

# 1. The Abrahamic Promises

God's promises to Abraham are set within a larger context.

## I. The Primeval History (Gen 1:1–11:26)

### A. Creation: Blessed life (Gen 1:1-2:3)

Starting with a formless and empty (*tohu wa-bohu*) earth, God gave it form (days 1-3) and content (days 4-6).

Realm	Days 1-3			Days 4-6		
		Formation	Differentiation		Filling	Contents
heavens	1	light	light : darkness	4	heavens	sun, moon, stars
waters	2	firmament	water above : below	5	sky + sea	sea creatures, birds
land	3	dry ground vegetation	sea : land	6	land	animals mankind

The use of the special word “create” (בָּרָא *bara*) categories the creation into three levels.

1. inanimate objects, including the vegetation (day 3b) and the heavenly bodies (day 4): covered under the general rubric “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (1:1).
2. animals of the sky, sea and land: “God created the great sea creatures and every living sea creature that moves, with which the water swarms” (1:21). These are the first living creatures. The use of “create” indicates an elevation of special-ness.
3. humans: “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them” (1:27); 3× use of “create” in poetry.

God blessed (בָּרַךְ *barak*) the life which he created:

1. the first living creatures: “God blessed them, saying, ‘Be fruitful, multiply and fill (פָּרוּ וּרְבוּ וּמְלֵאוּ) the waters in the sea...’” (1:22).
2. the humans: “God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth’” (1:28).

By blessing the living creatures and the humans, God endows them with abundant and effective life, i.e., he enables them to fulfill the command, “Be fruitful, multiply and fill.” Living creatures and humans have a similar purpose.

But humanity has an additional purpose:

he is made in the image of God: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness (בְּצַלְמֵנוּ כְּדְמוּתֵנוּ)” (1:26).

1. creation is God’s temple, and man is the image in the temple
2. man is God’s representative on earth, ruling it on God’s behalf. To the command to be fruitful, God adds, “subdue it [the earth] and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth” (1:28), i.e. over the living creatures of all three realms. Man is God’s vice-regent (Lat. *rego* rule), ruling earth on his behalf.

After creating a world that was very good, God did something special with the seventh day:

he finished his work and he rested (שָׁבַת *shabat*) from his work. God took his rest in the realm of time.

he blessed it and sanctified (קִדְּשׁ) it. This establishes a major division: six days that are very good vs. a seventh day that is holy. Does this imply an eschatology? Will it be God’s purpose to extend holiness to all time?

## B. The Garden of Eden (Gen 2:4-25)

In Gen 1, God specified where the creatures of the sea, sky and land were to live, but not where the humans are to live.

The LORD God formed (יצר *yatsar*), like a potter, the man (אָדָם *adam*) from the dust of the ground (אֲדָמָה). Man's origin was the ground, but that was not his destiny. In Eden, God planted a garden (גֶּן *Gk paradeisos*), the original paradise. Here he put the man (2:8).

1. The LORD God settled (הִנִּיחַ *hi*. “caused to rest”) the man in the garden (2:15).
2. The LORD God gave him two tasks: to work (עָבַד) and keep (שָׁמַר) the garden (2:15).
3. The Lord God supplied the humans with everything they needed for life.
4. The humans were to heed God's word. This was not complicated: they had a single command to obey, a single thing was off-limits amidst all God's bounty.
5. The garden was God's garden, his sanctuary on earth. Here he walked (הִלֵּךְ *hitp.*) in the cool of the day (3:8). Here he communicated with humanity. The garden was an intrusion of heaven onto earth.

## Exile (Gen 3–11)

The woman listened to the serpent's voice, and the man listened to the woman's voice. The woman *saw* that the fruit was *good* and she *took*, an act of moral autonomy, making her own decision of right and wrong.

God's judgment on sin:

1. Pronounced the serpent cursed (אָרַר) the opposite of “blessed.” Frustrates life, rendering it futile.
2. Inflicted man and woman with pain.
3. Expelled (גָּרַשׁ) them east of Eden to work (עָבַד) the ground (*adamah*). Working the ground is very different from serving in the sanctuary (garden). Man returns to his origins: the dust of the ground.

The rest of primeval history is divided into two sets of ten generations:

### 1. Adam to Noah

Escalation of sin:

1. Cain murdered Abel. God curses (אָרַר) him, an escalation of the curse to humans. Cain's line continues to the 7th generation. Cain went into voluntary exile from God, settling in the land of Nod (wandering), east of Eden (4:16).
2. The sons of God *saw* that the daughters of men were *good* (fair) and they took (6:2).

God's response: the Flood. Undoes creation and starts over with Noah, a man who walked with him and heeded his voice.

### 2. Noah to Abram

A new beginning with Noah, a new Adam.

“God blessed Noah and his three sons and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth’” (9:1).

God makes a covenant with Noah and all living creatures to not resort to a Flood again.

Escalation of sin:

1. Ham's sin against Noah (9:20-24). Noah, presumably on God's behalf, passes judgment: Canaan is cursed (9:24).
2. Tower of Babel (11:1-9). Humanity, still wandering east of Eden, fearing dispersion over the earth, gathers to make a city, tower and name. Divine judgment: confusion of language, scattering over the earth.

## II. The Patriarchal History (Gen 11:27–50:26)

### The Call of Abraham

God's response to the sin of the primeval history.

## The Abrahamic Promises

Now the LORD said to Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.

