

# Father Abraham

LESSON  
TWO

## THE LIFE OF ABRAHAM: ORIGINAL MEANING



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# Father Abraham

## Lesson Two

### The Life of Abraham: Original Meaning

#### INTRODUCTION

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Sincere followers of Christ love the Scriptures. We find that they speak to our lives in many different and very personal ways. This is a precious truth about Scripture that Christians should never forget. But many times this wonderfully personal dimension of Scripture can actually cause us to lose sight of something that we must always remember. The Bible was not written directly to you or me. In the first place, Scripture was written to other people who lived thousands of years ago. So as we try to understand how the Scriptures apply to our lives today, we must always be careful to base our modern applications on the original meaning of Scripture.

This is a series of lessons that we have entitled *Father Abraham*. And in these lessons we are exploring the account of Abraham's life that appears in Genesis 11:10–25:18.

This is the second of three introductory lessons, and we have entitled this lesson “The Life of Abraham: Original Meaning.” In this lesson we will see how important it is to read the stories of Abraham's life in light of when they were written and to whom they were written. We will explore the original impact these stories were intended to have on the nation of Israel as they followed Moses toward the Promised Land.

We will explore the original meaning of Genesis 11:10–25:18 by looking at two main issues. First, we will point out how Moses drew connections between the history of Abraham's life and the experiences of his original audience. And second, we will summarize some of the implications these connections had for the original audience.

Before we look at the original meaning of the life of Abraham, we should take a moment to review what we saw in the previous lesson. Up to this point, we have focused on two critical issues. First, we suggested that Genesis 12:1-3 reveals four major themes in the story of Abraham. God's kindness to Abraham (the many ways God showed mercy to the patriarch), Abraham's responsibility to be loyal to God (the many ways God expected Abraham to obey him), God's blessings to Abraham (the promises of a great nation, many children, a land, and a great name) and God's blessings through Abraham to others (the promise that Abraham would be a blessing to all the families of the earth).

Beyond this, we also saw that these major themes shaped the way Abraham's story was told in Genesis. We learned that the story of Abraham divides into five symmetrical steps. First, we begin with Abraham's background and early experiences in 11:10–12:9. Second, several episodes concentrate on Abraham's earlier interactions with representatives of other peoples in 12:10–14:24. The third and central segment of Abraham's life focuses on the covenant that God made with Abraham in 15:1–17:27. The fourth section of Abraham's life turns to Abraham's later interactions with representatives of other peoples in 18:1–21:34. And the fifth segment deals with Abraham's progeny and death in 22:1–25:18.

These five steps present the patriarch's life in a symmetrical pattern. The third section of 15:1–17:27, which deals with God's covenant with Abraham, serves as the centerpiece of Abraham's life. The second and fourth sections correspond to each other as they both focus on Abraham's interactions with other peoples. The first and last sections correspond to each other further by providing bookends to Abraham's life, tracing his family line from the past and into the future.

In many respects, this lesson will build on these insights into the structure and content of Abraham's life. With this review in mind, we are ready to move into the main concerns of this lesson, the original meaning of the life of Abraham in the book of Genesis. Let's begin by exploring the connections that exist between the stories about Abraham and the experiences of Israel who first received these stories.

## CONNECTIONS

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In this series of lessons we are building our interpretation of the life of Abraham on the assumption that these stories were originally written in the days of Moses, and that they are substantially the same now as they were then. Most critical scholars believe that these stories were not written in the days of Moses, but other portions of the Old Testament as well as Jesus himself insisted that Moses did write Genesis, and because of this modern Christians should have affirmed the Mosaic authorship of this book. But in this series we are also concerned with going a step further. We want to grasp not just the fact that Moses wrote these stories; we want to know why he wrote them. What was his perspective on the life of Abraham? What was his purpose in writing? One of the best ways to begin to explore the original meaning of Abraham's life is to look for the ways Moses connected his stories about Abraham with the experiences of his original audience, the Israelites who followed him away from Egypt and toward the Promised Land.

To explore how Moses connected his stories about Abraham to his original audience, we will touch on three matters: first, we will explore what we mean when we speak of these connections. Second, we will look at some types of connections that appear within the stories of Abraham's life; and third, we will summarize the connections in these stories by looking at each of the five major steps in the structure of Abraham's life story. Let's begin with what we mean when we speak of connections.

## DEFINITION

In many ways, when Moses composed his history of Abraham's life, he found himself in a situation that all writers of biblical narratives found themselves. He stood between two worlds. On the one hand, Moses had received accounts of what we will call "that world": the world of Abraham. He knew about what had happened in Abraham's life some 500 to 600 years earlier both from tradition and from extraordinary revelation

from God. In this sense, Moses dealt in the first place with the ancient world of Abraham's life.

But on the other hand, Moses also dealt with the world in which he lived, what we might call "their world": the world of Moses and the Israelites who followed him. As the leader of God's people at that time, Moses wrote his stories about the ancient world of Abraham's life for the sake of meeting the needs of their world.

