

Israel's Early History, I

Let us begin with prayer.

Father, as we approach Your throne we are grateful to have the privilege to come before You. We bring our praises and petitions, knowing that You are a God who delights to be called Father. You have adopted us into Your family, a family that is eternal. We thank You that You are building a worldwide family that will live together. We thank You for the privilege of knowing You and of studying the Word You have given us. This Word reveals to us Your mighty deeds in the past and explains them to us in words that You Yourself have inspired. I pray that as we consider the book of Joshua that You would teach us its lessons. And I pray that You would give us a good orientation to these historical books as we begin to explore their riches. Lord, help us to have hearts and minds that are quick to understand and also quick to obey what You teach us. Lord, help us in our frailty and weakness. We pray that You would fill us with Your Spirit. May what we do here be meaningful and useful, not simply to us but to Your kingdom. We pray this in Jesus' name, Amen.

Before getting into Joshua we want to set the stage for Israel's history because, of course, the Bible does not begin in the book of Joshua. There is a great deal of background that comes in the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Bible, that sets the stage for what we encounter in Joshua. Where does Old Testament history begin? There are various theories and considerable debate about that question. Much depends on how one defines history. Some, for instance, think that only nations can have a history. But others would argue that each of us has a family history, a personal history. Those who think that only nations can have a history tend to begin the history of Israel at the Exodus or later. Many contemporary, mainline biblical historians keep moving the date earlier—to the entry into Canaan, for example. They would do this because they think a history requires a nation—as Israel was formed at the time of the Exodus when God took them out of Egypt—and land because they are not truly a nation until they have land. Some historians begin with the entry into Canaan. Others begin with the introduction of the monarchy because they say Israel is not really a nation until they have a monarchy, a political structure in place that defines them as a nation. There are some who would argue that there really is no history of Israel, rather the historical books are the creation of some individuals sitting in exile who created a background for their own lives.

There are many problems with these views, but I want to at least alert you to the level of skepticism that is around today regarding what the Bible presents as Israel's history. I would argue that we should take the Bible more at face value. I would also argue that personal history is also history. And if it is true that the personal history of one family affects a larger group of people and eventually a nation, then that personal history is caught up into the national history of that particular people. When we think about the history of Israel I think it is good to start at least as far back as the call of Abraham in Genesis 12. Moreover, if we think of history as being shaped by natural causes—as far as we can speak of those—or personal agency, which is a typical and standard way of defining history, and if we believe in the God of the Bible who describes Himself as a personal being or agent who does things, then certainly we would not want to speak of history as beginning even with Abraham. I think the minute God begins to act as a personal agent we can in a very broad sense speak of that as the beginning of history. This may seem like common sense, but I am arguing against other scholars who want to push the beginning of history later and later in the time period in which Israel existed. I would want to push it much earlier. Really, history begins where the Bible begins.

There are some scholars who are beginning to talk about the concept of the primary history. They describe this as the text from Genesis to Kings. How is this primary? It is primary in comparison to what they call the secondary history: the books of 1 and 2 Chronicles, Ezra, and Nehemiah. So in the Old Testament there are really two histories of the people of Israel. The primary history begins in Genesis and goes through Kings, which ends with the exile. Then the secondary history begins with Chronicles, which starts off with genealogies that begin with Adam. The chronicler presupposes knowledge of the primary history. The chronicler writes its own rendition for its own, specific purpose addressing its audience who are those coming back to the land of Israel after the Babylonian exile. The secondary history begins with Adam, goes through the exile, and then into the return and the rebuilding of the Temple and such. Thus there are two, distinct histories of Israel in the Bible and each serves its own purpose.

I like this approach for several reasons. It recognizes that the Old Testament, and indeed the entire Bible, tells one, continuous story that should not be arbitrarily truncated, cut off or divided into, for example, myth at the beginning and history later on. I think we need to consider the historiographical purposes of even the early portions of Genesis. Whether we are meant to understand them in a strictly literal sense is a question that we should ask. You can have historiography that is not strictly literal in its presentation. There is, for example, the episode in Judges where Deborah and Barak won a battle. This is described in straight, historiographical prose and then in a poetic account. The poetic account differs in a number of respects, but this is in keeping with the fact that it is poetry rather than prose. Thus when we talk about Genesis 1-3 as the history of the beginning of the world, we do not necessarily mean that we read it in an absolutely literalistic way. But we do see it as having an historiographical purpose. It is referential. It is referring to the fact that God created the heavens and the earth, that this was done by His word, and so forth. The exact mechanisms are still a matter of debate. I do not feel compelled by evolutionary theories to adopt any of that because I think the evolutionary theories are in some state of crisis right now. I think we can feel confident that the Bible in the end will vindicate itself. But the understanding of those texts is our task. So we need to be duly tentative and humble when we talk about the way we understand the beginnings of the world. But I do think history begins when God begins to act. When God created time and space, history begins. God is a personal agent, and that is what makes history.

