

JOSHUA

Lesson 1 - Introduction

Today begins a new chapter in the ministry of Torah Class as we begin the study of the Book of Joshua. Joshua is a natural continuation of the Torah from a historical aspect as the final words of Deuteronomy record the death of Moses and the handing off of Israel's human leadership to Joshua son of Nun. But the book of Joshua is also a natural continuation of the theological and spiritual essence of the 5 books of Moses because we see that what was established and ordained by the Lord, through Moses, begin to come to fruition. And the immediate fruition was the placing of God's people into God's land, Canaan.

Because we've spent almost 5 years studying the 5 Books of Moses, the Torah, together it seems right to me that we spend at least a couple of sessions preparing to transition out of the Torah and into the book of Joshua, the 1st of that section of the Bible that Jews call the Former Prophets. Studying the Torah in the manner that we have can at times cause us not to see the forest because of the trees. That is we can miss the big picture and the beautiful flow of the Bible's progressive revelation if we don't pause to catch our breath; so let's climb into the gondola of a heavenly balloon and float for a while high above the wondrous work that Yehoveh has created and established so that we can view it in panorama as a whole.

I've mentioned before that in one sense the entire Tanakh, the Old Testament, is the history of Israel. Why Israel was created, who created it, and what it's immediate purpose was and ultimate purpose is, is the skeleton to which the flesh of the entire Bible clings. Without our understanding of the Israelite skeleton as the framework and foundation of our faith, the soft and malleable flesh of the New Testament can take on practically any form; and indeed it has. Thus we see literally thousands of Christian denominations established, each with its own set of faith doctrines, and each certain that it has become the exclusive standard bearer of God's truth to the exclusion of all the others. I'm so grateful that the Lord is finally starting to open the eyes of His beloved Church that Israel is not some obsolete dispensation that has been replaced by a group of faithful gentiles; rather Israel and its history embodies and exemplifies God's ideal principles, values, and justice system. It is those principles, values and justice system that produced our Messiah, Yeshua, who also fulfilled them in a way that has brought about the possibility of redemption for mankind and peace with God.

I marvel at how fortunate of a generation we are to be eyewitnesses to the fulfillment of prophecies that were foretold thousands of years ago. It is but historical fact that fulfillment of biblical prophecy ceased upon the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by the Roman Legions in 70 A.D., and it did not begin again until the mid 1940's in the modern era. During that entire almost-1900 year period of time that started not long after Christ's death there was

an extended period of prophetic dormancy and it was that long dormancy that caused many to lose faith and to begin to reinterpret the prophecies allegorically in ways that have led to all sorts of erroneous doctrines that are now deeply imbedded in Christianity (the worst of them being what is called Replacement Theology). But we are living during the era that the prophetic dominoes are falling once again, and they are falling at breathtaking speed. Although just as the Israelites were blind to the prophetic fulfillment of the arrival of their Savior 2000 years ago, so is the 21st century Church (in general) blind to prophetic fulfillments that are happening right before our eyes. And the first prophetic action that marked the awaking from its long slumber was the re-establishment of Israel as a nation of Jews in its original and ancient homeland, in 1948. Israel has always been, and will be until the establishment of the Millennial Kingdom, the place and the people where the Lord's prophecies are pronounced and where they come about. Without the existence of Israel, prophecy simply doesn't happen.

So rather than begin our preparation for Joshua by starting at Genesis 1:1 and the Creation story, we're going to begin a little later in the book of Genesis with the pre-history of Israel. This review is going to be fast moving but also in a different style than the manner in which we have studied Torah these past few years. It will be general in nature and presented more like the telling of an epic story. So sit back and relax but have your Bibles handy as we remember where Israel came from, in preparation for our study of the books of Joshua and then Judges.

THE HISTORY OF ISRAEL BEGINS WITH AVRAHAM (*ABRAHAM*)

Avraham (*Abraham*) is the best place to start because it was with him that God made an irrevocable covenant out of which the Hebrew people and the path of mankind's redemption would ultimately come. Although Jews correctly consider him their forefather, sometimes he is even spoken of as "the first Jew" or "the first Israelite". Since the term "Israelite" could not have happened until God changed Abraham's grandson's name from Jacob to Israel, and since the term "Jew" began with the tribe of Judah (one of Israel's 12 sons), it would be misleading to apply either the term "Jew" or "Israelite" to Avraham (*Abraham*), except perhaps in a poetic sense.