As Moses mediated between "that world" of Abraham's life and "their world" (his contemporary world), he drew connections between the patriarch's life and the lives of his readers so that they could see the relevance of the stories that he wrote. That is to say, Moses selected and shaped his stories in ways that made it possible for the Israelites following him to see that Abraham's life had connections to their lives. In large part, Moses did this by writing so that his audience could draw comparisons and contrasts between Abraham and their own contemporary experiences. Sometimes these comparisons and contrasts were only slight and other times they were more extensive, but in every episode Moses somehow drew attention to these kinds of connections between Abraham's life and the lives of his original audience.

Now that we have seen the basic idea of connections and original meaning, let's turn to our second concern, the types of connections that Moses established between Abraham's life and the experiences of his original Israelite audience.

## TYPES

For any story to have relevance for its readers, it must portray a world that its readers can understand. If the world of a story is completely different from the real world, if readers cannot relate to the story's characters and themes, then the story will not communicate. Or to put it in terms of this lesson, if "that world" of Abraham was completely different from "their world" of Moses and the Israelites, the stories about Abraham would not have been meaningful or relevant to the Israelites. So, Moses worked very hard to draw connections between Abraham's world and the world of the Israelites who were moving toward the Promised Land.

The question before us in this lesson is how Moses made these connections clear. How did he shape his stories about Abraham so that they connected to his readers' world? As we move forward in this series, we will see that Moses connected his accounts to the experiences of the Israelites in three main ways. First, he wrote his stories so that they told the Israelites about the historical backgrounds of things they experienced. And second, he wrote so that his narratives provided the Israelites with models or examples to follow or to avoid. And third, he wrote to show that many of the patriarch's experiences foreshadowed or adumbrated the Israelite's experiences. Because we will refer to these kinds of connections many times in future lessons, we should introduce all three of these techniques that Moses used to show the relevance of Abraham's life for his original audience. Let's look first at how Abraham's life provided backgrounds for Israel's experience in Moses' day.

## Backgrounds

In many ways, this is the easiest of all connections to identify. It is quite common for people in all walks of life to tell stories to each other for the main purpose of explaining the historical backgrounds of things they experience. Parents often do this with children, teachers illustrate their teachings in this way, pastors, and even political leaders do the same. We often connect stories to our audiences by drawing attention to the way they provide historical backgrounds.

Now with respect to the life of Abraham, we can describe this connection in this way: we find the connection of historical backgrounds when Moses pointed to ways in which Israel's experiences were historically rooted in the events of Abraham's life. Take for instance, the way Moses explained the historical background of viewing the land of Canaan as Israel's homeland. You will recall that a number of times during the exodus the Israelites wondered why they had to go all the way to the land of Canaan. Why would Moses not allow them to stop short of entering that land?

On a number of occasions, Moses addressed this very issue by providing certain details about the historical background of Abraham's life. In a word, he showed that God had specifically given Abraham a homeland in Canaan so that the Israelites could see why he insisted that they too had a homeland in Canaan. For instance, we read these words that God spoke to Abraham in Genesis 15:18:

**To your descendants I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the Euphrates (Genesis 15:18).**

This passage established the origin or historical background of Moses' insistence that Israel possess Canaan. God had given that land to Israel's great father and he had given it to them as his descendants, so settling in some other land would not do.

As we explore more details of Abraham's life we will see that Moses frequently pointed to these kinds of historical backgrounds. A second main way that Moses connected the life of Abraham to Israel in his day was by providing them with models. Let's see how modeling worked in these stories.

## Models

Moses did not want his original readers to receive the stories of Abraham as mere background information; he described many situations in the patriarch's life so that they could see a significant number of similarities between the circumstances of Abraham's life and their own circumstances. These similarities raised moral issues for Moses' audience. Moses pointed out that these similarities made it possible for Israel to see examples to follow and to reject.

Telling stories for the sake of providing models or examples is a common way to connect stories to our listeners. It happens all the time. When we warn someone at work not to do this or that, we often add a story about what happened the last time someone made this mistake. If we are teaching children why they should work hard in school, we

often reinforce instruction with stories that give examples of people who have a great success because they have worked hard in school.

Moses often did the same thing to connect his stories about Abraham to his original Israelite audience. He presented Abraham's story so that his characters could serve as models for Israel to follow or reject. Consider for instance, how Moses exhorted the Israelites to boldness against the threat of the Canaanites who occupied the Land of Canaan. We know from the books of Numbers and Deuteronomy that the Israelites following Moses refused to enter Canaan because powerful Canaanites occupied the land. Their hearts were full of dread because the Canaanites seemed to be an invincible foe. In Deuteronomy 1:26-28 we read these words of Moses to the tribes of Israel:

**But you were unwilling to go up; you rebelled against the command of the Lord your God. You grumbled in your tents and said, "The Lord hates us; so he brought us out of Egypt to deliver us into the hands of the Amorites to destroy us. Where can we go? Our brothers have made us lose heart. They say, 'The people are stronger and taller than we are; the cities are large, with walls up to the sky'" (Deuteronomy 1:26-28).**

