact is land. Israel’s faith is anything but a disembodied spirituality. It is rooted in dirt and soil – ‘adama.

The next chapter (24) is the longest in Genesis and records the acquisition of a wife for Isaac. The tedious repetition in this episode highlights the importance of the subject matter – the crucial significance of genealogy. The episode’s climax is achieved with Rebekah’s departure to Canaan. She is sent with the family blessing: ‘May you, our sister, become thousands of ten thousands [through motherhood] and may your seed possess the gates of its enemies’ (24:60). Thus the creation blessing of Genesis 1:28 continues to reverberate through the pages of the Text (cf. 3:15; 8:17; 9:1, 7; 17:6; 22:17).

The Jacob story: the merging of geography and genealogy

The blessing of Abraham is transferred to Isaac, and the focus shifts to him and his barren wife. This situation contrasts with the blessing pronounced upon her in the previous chapter. If twenty-five years pass before Sarah conceives, twenty transpire before Rebekah does, and her pregnancy is the result of Isaac’s prayers (Gen. 25:20–25).
If the command of God is the engine that drives the Abraham narrative in Genesis 12, an oracle of God to a pregnant but confused Rebekah propels the Isaac narrative: ‘two nations are struggling within you and the older will serve the younger’ (Gen. 25:23). If the focus in the Abraham narrative is on the incredible nature of the promise and the faith of Abraham and Sarah, the focus in the Isaac story is on the electing purposes of God, seen in the birth of Esau and Jacob, and the unexpected transfer of the blessing to the younger son, Jacob (Gen. 25:11, 19–26).

Two birth scenes frame Jacob’s life: the struggle with Esau in the darkness of the womb, when he born ‘Jacob’ (Gen. 25:22–23), and the struggle with God in the darkness at the Jabbok River, when he is reborn ‘Israel’ (Gen. 32:25–33). Similarly, two nocturnal divine encounters shape his life: the dream at Bethel (Gen. 28:10–22) and the struggle at the Jabbok. Jacob’s earlier vision at Bethel, before he leaves Canaan for Mesopotamia, reminds the reader of the event in Mesopotamia before Abraham left Ur – the building of the tower of Babel. There the human community launched a massive effort to make a name for itself by building a tower in order to collapse the boundary between earth and heaven. It resulted in failure and exile. As Jacob flees from Canaan to escape his brother’s wrath, he looks for a stone upon which to rest his head in a field. There he has a dream in a field in which he sees a ramp connecting heaven to earth and its base the stone on which he rests. Angelic beings move up and down on the ladder and Yahweh pronounces a blessing upon the fugitive:

‘The land upon which you have been lying I will give to you and your seed. Your seed will be like the dust of the earth, spreading out in all directions. All families of the earth will be blessed through you and your seed’ (Gen. 28:13–14).

The vision is interpreted by the words. The ramp connecting earth and heaven graphically links the unity of heaven and earth with the sleeping Jacob. Geography and genealogy coalesce on a rock in a field. God will build his tower through a seed found in this land. Or, in the language of the text, the blessing (read the blessing) will come through Jacob and his seed.

The centre of the Jacob narrative is the patriarch’s sojourn in Mesopotamia, where he and his wives and concubines produce virtually the entire family of Israel. The narrative pace slows down almost to a standstill by focusing on the births of twelve children (Gen. 29:31 – 30:24). Children are virtually everything. It is equally clear that they are born not by human means but by divine aid. The expression ‘He [God] opened the womb’ is used for the birth of the first child (Gen. 29:31) and the last (Gen. 30:22) in the sequence. God’s work is far more effective than any human manipulation. (Note that Leah sleeps with Jacob after giving Rachel the ancient equivalent of a fertility drug (Gen. 30:14-17). The subsequent text notes that it is Leah who gets pregnant, not Rachel.)

The larger picture is becoming clearer. The great nation that Abraham and Sarah were promised is gradually becoming a reality. The blessing of innumerable descendants for Rebekah is beginning to happen. The geographical theme emerges after the last child is born as Jacob asks Laban for his wages so that he can return to his land, Canaan (Gen. 30:25-26). Jacob has not lost sight of the promise. After gaining wealth in a dubious
way, Jacob is commanded by God to return to Canaan; he leaves Mesopotamia as furtively as he left Canaan twenty years earlier. In the former flight he stole his brother’s blessing from his father; in the latter he is accused of stealing his father-in-law’s family.