Another reason I like talking about Genesis to Kings as the primary history is that it recognizes a large degree of intertextuality. That is a technical term that means the way in which one text shows awareness of another text—perhaps by alluding to or reflecting the other text. If we think of Genesis to Kings as a somehow unified primary history, then it begins to make sense that one portion of that document seems to be aware of other portions of that document. I mentioned earlier in this course the way in which the horrible story of the Levite and his concubine in Judges 19 seems to be aware of and draw attention to a similar account in Genesis 19 at the house of Lot. That is an intertextual allusion that makes sense if the primary history is meant to be read as a unified document. I do not mean that Genesis to Kings were written by one individual during one time period, but certainly the divine author is in control of the sweep of the entire document.

Most importantly, I like this idea because it does make room for God as a personal agent, as a history maker. The Bible is clear on God as a personal agent. The Enlightenment thinkers said that we have to rule God out of historical processes and that, as soon as you begin to talk about God at work in history, you are no longer operating as an historian. I think we need to adjust our understanding of historical study as it has been influenced by the Enlightenment rather than ruling God out of a realm in which He is active. I like the way that this theory helps us see God as an active agent in history.

In light of these considerations, there would be good reasons for beginning this course at Genesis. We will indeed talk for a while about a signal event in Genesis. We will then move very quickly through the other books of the Pentateuch. But, for several reasons, the primary focus of this course will be on the historical books beginning with Joshua. We do not begin with Genesis in part because we do not have time. I hope that you will have the chance to study the Pentateuch in other courses. Our focus in this course will be on what have traditionally been called the historical books, Joshua to Kings. By calling these the historical books I do not mean to suggest that the Pentateuch is less historical. Despite many claims to the contrary, I view them all as having a referential purpose. Whatever the mode of depiction, we are hearing about significant past events beginning in Genesis.

Moving on to the question of Israel's beginnings, let us take a brief look at the Pentateuch. We want to get an idea of the flow of the Pentateuch. Then I want to talk about the developmental theme. First I want to look at the broad structure of the Pentateuch, then the pivotal event, then the developmental theme. In terms of its broad structure, the first book is Genesis. Genesis means "beginning." There are many beginnings recorded in Genesis. For example, the beginnings of time, space, life, humanity, nations and political structures, sin, murder, covenants, human experience of relating to God, and marriage, are all found in Genesis. Ecclesiastes says, "There is nothing new under the sun." Reading Genesis we discover that the way people think, act, and sin, and the way God acts, has remained the same. Countering the beginning of sin, the beginning of redemption is also found in Genesis. There are many beginnings in Genesis. Genesis 1-11 people sometimes call the primeval prologue, or the primeval history. In these chapters we have the story of creation, the Fall, the flood, and the tower of Babel. This serves as a prologue to Genesis 12, the beginning of election and promise. Here God comes down and speaks directly to Abraham. He calls him out to form a people for Himself.

Exodus is a book of deliverance. It tells the story of God releasing the people from bondage in Egypt. Toward the end of Exodus the people of God find themselves at Mount Sinai where God makes a covenant with Moses and the people. There the Ten Commandments and other laws are given. Then we come to Leviticus. Leviticus is a book of laws regulating the sacrificial system and worship. In Leviticus the people are taught how they are to relate to God. We learn of the holiness of God through these many laws that explain to us how we can live in His presence. In Leviticus we have instruction in holy life and worship. Numbers recounts the people's wandering in the wilderness. This was a time of testing and training. Numbers shows the people's rebellion and the consequences of rebellion. Of the generation who came out of Egypt, only two enter the Promised Land: Joshua and Caleb. At the beginning of Deuteronomy we find the people east of Jordan on the plains of Moab. In this book Moses rehearses Israel's history, delivers his final sermons, and seeks to prepare the people for how they should live and continue in trust of God as they enter the Promised Land. This is a very broad and general overview of the Pentateuch, but we see that there is continuity in this story. The Pentateuch tells one story in its various phases.