One of the ways Moses addressed this fear of the Canaanites was to provide his readers with the example of Abraham facing Canaanites in his day. For instance, we find the first reference to Canaanites in Abraham's life in Genesis 12:6:

**Abram traveled through the land ... At that time the Canaanites were in the land (Genesis 12:6).**

And in a similar way, in Genesis 13:7 we read these words:

**The Canaanites and the Perizzites were also living in the land at that time (Genesis 13:7).**

Why did Moses mention the Canaanites' presence in the land of promise twice in two adjacent episodes? One of his purposes was to show Israel that Abraham's situation was very similar to theirs. Canaanites were in the Promised Land in Abraham's day, just as they were in the days of Moses in Israel. Yet, Abraham believed the promises of God and went forward boldly into the land occupied by Canaanites. In this way Moses encouraged his readers to imitate Abraham's boldness by trusting the promises of God and by going into the land even though Canaanites still occupied it. In this way Abraham became their example to follow.

As we make our way through the life of Abraham, we will find many passages that offer positive and negative examples. But in the third place, there were times when Moses connected the life of Abraham to the lives of his readers by showing how events in the patriarch's life foreshadowed or adumbrated events that took place in his day.

## Foreshadows

In many respects, the connection of historical backgrounds requires very little similarity between the story and its audience to accomplish its purpose; examples or models require more similarity between the story and its audience for the example to be relevant. But foreshadowing occurs only when there are many similarities, so much so that “that world” of Abraham looks almost exactly like “their world” of Israel. Now this kind of extensive connection occurs infrequently in the stories of Abraham’s life, but from time to time, Moses described the days of Abraham in ways that closely resembled events in his own day.

Many of us have heard the adage, “History often repeats itself.” Of course, we all know that no two sets of historical events are ever exactly alike. But sometimes events are so similar that the second seems to be a repetition of the first. When biblical writers saw events in the past seemed to be repeated in the lives of their audiences, they often made this connection clear. And this literal technique is known as foreshadowing.

One example of foreshadowing appears in the well-known episode that describes Abraham’s covenant with God in Genesis 15:1-21. God gave Abraham assurance that his descendants would one day possess the land of Canaan by calling him to prepare for a covenant ritual. Abraham prepared by cutting some animals in half and by placing the pieces of their torn flesh on either side of a path. After the patriarch had fallen asleep, he had a vision of something that closely resembled an experience the original audience had in their day. In Genesis 15:17 we read these words:

**When the sun had set and darkness had fallen, a smoking firepot with a blazing torch appeared and passed between the pieces (Genesis 15:17).**

In the larger context of this passage we learn that this smoking pot and blazing torch represented God himself passing among the torn flesh of animals as an assurance that he would surely give Abraham’s descendants the land of promise.

Now get the picture. In Genesis 15:17 God passed before Abraham as smoking fire to assure him that God would give his descendants the land of promise. Now, to us as modern readers it may seem strange for God to assure Abraham by appearing as smoke and fire. But when we remember that Moses wrote about Abraham’s life for the Israelites following him toward the Promised Land, it is not surprising at all that he would include this detail. Throughout the Israelites’ travels, God had appeared before Israel in a way that resembled the smoking pot and flaming torch. In the glory cloud that led them toward the Promised Land, God appeared to them too as smoke and fire.

So, in this way God’s appearance to Abraham foreshadowed the way he appeared to the Israelites in Moses’ day. And as Abraham gained assurance of possessing the land because God went before him in this manner, the Israelites hearing this story should have gained assurance of possessing the land in their day as well.

Another, even more extensive foreshadowing occurs in the episode of Abraham’s deliverance from Egypt found in Genesis 12:10-20. This passage was written to guide Israel in their outlooks on Egypt. In this case, Moses constructed the entire episode so that it closely paralleled the experience of Israelites under his leadership. In Genesis

12:10-20 Abraham began a sojourn in Egypt because of a famine in the Land of Canaan, he was delayed in Egypt when Pharaoh took Sarah into his harem, but God delivered Abraham by sending diseases on Pharaoh's house. Pharaoh then sent Abraham away from Egypt and Abraham left Egypt with great wealth.

This story about Abraham was clearly designed to foreshadow the experience of the nation of Israel generations later. Just like Abraham, they sojourned to Egypt because of a famine in the Land of Canaan, they were held there by Pharaoh they were delivered by disease sent from God to the house of Pharaoh, Pharaoh ordered Israel's release, and Israel left Egypt having plundered the riches of the Egyptians. Moses purposefully shaped this account so that it foreshadowed the experiences of his audience. This kind of extensive foreshadowing is rare in the stories of Abraham, but such connections appear here and there in Abraham's stories.

As we read through the life of Abraham we will see all three connections in different ways and at different times. Moses connected "that world" of Abraham's life to "their world," the world of his original audience, by giving them the historical backgrounds of their experiences, by providing them with models to follow and reject, and by showing how Abraham's life foreshadowed many of their experiences.

Now that we have seen the types of connections that Moses established between Abraham and his Israelite audience, it will be helpful to summarize how each major step of Abraham's life connected to the lives of the original audience.