And I will make of you a great nation,  
and I will bless you and make your name great,  
so that you will be a blessing.  
I will bless those who bless you,  
and him who dishonors you I will curse,  
and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” (Gen 12:1-3)

The promises:

1. Blessing: 5× in vv 2-3. God will bless Abram, so that through him all nations will be blessed. God restores blessing, as he did with Noah, but now will be more proactive “I will bless you...all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”
2. Seed: God will make Abram a great nation (גוי גדול). Rather than commanding Abram, “be fruitful and multiply,” God will do it.
3. Land: calls Abram to leave his land and go to another one which God will show him. The land is identified in vv 5-7 as the land of Canaan.

Election: God chooses Abram, who is no better than anyone else; he’s an idolater living in Ur, s. Mesopotamia. He chooses him for the benefit of others also: God chooses him *from* the nations *for* the nations.

Obstacles

There are obstacles to fulfilling the promises of both seed and land:

1. Seed: Sarai is barren (11:30). This fact is highlighted by the chiasmic structure of 11:28-32, centering on v30.
2. Land: the Canaanites were then in the land (12:6).

## The Seed and the Land in the Patriarchal Narratives (11:27-25:18)

The Abraham narrative is developed in a chiasmic structure:<sup>1</sup>

- A Genealogy of Terah (11:27-32)
- B Start of Abram’s Spiritual Odyssey (12:1-9)
- C Sarai in foreign palace; ordeal ends in peace and success; Abram and Lot part (12:10-13:18)
- D Abram comes to the rescue of Sodom and Lot (14:1-24)
- E Covenant with Abram; Annunciation of Ishmael (15:1-16:16)
- E’ Covenant with Abraham; Annunciation of Isaac (17:1-18:15)
- D’ Abraham comes to the rescue of Sodom and Lot (18:16-19:38)
- C’ Sarah in foreign palace; ordeal ends in peace and success; Abraham and Ishmael part (20:1-21:34)
- B’ Climax of Abraham’s Spiritual Odyssey (22:1-19)
- A’ Genealogy of Nahor (22:20-24)

This pattern focuses attention on:

the start and climax of Abraham’s spiritual odyssey; beginning with the call to go (אֶל-הָאֲרָץ) “to the land I will show you” (12:1), ending with the command to go (אֶל-הָאֲרָץ) “to “one of the mountains of which I shall tell you” (22:2).  
the two covenants, associated with two annunciations concerning the two sons.

First covenant ceremony: follows Abram’s faith. “He believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness” (15:6). The extent of the land is specified: from the river of Egypt to the river Euphrates (15:18).

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1. Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1986), 28-29.

Second covenant ceremony: changed Abram’s name to Abraham (father of a multitude). Abraham is given a part: circumcision, the sign of the covenant.

Motivated by what he saw, Lot separated from Abram and journeyed east, while Abram settled in the land of Canaan (13:11-12). But the only land which Abraham acquires is a burial plot for Sarah: the cave at Machpelah in Kiriath-Arba (later Hebron) (ch. 23). Two generations later, when Rachel died in childbirth (Benjamin) on the road from Bethel to Ephrath (Bethlehem), Jacob erected a pillar over her tomb (35:20).

God continues his election, choosing Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau. With Jacob the process is complete. By the end of Genesis, the descendants of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob number 70, equal to the number of nations (Table of Nations, ch. 10). But they are in Egypt, outside the land.

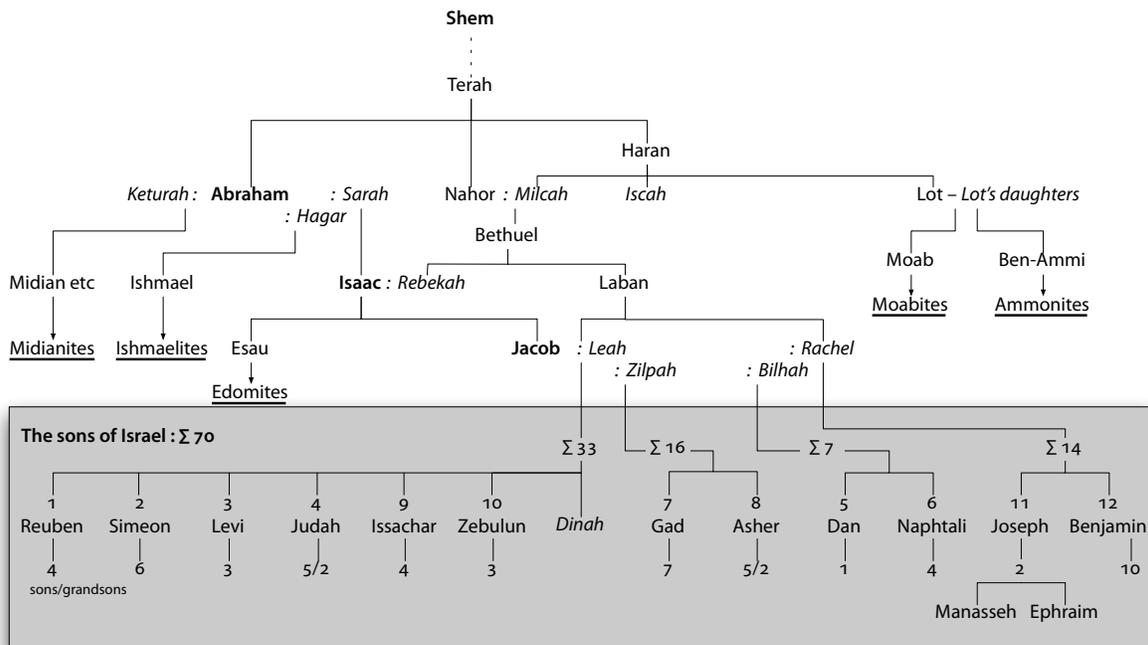


Fig. 1. The descendants of Terah and the “sons” of Israel