Just as Abram became a new man when he was circumcised and consequently renamed ‘father of many nations’, so Jacob becomes born again as ‘Israel’ after being crippled in a desperate struggle with a divine assailant (Gen. 32:25-30). As Geller (1982: 51) remarks, this passage is extremely significant: ‘the eponymous ancestor of the nation is about to receive the national name’. In what amounts to a second-birth experience, he fights in the darkness not with his brother but with God. He wins the fight by losing – by being broken – and facing up to his identity. Consequently, he tells God who he is (Jacob the deceiver, the heel-grabber) and has his name changed to Israel (God’s fighter). Jacob wins the blessing and will be God’s conquering warrior in the earth. But he does not emerge unscathed; he is now lame, wounded in the thigh (Gen. 32:26, 33) – the place from which his descendants will come (Gen. 46:26; Exod. 1:5; cf. Geller 1982). Jacob has been circumcised in his spirit. He has had a vision of God and receives a new vision of his brother (Gen. 32:31; 33:10).

As we prepare to read Dempster’s account of Joseph, consider these introductory comments by Tremper Longman.

We now come to the final toledot of Genesis, the toledot (or “family history”) of Jacob (Gen 37:2). In keeping with the pattern that we have seen thus far, the toledot of Jacob focuses on Jacob’s children. Of all the sons of Jacob, it’s Joseph whose story we hear most fully, though we will note a short interruption with a story of Judah (Gen 39).

I will call this section the Joseph story after its main protagonist. One of the first things scholars notice as they begin reading the Joseph story is the change in literary type and quality. While the patriarchal narratives consist of loosely connected and short episodes, the Joseph story has the character of a short story or novella. Though there are different scenes, there is more coherence to the plot than we have seen so far. There is also coherence of theme, noted in part by the common use of the term bless in the story. Not only is Joseph blessed, but those around him often are as well. After all, God was with him.

Remember, Joseph is not one of the patriarchs. Later generations will speak of the “God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” Notice that Joseph isn’t included in this list. The Joseph story provides a bridge between the patriarchs and the exodus account, giving explanation as to how the Israelites arrived in Egypt in the first place. Though not a patriarch per se, Joseph is clearly the recipient of the covenantal promises given to Abraham. We will often hear that God was “with him,” blessing him and those in his presence.

To truly understand the Joseph story we should begin near the end, for Joseph himself utters the theme of his life. After the death of Jacob, the eleven brothers, who previously had mistreated their now powerful brother Joseph, are worried that Joseph has waited until this moment to take his revenge on them. They offer to serve him provided that he doesn’t hurt them. Joseph is offended and responds by saying: “Don’t
be afraid of me. Am I God, that I can punish you? You intended to harm me, but God intended it all for good. He brought you to this position so I could save the lives of many people. No, don’t be afraid. I will continue to take care of you and your children” (Gen 50:19–20). Indeed, as we reflect on the life of Joseph as told in Genesis 37–50, we are struck by the truth of this statement. From a human perspective Joseph’s life seems like a series of hard knocks with no meaning. However, Joseph understands that his life has tremendous meaning. (How to Read Genesis, Tremper Longman III, pp. 149–150)

Now for Stephen Dempster’s account of the story of Joseph.

**The Joseph story and universal blessing**

It is against this background that the story of Joseph, which concludes Genesis, is sketched. Many of the themes of the Tanakh resound: persecution, exile and return, Israel’s being a blessing to the nations. But the key themes of genealogy and geography emerge here particularly at the beginning and ending of the story. This story as a whole fulfils the prediction to Abraham about Israel sojourning outside the land of promise (Gen. 15:13), but it is also about Israel’s being a blessing to the nations. Three people emerge as important in the text. First, Joseph, Jacob’s son, has dreams of dominion and sovereignty that propel the narrative. The dreams of Joseph enrage his brothers at the beginning of the story. When the opportunity arises to eliminate their younger sibling, they remark, ‘We’ll see now what will become of his dreams’ (37:20). The rest of the Joseph story answers this sarcastic jibe. The dreams of an unlikely Israelite show that Yahweh is determined to bless the nations come what may, even if Israel wishes to destroy the one through whom the blessing will come. That individual, ironically, will become a person who will bring reconciliation and healing not only for the nations but also for Israel itself.

The second focal person in the text is old Jacob or Israel. When, as an aged patriarch, he comes to Egypt to meet his beloved son, he is shown to be an important medium of blessing. While on the journey with his family, he has a dramatic vision that joins the themes of genealogy and geography. He is about to leave the land of promise, so he needs reassurance that he will be back:

‘I am God, the God of your father! Do not be afraid of going down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. It is I who will go down with you there and it is I who will surely bring you back! Joseph’s hand will close your eyes’ (Gen. 46:3–4).