### SUMMATION

You will recall that Abraham's life divides into five symmetrical steps. In each of these sections Moses found ways to connect the stories about Abraham to the circumstances of his original audience.

First, Moses told about Abraham's background and early experiences in ways that connected to the background and early experiences of the people who had followed him out of Egypt. Both Abraham and Israel descended from the same family. And both Abraham and Israel had been called by God to inhabit the land of Canaan. So, Moses gave historical backgrounds, set up Abraham as a model, and even showed ways that Abraham's life foreshadowed the experiences of the original audience.

Second, Moses also described Abraham's early interactions with others in ways that connected to his audience. He spoke of how Abraham interacted with Egyptians because Israel interacted with Egyptians in their day. He spoke about Abraham and Lot because Israel interacted with descendants of Lot, the Moabites and the Ammonites. He wrote about kings from the east and the Canaanite king of Sodom because Israel had similar experiences with foreign kings and Canaanite cities.

Third, Moses wrote about God's covenant with Abraham because Israel had entered into covenant with God as well. Abraham's covenant with God foreshadowed the covenant God made with Israel in many different ways.

Fourth, Moses wrote about Abraham's later interactions with other peoples. He wrote about the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, and Abimelech the Philistine because Israel faced similar people in their day: the Canaanite cities, the Moabites and the Ammonites, and the Philistines.

And fifth, Moses wrote about Abraham's progeny and death in a way that connected with his Israelite readers. He focused on Isaac as Abraham's special son and heir because his Israelite audience was descended from Isaac. He drew attention to the burial ground for Sarah because that ground was in the land God promised to Israel. He drew attention to other sons of Abraham who were not Abraham's heirs, especially Ishmael, because Israel had to deal with the Ishmaelites in their day.

So we see that as Moses wrote about Abraham he drew many different connections between his stories and the experiences of his Israelite audience. And he did this in order to provide significant guidance for the Israelites as they followed him toward the Promised Land.

Now that we have seen the main ways Moses connected Abraham's life to his original Israelite audience, we need to ask another important question about the original meaning. What were the implications of these connections for the original audience? What were they to learn from the stories of Abraham's life?

## IMPLICATIONS

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There should be little doubt that when people take time to write a history as complex as Abraham's life in Genesis, they have all kinds of motivations and goals. They want their stories to have multiple impacts on their audiences. In fact, when Moses wrote the life of Abraham, his intentions were so manifold that it is impossible to decipher them completely, much less to state them all in a few sentences. At the same time, it is possible to summarize the chief implications Moses hoped his original audience would draw from his stories about Abraham.

We will explore the original implications of the life of Abraham in three steps. First, we will describe the basic impact that these stories were designed to have on the original audience. Second, we will see how the impact of these stories unfolds in the four major themes of Abraham's life. And third, we will summarize the original implications of each of the five steps in Moses' stories about Abraham. Let's look first at the basic impact these stories were designed to have.

### BASIC IMPACT

In very general terms, it helps to summarize the purpose of Abraham's story in this way: Moses wrote about Abraham to teach Israel why and how they were to leave Egypt behind and to continue toward the conquest of the Promised Land. In other words, by seeing the historical backgrounds of their lives in Abraham, by finding models or examples to follow and reject in the stories of Abraham, and by discerning how his life foreshadowed their lives, the Israelites following Moses could see the ways they were to pursue God's purpose for them.

Although we can be confident on the basis of the testimony of Scripture and even Jesus himself that the book of Genesis comes from the days of Moses, we should note

that we cannot be sure precisely when Moses completed these stories as we have them now. Whatever the case, we may safely say that Moses' main concern when writing the history of Abraham would have been very similar for either generation. He wrote about Abraham to turn their hearts away from Egypt and toward possessing the Promised Land.

This general implication for the original audience can hardly be overemphasized. Moses wrote to encourage the nation of Israel following him never to return back to Egypt and to succeed in the conquest of Canaan and this broad implication guides us in our modern application of Abraham's life. As Christians we are on a journey, a journey that actually completes the journey begun by Israel in the days of Moses. We are moving toward the new heavens and new earth. So, for us to apply Abraham's stories properly to our lives, we must pay attention to the ways they instructed the original audience to keep moving toward Canaan.

To unpack this overarching focus a bit, we should look into Moses' purpose in more detail by returning to the four major themes we have already identified in this portion of Genesis.

## MAJOR THEMES

You will recall that earlier in this lesson we suggested that Genesis 12:1-3 presents at least four themes that give coherence to this part of the patriarchal history. These four themes express the central impact Moses designed his stories to have. First, he focused on divine grace to Abraham; second, he concentrated on Abraham's loyalty; third, he was concerned with blessings *to* Abraham; and fourth, he focused on blessing *through* Abraham. It helps to think of Moses' original purpose for writing about Abraham in terms of these four motifs.