Avraham (*Abraham*) was born sometime around 2000 BC in an area historically known as the Fertile Crescent. The Fertile Crescent was so called because it lies in the flood plain between and along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, where regular flooding deposited rich silt that was ideal for agricultural use. He lived, at least for a time, in the city-state of Ur, in a region called Mesopotamia. Today, Ur and much of Mesopotamia falls within Iraq's borders, next to the Euphrates River. Ur was the center of moon-god worship, and much of that ancient city has been excavated, and there is no doubt as to its identity.

Avraham's father was Terach (*Terah*), a descendant of Shem who was one of Noah's (*Noah's*) 3 sons. Only about 350 years had passed since Noah and his family escaped the world-destroying deluge of water by constructing an ark, an enormous wooden ship that Noah built at God's command. If you were alive in 2000 BC, you could have asked Noah himself about the Great Flood, because he was still living when Avraham was born.

About 200 years ago a scholar invented a name for the countless descendents of Noah's (*Noah's*) son Shem; the scholar called them Shemites, we now say Semites. The name stuck. Therefore, genealogically speaking, Avraham was a Semite since he descended from Shem, although he belonged to a culture that was very probably Amorite (a people who became the epitome of evil and one that God set about eradicating). Being a Semite identifies Avraham or anyone else for that matter not to a geographical region or to a particular culture, but to a large extended family that came from a specific gene pool. Unfortunately, we most often hear this term in our day used in the phrase "anti-Semitic", having come to denote some type of predisposition or bigotry against the Jewish people.

During Avraham's (*Abraham's*) era, some 4000 years ago, civilization was in full swing though it manifested itself quite differently from region to region, and continent to continent. In Asia and the Middle East, the area the Bible primarily concerns itself with, there were hundreds of tribes and clans that were nomadic to some degree. Where cities did form, they were generally city-states. That is, small nations with defined territory that was quite limited, and usually didn't go much beyond the city walls or boundaries. Typically, each city-state had its own king and most often its own set of gods. There were constant skirmishes between these city-states; some serious, some amounting to little, and usually involving stealing each others possessions, livestock, idols, food, pastureland, and sometimes taking people for slaves and servants. The taking of people from another tribe or nation was a common way for kings and tribal leaders of this time to more rapidly grow their own population, thereby increasing their personal security, wealth, power, and status.

Some cultures were tent dwellers, which meant they were wanderers, constantly moving from area to area seeking fresh pasturelands and water for their flocks and herds. Others, the semi-nomadic, tended to stay in an area longer than their nomadic tent-dwelling neighbors; so, they lived in non-portable huts constructed of the local flora and fauna. Then again, there were so-called sedentary peoples, meaning they lived permanently in cities with governments, taxes, mud brick and stone houses, magnificent palaces and temples, roads, even sanitation systems. Most often, these several types of cultures lived side-by-side, and were symbiotic. There were even small empires in existence as well, as with the early Babylonian Empire that is unrelated and unconnected to a later and different Babylonian Empire (the one that conquered Judah and sent them into exile) that came about well over 1000 years after the old Babylonian Empire collapsed.

In Avraham's (*Abraham's*) time, only about two hundred years had passed since the Tower of Babel episode [**Gen. 11**] when God scrambled a single human language into many so that humans would disperse over the planet and repopulate other geographical areas. All but a handful of the millions of descendents of Noah (*Noah*) had, by now, turned their backs on God. Idolatry was rampant. Sex was perverse and had become part of religious ceremony. Child sacrifice was widespread. In fairly quick fashion since the destruction of the Great Flood, the world was once again thoroughly wicked. There were many relatively new spoken and written languages, with extensive and elegant vocabularies and alphabets.

Nimrod was the best-known leader of a widespread revolt against God that resulted in the construction of the Tower of Babel. And, Nimrod is rightly credited with being the founder of

what the bible calls the “Mystery Babylon” Religions. He built the first walled city after the flood and is credited with modernizing the art of warfare. You see Nimrod was of the line of Ham, who was a son of Noach. Ham represents a line of people that began their wickedness within a few years of stepping out of Ark. In fact, Nimrod was the son of Cush, the line who populated Africa. It might surprise you to know that the great Nimrod was a black man.....a Negro.....and many ancient carvings bear this out.