Let us now talk about the pivotal event of the Pentateuch. First, let me introduce the grace principle. Grace is there from beginning to end in the Bible. To anyone familiar with the primeval prologue of Genesis 1-11, several events or themes stand out: the creative work of God, the fall of man, God's execution of judgment, and the evidence of God's grace. The three first themes stated here are the more obvious. But the last theme is perhaps the most important. In these chapters that deal mainly with sin and judgment, God's grace is evident. God provides Adam and Eve with clothing for their bodies after the Fall. It is interesting that before the Fall Adam and Eve are said to have been naked and unashamed. This is talking about a man and his wife between whom there was nothing that had to be hidden. They were completely at ease with each other; they were completely one with each other. This is not talking

about a general state for humanity. Rather, this is evidence that there was nothing between this first married couple until sin came. Then suddenly they were ashamed and began to try to cover themselves and separate themselves from each other to some degree. With sin comes destruction of relationships in many different ways. But God, recognizing their state Himself, provided a covering, clothing for them. This is a measure of His grace. Also, He was unwilling after their sin to affect immediately the physical part of the pronouncement: “In the day that you eat of that tree, you will surely die.” God would have been within His rights to strike them dead in that moment, but He did not. I think that is another measure of His grace. God was also gracious toward Cain. Cain had killed his brother and therefore was banished, but he was afraid that in his banishment someone would find him and kill him. God utters an oath of sevenfold vengeance on anyone who would harm Cain. Thus God graciously protects even the killer Cain. This is a remarkable instance of God’s graciousness toward His creatures. God also graciously preserved Noah and his family through the waters of the flood. God destroyed the whole world in the flood, but he preserved one family. He did this though He recognized that, according to Genesis 6:5, “Every inclination of the thoughts of [man’s] heart was only evil all the time.” That is a dramatic, general statement. We see further astonishing evidence of God’s grace in His promise that He will never again destroy the earth with a flood—though the condition of the human heart had not changed. That is quite remarkable! After the flood God says in 8:21, “Never again will I curse the ground because of man, even though every inclination of his heart is evil from childhood. And never again will I destroy all living creatures, as I have done.” The flood did not solve the problem of human sin and wickedness. People were still born sinful. And yet God promises that graciously He will never again destroy the world in that way.

We begin to see a pattern here: God’s judgment, which is then accompanied by some evidence of His grace. In each episode we have sin, judgment, and grace. We see this in each episode except, seemingly, in the last episode of this prologue recorded in chapter 11. Genesis 11 recounts the story of the Tower of Babel. This is the story of the first and grandest humanistic experiment. The people of the earth say in 11:4, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.” They were trying as human beings to build something that would last. I think this is the first and greatest and perhaps the most disastrous of purely humanistic experiments. This is an example of human beings trying to raise themselves up to heaven. God’s response to this humanistic experiment is to bring about exactly what they had hoped to avoid. In 11:9 it says, “So the LORD scattered them from there over all the earth.” Just what they had hoped to avoid was what resulted. Gerhard Von Rad has drawn attention to the impact of the way this primeval prologue is concluded. I think he says it rather well. He says:

The story about the Tower of Babel concludes with God’s judgment on mankind. There is no word of grace. The whole primeval history, therefore, seems to break off in a shrill dissonance. The question now arises even more urgently: is God’s relationship to the nations now finally broken? Is God’s gracious forbearance now exhausted? Has God rejected the nations in wrath forever? That is the burdensome question which no thoughtful reader of chapter 11 can avoid. Indeed, one can say that our narrator intended by means of the whole plan of his primeval history to raise precisely this question and to pose it in all its severity. Only then is the reader properly prepared to take up the strangely new thing that now follows the comfortless story about the building of the tower: the election and blessing of Abraham. We stand here, therefore, at the point where the primeval history and sacred history dovetail and thus at one of the most important places in the entire Old Testament.

This pattern of sin, judgment, and grace is repeated throughout chapters 1-10, but then in chapter 11 the story of this humanistic experiment is told. The experiment fails miserably and is judged by God, but there does not seem to be any grace extended. We wonder where the gracious hint is. Where is the hint of God's forbearance? It is not very obvious. But as we look more closely we see that at the end of chapter 11 the narrator picks up again on the genealogy of the sons of Noah. These genealogies were already presented in chapter 10. But in 11:10-ff the narrator picks up on them again, and he retraces the portion of that genealogy relating to Shem. And he does not record all of Shem's descendants but he follows the line that leads to Terah, Abraham's father, and then to Abraham himself. After this terrible story of sin and judgment of the Tower of Babel, the narrator chooses to begin again and lead us to something significant. He starts the genealogy over again, though we saw it in chapter 10, suggesting that something significant will happen in this particular human lineage. That is exactly what we see in chapter 12.

Thus when we come to Abraham in 12:1 we are expectant. Derek Kidner has pointed out, "The history of redemption, like that of creation, begins with God speaking." That is what we find in Genesis 12. Having talked a little about the principle of grace, we now want to move to this great promise. This promise is not only key to understanding the Pentateuch, but it is also key to understanding the history of Israel, leading all the way up to Christ. This is a very important thing. Genesis 12:1 says:

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.

"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.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you."

This is the first occurrence of this patriarchal promise, as it came to be called because Abraham is the first of patriarchs. This promise is repeated over and over again in the Bible. It is repeated several times to Abraham and his descendants.