### Divine Grace

In the first place, Moses wrote about the ways God had shown mercy to Abraham. In broad terms, we have already seen that God showed much grace to Abraham, both in the early years of his relationship with God and on a daily basis throughout his entire life. The motif of divine grace was designed to remind the Israelites in Moses' day that God had shown great mercy to them as well. God had shown them early grace when he brought them from Egypt to Sinai. And day after day, he continued to show them mercy, even as he prepared them for the future conquest of Canaan.

The well-known words God spoke at Sinai in Exodus 19:4 speak of God's grace in this way:

**You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself (Exodus 19:4).**

Sadly, the Israelites who Moses led had forgotten how much mercy they had received from God. Early on they complained that God and Moses had cheated them by taking

them away from the comforts of Egypt. They complained about food and water in the wilderness. They thought God had asked too much of them when he called them to enter the conquest for the Promised Land. So, Moses frequently stressed the ways God showed mercy to Abraham to remind his original audience of the ways God had blessed them, the mercies God had shown to them over and over.

### **Abraham's Loyalty**

In the second place, we have seen that Moses also emphasized Abraham's loyalty by drawing attention to the many ways God held Abraham responsible to obey his commands. Moses repeatedly emphasized that God expected the patriarch to be faithful to his commands because this focus was also relevant for the Israelites who followed him. This focus on the requirement of loyalty also spoke to Israel in Moses day. Listen to the way God continued to address Israel at Mount Sinai in Exodus 19:4-5:

**You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession (Exodus 19:4-5).**

Notice here that the blessings of becoming a treasured possession were dependent on Israel's faithfulness. Although God had shown much mercy to the nation, the status of each person in each generation depended on how they responded to the commands of God.

Now, as we have seen, the main responsibility given to Abraham was that he go to the land of Canaan. Moses stressed this responsibility because he wanted Israel following him to stay the course for the land of Canaan as well. And of course, as Moses wrote about Abraham's other responsibilities, he did so to teach the Israelites of his day about their many other responsibilities. The many requirements of loyalty from Abraham spoke plainly to the fact that the original audience was to be loyal and faithful to the commands of God as well.

### **Blessings to Abraham**

In the third place, we have also seen the importance of the theme of God's promised blessings to Abraham. In his stories about Abraham, Moses focused on the promised blessings of a great nation, prosperity and a great name for Abraham and his descendants. And on a number of occasions we even see that Abraham experienced some foretastes of these blessings in his own lifetime. And on many other occasions the stories of Abraham focused on the future fulfillments of these blessings in generations to come. Moses focused on Abraham's blessings these ways because these promises were also for Abraham's descendants, the people of Israel whom Moses led. The people of Israel were promised great blessings too. They were to become a great nation, to experience

unprecedented prosperity and to receive a great name when they entered into the Promised Land.

In fact, much like Abraham, Israel had also experienced many foretastes of these blessings by the time the book of Genesis was written. They had already begun to see fulfillments of some of these promises in their own lives. Yet, there were still many future fulfillments of these blessings to come once they entered the land of promise. God spoke of these future blessings for Israel at Sinai in this way in Exodus 19:6:

**You will become for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation  
(Exodus 19:6).**

Moses wrote of the blessings God promised Abraham to raise the hopes of Israel in his day. As they read of God's promises to the patriarch, they could clearly see how God had great blessings in store for them as well.

### **Blessings through Abraham**

In the fourth place, we have also seen that the stories of Abraham revealed that God's blessings would also come through the patriarch to the entire world. As you will recall, the blessings through Abraham would not come in a simple fashion. In Genesis 12:3 we learn that God would give Abraham success through a process of blessing Abraham's friends and cursing his enemies. In a variety of episodes, Moses pointed out how God gave Abraham foretastes of this process in his own lifetime as he interacted with other peoples representing different nations. And on a number of occasions in his stories of Abraham's life, Moses pointed out that many fulfillments would come in the future.

Moses stressed this motif because it was so relevant to the people of Israel who followed him in his day. God assured them of success in being a blessing to others because he would bless their friends and curse their enemies. They too had seen foretastes of these promises as they interacted with various groups of people in their own day. They had already seen God bless those who were their friends and curse their enemies on a number of occasions. And beyond this, Moses also focused on these matters to turn the eyes of the Israelites toward future fulfillments as they entered the Promised Land and spread the kingdom of God to the ends of the earth. As we have just seen, in Exodus 19:6 God said this to Israel:

**You will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exodus  
19:6).**

This vision of the nation as a kingdom of priests did not simply point out that the nation itself would be blessed with the privilege of being a holy people serving God, but also pointed out that the children of Israel would serve God's purposes throughout the world.

As Moses inspired Israel to move toward the Promised Land, his stories about Abraham were designed to instill within them the vision of how God was going to use Israel to spread his kingdom and thus his blessings to the entire world.

Now that we have seen the implications of the four major themes of Abraham's life for the original audience, let's briefly summarize the impact of Abraham's stories on the original audience by looking at each major step in the structure of the patriarch's life as it is recorded in Genesis.