The aged patriarch is promised that in exile the family will mushroom from the size of a small family into a huge nation. God will then bring the nation back and re-establish it in the land of promise. Immediately after this scene the narrative flow freezes as a lengthy genealogical list detailing Jacob’s family is included in the text (Gen. 46:8–27). Remarkably, this list includes seventy members, the same number as the nations enumerated in the Table of Nations (Gen. 10), which were eventually dispersed across the earth. Here is Abraham’s new humanity, a new ‘Table of Nations’, called into being to restore the nations to the fulfillment of the divine purpose.
That this purpose indicates blessing for the rest of the world is indicated in a strange scene where the aged Israel meets the powerful Pharaoh (Gen. 47:7–10). There are not just two individuals meeting here, but two nations, one of them embryonic and the other the most powerful nation on earth. Old Israel is at the end of a painful and broken life and the Pharaoh is a picture of power and majesty. But it is Israel who blesses Pharaoh (Gen. 47:10)! The irony is impossible to miss. The hope of the world comes from Israel and not from Egypt. Blessing comes from a decrepit and broken Israel and not from a dominant and strong Egypt.

The third prominent figure in the narrative is Judah. He is first mentioned in an obscure way, being involved in the sale of his brother to traders (Gen. 37:26). Then follows a story about him and his family that seems like an arbitrary interpolation by a drowsy redactor (Gen. 38). Nevertheless, it is an entire episode devoted to the future of Judah’s line of descent. This apparently self-contained story emphasizes a future for Judah’s line, despite significant obstacles raised by Judah and his own family.

Judah has moved into a particular area where Canaanites thrive; he and his son Er marry local Canaanite women. When his son displeases Yahweh, he dies. His brother Onan likewise dies when he refuses to do the duty of a brother-in-law by marrying Er’s wife, Tamar, and raising up a descendant to carry on his brother’s name. When Tamar sees that the last son of Judah, Shelah, will not be given to her to raise up an heir for her husband, she takes matters into her own hands. Disguised as a prostitute, she seduces her father-in-law, receiving a pledge of payment as staff, a string and a cylinder seal, the ancient equivalent of an identification badge. When her pregnancy comes to light, she is ironically condemned to death by Judah, who quickly changes his mind when confronted with his own tokens of pledge. Judah recognizes his sin and exonerates his daughter-in-law. The text concludes with the birth of the grandchildren of Judah, Perez and Zerah.

This text highlights two factors: first, the progeny of Judah through a Gentile woman, who wanted blessing for her dead husband. She was more righteous than the chosen people to whom she was related in marriage. She believed more in the seed than they did, and if it had not been for her ingenuity the promise would have been lost. But there is a second irony. The staff left with Tamar as a pledge of payment for sex becomes not only a means of evoking Judah’s confession but the means by which Judah will rule the nations in the future. Thus it is not a coincidence that at the end of the Joseph story there is a picture of old Jacob pronouncing a powerful blessing upon his children and particularly on Judah. This blessing is especially striking because it will be realized at the end of history, or ‘in the last days’, the first occurrence of what appears to be a technical term in the Tanakh for the end of history or the eschatological age. In these words are gathered together elements of dominion and dynasty:

Judah – your brothers will praise you! Your hand will be placed upon the neck of your enemies. Your father’s children will bow before you. Judah is a lion’s cub. You have gone up from the prey, my son. He kneels and lies down as a lion and as a lioness – who can stand against her? The staff will not leave Judah and the sceptre from between his feet until the one comes to whom it belongs, and the one to whom is owed the obedience of the peoples. Tying to the vine the donkey, and to the plant the
she-donkey’s foal, he washes his garment with wine and his shirt with grape juice. His eyes are dark from the abundance of wine and his teeth white from milk (49:8-12).

From this blessing the big picture of the Joseph story begins to emerge. As Joseph is singled out in his dream as the one before whom his family will bow down, so the nations will do the same to Judah. Moreover, the imagery of a warrior-king is used: he will place his hand on the neck of his enemies. This may allude to the battle between the seeds mentioned in Genesis 3, in which a blow to the head defeats the serpent. The metaphor of a human warrior is mixed with that of a powerful, ferocious lion that has destroyed its prey. The metaphor switches back to that of the warrior-king whose rule will extend from Judah to encompass, one day, all the peoples of the earth.