Let us speak briefly about the time of the call of Abraham. I think the NIV has grammatical grounds for translating "The Lord said" in 12:1 as a pluperfect: "The Lord had said." This leaves it open to assume that the Lord had said this to Abraham long before he came to Haran with his father, Terah, and his nephew, Lot. Back when he was in Ur God had spoken to him. Stephen in his speech makes this explicit saying, "The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran" (Acts 7:2). Thus after the Lord spoke with him Abraham had migrated with his father and some of his family to Haran, moving northwest from Ur. There are questions about this. Some say, "Did not God say to Abraham, 'Leave your country and your people and your father's household'?" What is he doing with some portion of his father's household?" There is sometimes a difference between God's commands and our obedience, and this may be such an instance. Kidner has argued that Abraham moved slowly in departing from his father's household so that it might be done with the least possible rupture and the least possible difficulty to the family. We cannot know. Perhaps it was because of family considerations; perhaps he discovered that some of his family was going where he needed to go anyway.

He does eventually part company with his father's household entirely. Thus the time of God's call was initially when Abraham was still in Mesopotamia. The first record of it, though, is here as he is already in Haran on his way toward the land of Canaan.

Let us now discuss the content of God's call. He asks one thing of Abraham. He tells him to leave. He is concerned that Abraham does this one thing. I think it may be fair to say that God is asking Abraham to trust Him. Trust that does not lead to any action is not real trust, and so God describes the action required: "Leave your country, your people and your father's household and go to the land I will show you." He does not say, "Go to the land flowing with milk and honey." He does not say, "Go to the land of Canaan." He does not tell him to go to any particular place. He simply says, "Go, and I will show you as you go. I will eventually lead you to the land where I want you to be." In this order to leave God is asking Abraham to trust because the act of leaving will require much trust on Abraham's part. So that is Abraham's part, to trust God and leave. God's part is fuller. He makes a sevenfold promise:

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.
I will bless those who bless you,
and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth
will be blessed through you.

Contrast what God asked of Abraham—leave—with all the promises God makes to Abraham. Here God promises Abraham land ("Go to the land I will show you"), offspring ("I will make you into a great nation"), and blessing ("I will bless you..."). There is some debate as to the translation of the verb in the phrase "all peoples on earth will be blessed through you." In a couple of instances where this patriarchal promise is repeated it is given in a form that can be used in a reflexive sense. Thus this could be rendered, "and by your name nations will bless themselves." In other words, the nations will say, "May you be blessed like Abraham," or "May you be as blessed as Abraham." That is a little different than saying the peoples will be blessed through you. That is, in some way connected with you and your life and the life of your descendants, the nations will be blessed. It could be that both ways of rendering this are true. However, the New Testament certainly emphasizes the sense of the promise that through Abraham all the nations will be blessed. God's part, then, is a wonderful, sevenfold promise of land, offspring, and blessing both to Abraham and through him to others.

Following this recording of God's call we have Abraham's departure. Genesis 11:4 says, "So Abram left, as the LORD had told him, and Lot went with him." So Abraham is leaving his father's household but he is still accompanied by Lot. He will eventually part company even with Lot. Notice the faith of Abraham that is implicit in this action. He is far from being a great nation, so he has to look to the future and trust that God will be true to His promise, that God will make him a great nation. Abraham is far from having a great name. Similarly, he will not even live to see his role in being a blessing to the nations as that will happen with future generations. To obey God required faith of Abraham. That may be why he is sometimes called the father of the faithful. The longer I live in my Christian life the more I get used to and come to peace with walking by faith and not by sight. I think all of us would like to see the light at the end of the tunnel, but maybe it is sufficient to know that we are in the right tunnel and God has us in His hands. He is leading us, sometimes through the dark passages where we do not know why we are here, what we are doing, and where He is leading. But that is the nature of walking by faith.

That is the only kind of life that is worth living. Abraham shows us what this means. He did not have anything that he could hold in his hands as he left all that behind, but he trusted God and moved out.

We will move next to the developmental theme of the Pentateuch, but I want to talk first about what we mean by theme and plot. David Klines in his book, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, begins his discussion by carefully distinguishing between plot and theme. What is the plot of a story, a narrative? The plot is the story line. This a significant tracing of a sequence of events that somehow relate to one another, by causation or some other connection. Also in a plot there is usually one (or more) point of tension that cries out for resolution and the plot is moving toward that resolution. What is the difference, then, between plot and theme? Klines describes the theme as the conceptualization of the plot. The theme is the central concept, message, or meaning that is conveyed by the plot. The theme is related to the plot with an emphasis on conceptualized meaning. The theme tends to focus on the significance of the story and state its implications. There are other definitions of theme, such as the central or dominating idea in a literary work, or a rationale of the content, structure, and development of a literary work. Therefore we want to talk about the thematic progression of the Pentateuch. What is the theme and how is it developed? And how does it then establish a background for the book of Joshua?