## **FIVE STEPS**

You will recall that the stories about Abraham's life divide into five main steps. First, Abraham's background and early experiences in 11:10–12:9; second, Abraham's earlier interactions with representatives of other peoples in 12:10–14:24; third, the covenant that God made with Abraham in 15:1–17:27; fourth, Abraham's later interactions with representatives of other peoples in 18:1–21:34; and fifth, Abraham's progeny and death in 22:1–25:18.

Each of these major steps divides into a number of smaller segments or episodes. We will briefly summarize the content and some of the main implications that these episodes had for the original audience for whom Moses wrote.

### **Background and Early Experiences**

The first step of Abraham's life, his background and early experiences, reported several features of Abraham's family and the time when God first called Abraham into his service. In general terms, Moses designed this first step to show his original Israelite audience how they could learn about their own family background and their call from God from these events in Abraham's life.

This first step divides into three episodes or segments. The life of Abraham begins with a genealogy that presents Abraham's divinely-favored lineage in 11:10-26. These verses establish that Abraham was a climactic character in the family of Shem, a family that held a favored status before God as God's special chosen people. This genealogy in turn should have reminded Moses' original Israelite audience that as the family line of Abraham, they shared this same favored status. They were God's special chosen people.

The second episode of Abraham's background and early experiences is another genealogy in 11:27-32. In a nutshell, this passage depicts Terah as an idolater who attempted to go to the land of Canaan but failed. Moses' original audience easily would have seen the similarity between Abraham's circumstances and their own. Their parents had been involved in idolatry and had failed to reach the land of Canaan as well. So, just as Abraham had to avoid repeating his father's failures, the Israelites who followed Moses also had to avoid repeating the failures of their fathers and mothers, the idolaters of the first generation of the exodus who failed to reach Canaan.

Abraham's background and early experiences then move to the story of Abraham's migration to Canaan in 12:1-9. God called Abraham to the land of Canaan,

and Abraham obeyed the call of God despite many difficulties. In much the same way, God called Moses' original Israelite audience to the land of Canaan, and they were also to obey despite many difficulties. So the story of Abraham's migration to Canaan had the original implication that the Israelites in Moses' day were to follow the footsteps of Abraham and migrate as he did to the land of Canaan.

With these three segments, Moses introduced Abraham's life and offered significant guidance for his original audience as they faced the challenges of their own service to God.

## Early Contacts with Others

The second major step in the Genesis account of Abraham's life concentrates on the patriarch's earlier interactions with other peoples. These chapters depict the patriarch interacting with other groups of people in a variety of ways to guide the original Israelite readers as they interacted with others.

In the first episode, Moses described Abraham's deliverance from Egypt in Genesis 12:10-20. You will recall that the patriarch sojourned in Egypt because of a famine, but God delivered him from Egyptian bondage by sending diseases on Pharaoh's house. Because of God's great deliverance Abraham left Egypt with many riches and never returned. Abraham learned very clearly that Egypt was not his home.

Moses' original Israelite readers could see that their own experiences reflected many aspects of Abraham's story. They had gone to Egypt because of a famine, they had also been delivered when God sent diseases on the Egyptians, and they had left Egypt with many riches from the Egyptians. Unfortunately, as the Israelites faced difficulties in their travels, many of them began to idealize life in Egypt and wanted to return. This episode should have made it clear to the original audience that Egypt was not their home. They were to remember how God had graciously delivered them, and to leave Egypt and the Egyptians far behind.

The second segment of Abraham's earlier interactions with others is the story of his conflict with Lot in 13:1-18. This is the well-known story of struggle between Abraham's men and Lot's men, when the two groups quarreled over natural resources for their sheep. In this struggle, Abraham treated Lot with kindness, allowing Lot to live in peace in the lands he chose. The original readers of Genesis would have had little trouble understanding what this story meant for them. According to Deuteronomy 2, as they traveled towards the Promised Land Moses commanded the Israelites to treat Lot's descendants with kindness, to let them live at peace in their ancestral land. In effect, Abraham's kind treatment of Lot showed the Israelites how to treat the Moabites in their day.

The third episode of Abraham's earlier interactions with others is the story of Abraham's rescue of Lot in 14:1-24. This complex story described how Abraham defeated powerful, tyrannical kings who had come from afar, and how he showed further kindness to Lot by rescuing him from these tyrannical kings. This story spoke rather plainly to the Israelites following Moses. As Israel passed through the lands of the Moabites and Ammonites, who descended from Lot, the army of Israel defeated the tyrannical kings Sihon of the Amorites, and Og of Bashan, both of whom had oppressed

the Moabites and Ammonites. By rescuing the Moabites and the Ammonites in this way, Israel followed the model that Abraham had set for them.

And so it is that in each episode of this step of Abraham's life, Abraham was presented as a model for Israel to follow in their own times.

## Covenant with God

Now we come to the third major step of Abraham's life, the covenant that God made with Abraham in 15:1–17:27. In general terms, this step focuses on God's covenant with the patriarch in ways that reveal the character of Israel's covenant relationship with God. These chapters divide into three main segments.

