

GEORGE W. TRUETT THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

WRITING ASSIGNMENT 1: ABRAHAMIC PROMISES AND THREATS

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It is unlikely that Abraham could have imagined the countless repercussions set in motion by his act of obedience to God. Three major world religions trace their lineage to Abraham; his actions of trust (and mistrust) in the Creator craft a narrative that proclaims a God of promises as well as the character of the great patriarchs. As the biblical story progresses from the primeval history of Genesis 1-11 to the patriarchal narrative in the rest of the book¹, God's promises to Abraham become the focal point of the ancient authors. Through the establishment of several covenants God promises Abraham a great blessing, a great name and heritage, and that his offspring would build a great nation; blessing all the families of the earth. God would ultimately utilize the resulting family of patriarchs to fulfill this promise, though the characters of the story threaten the fulfillment with cycles of sexual disobedience and deception.

1. In the first biblically recorded intervention of God into the life of humanity since the tower of Babel, the Lord asks Abraham to move into a new land (Gen 12:1 NRSV). There is little evidence that Abraham knew much of YHWH before this encounter² but regardless, he follows God. As an implied result³ of obeying this command, God makes a monumental promise to Abraham. In this promise, God commits to make Abraham “a great nation”, to bless him “so that his name will be great” (12:2). This promise of blessing goes beyond a simple guarantee of greatness; it is a grand commitment to bless all the whole world (12:3). If one is to believe this narrative, God is claiming to construct a nation that will cause “all the families of the earth” to be blessed. From a womb which held no promise of life, God dares to proclaim a nation full of promise and life; enough to share with the whole earth.

1. Andrew E. Arterbury, W. H. Bellinger Jr., and Derek S. Dodson, *Engaging the Christian Scriptures: An Introduction to the Bible*. (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, 2014), 35.

2. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*. (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 1985), 46.

3. Walvoord and Zuck, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: Old Testament*, 47

Characteristic of ancient literature⁴, the Abrahamic promise is emphasized in the text by being repeated multiple times. God guarantees the promise through several covenants with Abraham, each time reiterating the commitment to make of Abraham a great nation. As the family begins their journey and travels through Egypt, Abraham starts to question God's promise (15:2). God answers with a powerful reminder of the deliverance the Lord had already brought, and solidifies the promise through an ancient covenant involving a procession through the middle of severed animals. God passes through the covenantal procession alone after causing Abraham to fall asleep, implying that God would stay faithful to the promise, even if Abraham did not⁵. Later God institutes another covenant with man: circumcision. With this covenant, God reiterates the promise of blessing and to make Abraham "the ancestor of a multitude of nations" (17:4). In a final repetition of the promise to Abraham, God commands the sacrifice, and consequently directs the last minute intercession for, Abraham's promised child (22:1-24). It is in these repeated promises and progressive covenants that one can recognize the weight of the commitment God makes to Abraham. As the journey starts and Abraham is learning to trust a God he does not know, God enters into covenant with him without requiring Abraham to do anything but trust. God walked between the severed animals alone, for it seemed enough that Abraham was simply there and following the Lord. As time progresses though, God calls for Abraham to be circumcised, asking for the men that follow the Lord to cut their own flesh as a constant reminder of God's promise. In progressive fashion, the final repetition of the promise asks for the most from Abraham. God is promising to build a nation of worldwide blessing, but Abraham has to trust that God could still do this, even if the son of promise was sacrificed.

4. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 102.

5. Arterbury, Bellinger, and Dodson, *Engaging the Christian Scriptures*, 38.

Abraham proved faithful, and came within seconds of sacrificing Isaac, before God intervened by providing a ram. It was in this final test that God claims to “indeed” bless Abraham. (22:17)

One can feel the weight of the promise more fully by this point; this nation will happen as a result of the miraculous. This promise is held by a God who is powerful enough to demand Abraham’s only child, but graceful enough to not want him. This promise therefore, is larger, more frightening, and yet more filled with blessing than the world had ever seen, but it was just beginning. The rest of the book of Genesis focuses on the fulfillment of this God-given promise and, conversely, the obstacles to that promise erected by the human characters of the story.

2. Yes, God’s promise to Abraham was monumental, but cycles of sexual disobedience and deception threatened to derail the covenant. First, Abraham and his lineage continually allowed impatience and jealousy to take precedent in their marital lives. For example, not only do Abraham and Sarah let their impatience with God’s timing lead to a child with her servant (16:4), but their grandson Jacob and his two wives allow jealousy to dictate the addition of maidservants to his harem (30:3). In this part of the biblical text, it is not uncommon for men to take on other wives or to have children with servants, but God has called for this family to be set apart as a blessing: to trust the Lord’s fulfillment of the promise to make a great nation out of Abraham. Abraham and his descendants need not figure out creative ways to fulfill this promise on their own, they need simply to trust that God will make the nation of Israel in God’s own timing. These episodes involving a patriarch’s wife offering their maidservant to her husband always seem to bear bad fruit for the family in the end. Jealousy and anger find their way into the ancient family through these events, and it could have easily derailed a human promise (16:5, 30:6).

Beyond the sexual disobedience that appears in cycles throughout the patriarchal narrative, one is struck with the amount of deception in the story. When difficult circumstances appear in the narrative, the characters will often resort to lying as a way to withdrawal from trouble. From Sarah's lying about her bitter laugh of mistrust (18:15), to Jacob's deception of Isaac in order to steal the blessing (27:22), to Joseph's brothers lying about trading their brother into slavery (38:32), the characters of the narrative continually threaten God's promise. The Lord had promised Abraham a great nation of blessing that would impact the whole world, so where can a cycle of lies fit into the picture? The narrative shows that lies simply cannot advance the promise. Heavenly characters instantly rebuke Sarah's laugh and proceeding lie (18:15). Jacob fears vengeance from his brother Esau after deceiving him (28:45). Eventually, Joseph's brothers had to beg at his feet to gain forgiveness for their deception (42:6 - 45:3). These cycles of lies complicate the biblical narrative. On one side, it seems that because of lies, Jacob took his place as "Israel", and Joseph gained power in Egypt to move the family, as a previous text had predicted (15:13). The lies however, are never commanded by God, and always result in negative repercussions. Just like God delivered Isaac from certain sacrifice, God could have worked these situations out in a holy way without deception.

Taken alone, either of these cyclical sins could have prevented the promise of God from being fulfilled: for the ancient people already knew that God could punish sin. The beauty of God's promise shines through in the midst of man's best efforts to hinder its progress. God will remain faithful to the chosen people, even when they lie, break their marital covenants, and laugh at the Lord. God will allow humankind to sleep through the part of the covenant where they should be committing themselves to faithfulness. The Lord knows that humans will inevitably be unfaithful to the promise, but God remains faithful anyway. God promises Abraham a great

blessing, a great nation, and a worldwide impact; and God delivered, despite humankind's proclivity toward sin.

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