

Introducing the Bible
Worksheet for Week 3
God Chooses and Saves a People

These worksheets will introduce you to the material we'll talk about in class each week and provide you with a structured set of daily Bible readings. If you have a study Bible, I'd suggest that you begin this week by reading the introduction to Genesis. Then read this worksheet and begin the daily Bible readings.

God Chooses Abram (later, called Abraham)

Last week, we looked at the creation stories, in which God creates everything there is, pronounces it good, and creates humans in his image. We saw the humans, desiring to be like God themselves, rebelling against God, turning from him and consigning themselves to exile. This week, we are introduced to Abram, one person, chosen by God, with whom God will enter into yet another covenant, so that all the nations of the earth may be blessed and all creation renewed.

The stories of Abraham & Sarah, and their descendents, consume the rest of the book of Genesis. Nearly 2000 years or so before Jesus, God chooses a man named Abram to be the one through whom God would restore his people and all creation. God makes three promises to Abram: (1) Abram will be the father of a great nation, (2) God will give them a land (12:7), and (3) through Abram all the "families of the earth will be blessed" (Genesis 12:3). The third promise is particularly important in understanding the rest of the Bible. God did not choose Abram and his descendents (who would become the nation of Israel) just for their own sake, but for the sake of the whole world. This notion of God's people being the agent of God's renewal and redemption carries all the way through the Bible. For example, Jesus' commission of his disciples to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19) is the natural extension of the charge given to Abram.

The stories of Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Esau and all the rest of the family are real, they are messy, and, frankly, usually not very flattering! Abraham and Sarah do not trust God's promises about children; indeed, Sarah laughs at the idea. Sarah is so sure that God won't deliver on his promises that she sends in one of her maid-servants to get pregnant by Abraham and then, when she does, tosses the servant and her child out of the camp! Jacob cheats his brother Esau out of his birthright – at his mother's instigation! Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery. But . . . through all this, there are a couple of points to keep in mind:

1. These Old Testament "heroes" are often not good role models for us. The Biblical writers don't try to clean up these stories or make the ancient patriarchs of Israel seem larger than life. The writers tell it as it was. There isn't a moral to all these stories. Sometimes, you can't even be sure whether the story is giving us a good example or a bad one!
2. Through all this human ugliness, God's purposes move forward. When Joseph confronts his brothers, he tells them, "Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good" (Genesis 50:20).

Covenants

The notion of covenant is one of the central themes of the Bible. It isn't a word we use much anymore, but it expresses the making and keeping of commitments and promises. Though there are several types of covenants in the Bible, they fall into two broad categories, (1) the covenant between God and his people and (2) the covenants among humans. Covenants are used in the Bible to bind two persons legally and personally, as when Jonathan makes a covenant with David (1 Samuel 18:3-4), wherein their loving bond diminishes the legal aspects of the covenant. In other cases, such as the covenant between Laban and Jacob (Genesis 31:43-54), the legal power of the covenant is much more important because Laban and Jacob don't trust each other. In most biblical covenants between humans, God is called on as the witness and guarantor. When God is a participant in the covenant, such as God's covenants with Noah (Genesis 9:8-17) or Abraham (12:1-3) or Moses (in Exodus and Deuteronomy) or David (see 2 Samuel 7), the covenant takes on all the theological significance of a commitment between God the creator and his creation, between God the king and his people.

The Basics of the Moses' Story

The book of Genesis closes with the confrontation of Joseph and his brothers. When the book of Exodus opens, Abraham's descendents (through Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons) have been enslaved in Egypt for several hundred years. Sometime around 1500–1300 BC, Moses is born, raised in the Pharaoh's house, murders an Egyptian who was

beating a fellow Hebrew, and disappears into the desert. There, he marries and tends to his flocks. One day, he sees, in the distance, a bush that is burning, but is not consumed by the fire. When he investigates, Moses is confronted by God who tells Moses that he, Moses, is to deliver the Hebrews from Egypt. It is in this meeting that God reveals his name to Moses, YHWH, which means “I am” or “I am who I am.” Moses resists and offers up some reasons why he isn’t the right guy, but God presses on. Thus, Moses, with the help of his brother, returns to Egypt to confront the Pharaoh and demand freedom for the Hebrews. As you’d expect, the Pharaoh resists, and relents only when God sends death to all the first-born of Egypt. Death passes over the homes of the Hebrews who have marked their doorways with the blood of a lamb.¹

After the final plague, the Pharaoh lets the Hebrews go, but then changes his mind and chases after them. God parts the Red Sea (or “sea of reeds”) to let the Hebrews pass, but the Egyptian army is drowned when they follow the Hebrews into the parted sea.

Moses then leads the Hebrews into the desert and after a few months, they arrive at Mt. Sinai where God gives Moses the Ten Commandments. Moses leads them to the edge of the land God has promised them. They send spies into Canaan to check things out and, being terrified by what they see, the Hebrews turn back. Rather than trusting in God, they trust in their own judgment. As you might expect, God is angry with them and tells them that they will not enter the Promised Land until all of that generation die.² Even Moses will never enter Canaan. Thus, the Hebrews wander aimlessly in the wilderness for forty years. The book of Deuteronomy is largely Moses’ final speech to the new generation of the Hebrews, who will soon begin their conquest of Canaan. Moses’ death is recorded at the end of Deuteronomy.

The Law

Much of the Pentateuch is taken up with God’s presentation, through Moses, of God’s law. Christians often see only the burdensome and dark-side of God’s law. However, the ancient people of God understood that God’s law was God’s moral instruction for them. The law was God’s means of teaching them how to live in relationship with him. What could be a greater joy! The Law also marked out the people of God. God’s people were those who kept the Sabbath, obeyed the dietary laws, circumcised their male children, and so on. These laws were, in effect, badges of membership in God’s chosen people! Ruth, the great-grandmother of King David, was not born an Israelite, but she became one of God’s people because she worshipped YHWH and was obedient to God’s law.

¹Jews commemorate this “passing over” every spring. In the last week before his crucifixion, Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. The last supper of Jesus and his disciples was a Passover dinner; Jesus is the Passover lamb!

²Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, urge the people to trust in God’s promises and enter the land, but they are ignored. Because of their faithfulness to God, Joshua and Caleb are allowed to lead the next generation into Canaan.

Bible Readings for Week 3

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. What do you find most surprising in these readings?

<p>Day 1 Genesis 12:1-3, 7 God's promises to Abram</p>	<p>Day 2 Genesis 17 God elaborates the covenant and gives circumcision as a sign of the covenant</p>
<p>Day 3 Genesis 49 Jacob blesses his 12 sons, who would become the fathers of the 12 tribes of Israel</p>	<p>Day 4 Exodus 3 God reveals himself and his name to Moses at the burning bush</p>
<p>Day 5 Exodus 20 God gives the Ten Commandments</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>