The first episode focuses especially on God's covenant promises to Abraham in 15:1-21. This chapter is the well-known account of the time when God entered into a covenant with Abraham. God promised to give Abraham progeny and land. Specifically, God promised that Abraham would have a multitude of descendants, and that after a time of mistreatment in a foreign land, Abraham's descendants would be brought back to the land of promise. This passage was designed to remind the Israelites that God had made a similar covenant with Israel through Moses. And more than this, it showed them that they themselves were experiencing the fulfillment of God's promises to Abraham. The Israelites were Abraham's promised progeny, and they were returning to the very land that God had promised to their patriarch. To doubt these facts was to doubt the gracious covenant promises God had made to Abraham and reaffirmed with Moses.

The second episode that focuses on God's covenant with Abraham is the patriarch's failure with Hagar in 16:1-16. This sad story recalls how Abraham and Sarah turned from the covenant promises of God by seeking a child through Sarah's Egyptian handmaiden, Hagar. Abraham and Sarah failed to trust God's covenant promises, but God rejected their alternative plan by not accepting the child Ishmael as Abraham's true seed. Moses' original audience repeatedly turned from God's promises in covenant and desired the comforts of Egypt. And this story from Abraham's life taught them that just as Abraham's plan had been rejected, their alternatives to God's plan would also be rejected.

The third episode focusing on God's covenant with Abraham is the account of Abraham's covenant requirement in 17:1-27. In this passage, God confronted the patriarch over his failure to follow God's plan. The Lord also reasserted the need for covenant loyalty by instituting circumcision as a covenant sign that was to be applied to Abraham and his sons. By this sign, God reminded Abraham that his covenant relationship entailed the responsibility of loyalty, and that loyalty would lead to great blessings. Moses recounted this side of Abraham's covenant to confront the Israelites in his day over their failures to remain faithful and to reassert the Israelites' need for covenant loyalty. Only as the Israelites were faithful to their covenant God could they rightly hope for his great blessings.

So, the centerpiece of Abraham's life, his covenant with God, drew attention to the grace of God's marvelous promises to Israel. But it also forcefully reminded his audience that they were obligated to display loyal service to their covenant God.

## Later Contacts with Others

Now we come to the fourth step of Abraham's life: his later interactions with others in 18:1–21:34. In these chapters Abraham encountered various people who were associated with people living in Moses' day. Abraham interacted with the Canaanite inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot, Abimelech, and Ishmael. In general terms, Abraham's interactions with these people taught Israel how they would interact with the Canaanites, the Moabites and Ammonites, and the Philistines and Ishmaelites of their day.

The first story of this portion of the patriarch's life is the account of Sodom and Gomorrah in 18:1–19:38. This well-known narrative tells of the threat of divine judgment against the evil Canaanite cities. It tells about Abraham's concern for the righteous in the cities, and the destruction of these cities as well as Lot's rescue. These events spoke directly to the situation facing Moses' original audience. They helped them understand what was happening with people living in their day: God's threat against the Canaanites, the concern they were to have for the righteous among the Canaanites (like Rahab whom they would encounter in Jericho), the destruction that was sure to come against the Canaanite cities, and their relationship with Lot's descendants, the Moabites and Ammonites.

The second portion of Abraham's later interactions with others appears in 20:1-18. In this story Abraham once again interceded for an inhabitant of the land, namely for Abimelech the Philistine. You will recall that Abimelech threatened Abraham's future by taking Sarah from Abraham, not knowing she was his wife. Then, God brought judgment against Abimelech, and Abimelech proved to be righteous by repenting of his actions. As a result of this repentance, Abraham interceded on Abimelech's behalf, and Abraham and Abimelech enjoyed lasting peace and friendship with each other.

This story spoke to the Israelites in Moses' day about the attitudes they were to have toward the Philistines in their day. In a variety of ways, the Philistines threatened Israel. But when the threat of God's judgment brought repentance among the Philistines, the Israelites were to intercede on their behalf, and to enjoy lasting peace with them.

The third narrative of this section, found in 21:1-21, focuses on the difficult relationship between Isaac and Ishmael. Isaac and Ishmael were both sons of Abraham. But when tensions rose between them, God instructed Abraham to separate Ishmael from the family. God still blessed Ishmael, but made it very clear that Abraham's only rightful heir was Isaac. As Moses informed his original Israelite audience of these events, he helped them understand the nature of their relationship with the Ishmaelites of their day. When tensions rose between Israel and the Ishmaelites, the Israelites were to remember that God had ordained a separation between them. Although God blessed the Ishmaelites in many ways, the Israelites were the true heirs of Abraham.

The fourth episode of Abraham's later interactions with others is the story of Abraham's Treaty with Abimelech in 21:22-34. This story reports how the Philistine Abimelech acknowledged God's favor toward Abraham, and how Abraham agreed to live in peace with Abimelech and his descendants. It goes on to tell how controversy arose over water rights for Abraham's sheep, and how Abimelech and Abraham entered a formal treaty at Beersheba, pledging mutual respect and honor.

Abimelech and his commander reminded Moses and the Israelites of the potent threat the Philistines were in their day. Here, Moses taught his followers that if the Philistines would acknowledge God's blessing on Israel, then Israel should follow Abraham's example and live in peace with them. The well called Beersheba still remained in Moses' day, reminding Israel of the treaty made there, and of how they were to pursue peace and mutual honor with the Philistines.