It is stated that the sceptre will not depart from Judah until ‘he comes to whom it belongs’ (Gen. 49:10). The Hebrew text here is a notorious interpretive crux. Although the above translation has its difficulties, it provides a semantic parallel with the next line: ‘to whom belongs the obedience of the peoples’. It then fosters the expectation of a descendant from Judah whose dominion will encompass the world. The text concludes with the effect of his reign: nature will be renewed so much that vines will serve as hitching-posts for donkeys and wine will be used for washing clothes.

There is thus a clear genealogical and geographical dimension to the promise. At the end of Genesis, Israel has been a blessing to the nations through his son, the royal figure of Joseph. Old Israel also looks to the end of history and sees there his son, Judah, conquering enemies and extending rule from his own nation to that of the world. This dynasty will renew nature. But it is worth noting that, although Judah has an important role in the future, other individuals from the line of Israel play significant roles as well, and help to sketch out the nature of the dominion that will some day be exercised by Judah.

Before proceeding to the next ‘book’ in the Tanakh, it is worth considering the next time the phrase ‘in the latter days’ occurs, this designation of a time period in which the blessing of Judah will be effectively realized. The phrase is next found in Numbers 24:14 and its context is Israel’s march to the promised land. A pagan prophet, Baalam, has been hired to curse Israel to prevent it from reaching its destination. God transforms the curse into a blessing, proclaiming that a ruler will emerge from Israel ‘in the latter days’, who will destroy its ancient foes, smiting their heads, possessing their gates, and extending his rule far and wide. Baalam’s end-time blessing both complements and supplements Jacob’s blessing of Judah.

(Gordon Wenham concludes our study of the Patriarchs and Joseph with these comments about the New Testament’s use of Genesis 12–50.

The New Testament sees the history of the Church as a continuation of the history of Israel: Israel is the olive tree into which Gentile believers have been grafted (Rom. 11:17–24). So the figures of Genesis are the earliest members of the Church, and their
deeds should inspire later believers to imitate them. Most quoted is Genesis 15:6, ‘He [Abraham] believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness,’ which Paul uses to demonstrate the centrality of faith, and James to show that faith must issue in good deeds (Rom. 4:9, 22; Gal. 3:6; James 2:23).

But the most prolonged appeals to the examples of the patriarchs are to be found in Stephen’s speech to the council, which ranges from the call of Abraham in Mesopotamia to Jacob’s burial in Canaan (Acts 7:2–16), and in Hebrews 11. The latter’s review of Genesis starts with Abel and ends with Joseph’s last words insisting that in due time he should be buried in Canaan (Heb. 11:4–22). These were all people who, according to the author of Hebrews, lived by faith in the promises, who persisted in face of difficulty and persecution, just as he hopes his readers would too. (Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch, Gordon Wenham, pg. 55)

Paul House has these concluding remarks to that part of the Drama of Scripture that is told in the book of Genesis.

When Genesis ends many theological themes are firmly fixed into a pattern, while others remain outside the pattern, not yet connected to the whole. Certainly a definite portrait of God has emerged. God is the sole deity who acts in these accounts. God alone creates, so God alone judges sin, calls, guides and blesses Abraham and his descendants, and protects and delivers the people now called Israel in all circumstances. This God communicates with people, alternately expressing commands, promises and guidance, and this God works to remove the sin that hounds the whole human race. This God has no beginning, no rival, not time or space boundaries, no moral flaw, no hidden agenda.

A picture of the human race has also emerged. People are made in God’s image yet are not satisfied with this lofty position. They desire to be God in the sense that they disobey God’s word, thus attempting to seize divine authority for themselves. Humans eat the fruit of pride, violence and immorality, and therefore they learn to fear, hate lust and disobey. Yet they also have the capacity to hear God’s promises and act in faith, and however halting and short-sighted that faith may be, it is still faith, not in images that can be stolen and buried but in the God who creates, communicates and redeems. The human race is clearly at its best when its members believe in God and by faith obey God’s communicated standards.

With these pictures in place it is possible to note what has yet to occur that has been foreshadowed thus far. The one God has yet to eradicate human sin. The groundwork for this eradication has been in large part fulfilled. But the promised land remains in the hands of “foreigners,” no specific moral law exists, all nations have yet to be blessed through Abraham’s lineage, and Israel lives in Egypt. Clearly, then, some important details need to be clarified. It seems appropriate, though, to assume that resolution of these items will come from the twin themes of God’s uniqueness and the human race’s faith. The Creator God stands alone as the single hope for the created human race to fulfill their potential as rulers of the created earth. (Old Testament Theology, Paul R. House, pp. 85–86)