So, we see that the stories of Abraham's later interactions involved many characters who corresponded to people who Moses and Israel encountered. By looking at Abraham's actions the Israelites could learn many lessons for their day.

## **Progeny and Death**

Now we come to the final step of Moses' record of Abraham's life, his progeny and death in Genesis 22:1–25:18. These episodes focus on Abraham's legacy, which extended his covenant relationship with God to future generations. In general terms, the Israelites who first received these stories from Moses should have learned much about their own status as Abraham's heirs, and about the hopes they were to have for their own progeny.

The first episode in this portion of Abraham's life is the well-known story of Abraham's test in 22:1-24. This test was designed to determine if Abraham loved God more than he loved his son Isaac. God initiated a difficult test, calling Abraham to sacrifice his son. Abraham complied, and God assured Abraham that the result of his compliance would be a very bright future for Isaac.

Although there were countless implications of this story for the Israelites following Moses, the most prominent feature of this passage was that it reminded them that God was testing the nation of Israel to see the depth of their loyalty to him. God initiated many tests for the nation of Israel in Moses' day. And Abraham's compliance to his test reminded them of their own need to comply with these tests, no matter how difficult they were. And the affirmation of Isaac's grand future as Abraham's progeny reminded the Israelites of the grand future they themselves would have if they passed these tests.

The second episode of the last step of Abraham's life is the story of the patriarch's purchase of burial property in 23:1-20. This story describes how Abraham acquired a family burial site in Hebron when his wife Sarah died. The narrative emphasizes that the patriarch did not accept this property as a gift, but rather that he purchased it. This deed of property established his family's legal right to see the land of Canaan as their homeland.

The Israelites following Moses understood the importance and implications of this purchased burial site for their own lives. It was their ancestral burial site. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were all buried there. They understood that it was their legal possession in the land, even prior to the conquest. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob spent much of their lives in and around Hebron. The Israelites were so committed to Hebron as their ancestral homeland that they even carried the bones of the patriarch Jacob back to Hebron for burial. This story about Abraham's purchased burial land demonstrated that the proper place for his descendants was none other than the land of the Canaanites.

The third episode of Abraham's progeny and death is a touching story about Abraham's daughter-in-law, Rebekah, who became the wife of his special son Isaac in 24:1-67. In this story, in order to ensure that Isaac would avoid Canaanite corruption, Abraham insisted that Isaac not marry a Canaanite woman. But Abraham also insured that Isaac would remain in the land of Canaan, the land of promise, by sending a servant to bring a wife to Isaac. By finding a wife for Isaac in this way, Abraham insured a great future of blessings from God for Isaac and his descendants.

The Israelites following Moses should have learned from this story that Isaac, their ancestral connection to Abraham, remained pure from Canaanite corruption even as he maintained his homeland in Canaan. Isaac's bright future of blessing would be their future as well, so long as they also resisted the corruption of the Canaanites who dwelled in the Promised Land.

The final episode of Abraham's life is the story of the patriarch's death and heir in 25:1-18. This collection of several brief accounts lists Abraham's sons by wives other than Sarah. Then it turns to the patriarch's death, during which Isaac received Abraham's final blessing as his legal heir. Finally, it closes with a contrasting section that briefly lists Ishmael's descendants.

This closing of Abraham's life had many implications for the original audience. It listed the other sons of Abraham to distinguish them from the Israelites. It highlighted Abraham's final blessing on Isaac to assure the Israelites following Moses that they were the true heirs of Abraham's promises. And it mentioned Ishmael's descendants to dispel any claims the Ishmaelites might have made to Abraham's inheritance. By closing his account of Abraham's life in this way, Moses settled the identity, rights and responsibilities of Abraham's true descendants, the Israelites whom he led toward the Promised Land.

So we see that Moses wrote his stories about the life of Abraham to teach the Israelites he led why and how they should leave Egypt behind and move toward the conquest of the Promised Land. To accomplish this goal, Moses stressed in various ways in each episode of the patriarch's life how they were the heirs of the grace given to the patriarch, how they were responsible to be loyal to God as the patriarch had been responsible, how they would receive blessings from God as Abraham had, and how they would one day bless all the nations of the earth. Moses' account of Abraham's life had immeasurable implications for the Israelites who followed him toward the Promised Land.

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## CONCLUSION

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In this lesson we have looked at the original meaning of the account of Abraham's life in Genesis. And we have looked in two main directions to explore this original meaning: on the one hand we have examined the connections Moses established between these stories and the experiences of the Israelites to whom he wrote. And on the other hand, we have looked at how Moses designed his stories to impact his original audience as they left Egypt behind and moved toward the conquest of Canaan.

As we learn more about the connections Moses drew between Abraham and the original Israelite readers, and the impact he expected his story to have on his audience, we will discover how each episode of Abraham's life was intended to guide the Israelites. And we will also be better able to discern how these stories should apply to our lives today.

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