Nimrod married a woman named Semiramis, and after he died, Semiramis deified him and declared him the sun god. She herself was worshipped as the “Queen of Heaven”; and, as the mother of Tammuz who was the reincarnation of Nimrod. This triumvirate of sun-god father, queen of heaven mother, and reincarnated son would become the formula for nearly all of the Babylon Mystery religions, that is, the pagan religions of the world, right up to today. We find all throughout history, in all cultures, transliterated names and titles of Nimrod and Semiramis assigned to their own particular pantheon of gods. For instance, in Egypt the Queen of Heaven was called Isis; in India, Indrani; in Asia, Cybele, and in the ancient Middle Eastern lands, Ashteroth (who we see mentioned in several places in the Old Testament).

As for Nimrod, he is also called Ba'al and known as the god-man Ninus, the builder of Ninevah. And, since his son Tammuz is simply the reincarnation of Nimrod, Tammuz is also Nimrod.

Hundreds of sub-cultures had erupted, and communication was well developed. Clay tablets were being utilized as the primary writing medium for cuneiform in Mesopotamia, while a long way southwest on the African continent, at the mouth of the Nile the Egyptians were using papyrus and reed stylus' to write their hieroglyphics; even building libraries for the growing volume of records. Trade routes were opened from the Mid East, to the Far East, to India, perhaps even to China. These regions were not unknown to each other, rather they were well connected. Trade was occurring amongst these various cultures, bronze was well known and iron was in use sparingly. Egypt was already dotted with Pyramids. In fact, by the time Abraham was born, the Pyramid building era was at a close. This was not a world full of disinterested, small thinking, primitive peoples that ate raw meat and lived like wild animals. Most were smart, aggressive, forward thinking, and constantly seeking to improve their technology and the quality of their lives.

It was during this same time, much farther west near the Atlantic Ocean, that an unknown people constructed a strange structure that scientists still puzzle over to this day: its name is Stonehenge.

Avraham (*Abraham*) undoubtedly started life as a pagan [**Gen. 12**]. His father, Terach (*Terah*), was a merchant of idols.....standard idols of the Mystery Babylon religions. It is likely, therefore, that Abraham owned and worshipped a number of gods. On the other hand, there is the remotest possibility that he could have been one of a few that still believed in the One God that Noach (*Noah*) spoke of, but that is highly unlikely. Certainly if Avraham had despised idols, it is not easy to imagine his getting along well with his father, who would have taught him otherwise. It's also entirely conceivable that Avraham worshipped God Almighty as well as some number of other gods. It's hard to know. The spiritual mind of the people of that time had

no problem with the idea of worshipping many gods and adding a new one if he or she happened along. People of Avraham's day also tended to put their gods in a hierarchy, with one being dominant and the rest following in a kind of celestial pecking order.

One of the great curiosities of history is that it appears that atheism, the belief that there is no god, that there is nothing greater than man, is a relatively modern concept, as every ancient society ever discovered is found to have worshipped superior beings.

Avraham had two brothers, an unusually small family for that time. One died. Avraham (*Abraham*) married Sarai (*Sarah*), his half-sister, who was unable to give him children. Marrying family members was the norm for the day and not yet forbidden by God. For reasons we're not given, Avraham's father Terach (*Terah*) gathers his family together and leaves the comforts and security of city life in Ur, traveling north and west about 600 miles until they arrive at Haran. Why they stopped there we don't know, because the clearly stated original destination was a place called Canaan, about 400 miles to the south. In any case, the family decided to settle in Haran. What Avraham did for a living there is anybody's guess, though Genesis tells us that when he moved on he took flocks and herds with him, so he was prosperous.

One day, when Avraham (*Abraham*) was about 75 years old, God revealed Himself to him. God tells Avraham to leave Haran, but doesn't tell him where he's going; this probably has something to do with his aged father and surviving brother deciding to stay put. God strikes a covenant, a unilateral contract, with Avraham that if he will follow Him, God will give him a land of his own, bring forth a great nation from his seed, and from this the whole world will be blessed.

There is practically no information at all about Avraham (*Abraham*) prior to this time. All things considered, he was probably a fairly ordinary person, and surprised as anybody at God choosing him to carry out such a grand plan. I've often wondered how God first gained Avraham's attention; I suspect by speaking to him, at least that's the way the Bible presents it. As an Amorite, Avraham was surrounded by a number of idols and gods. It's unlikely any of those pieces of wood or stone ever had much to say to him, so however God communicated with him, it was spectacular and believable enough that Avraham did what he was told.

Avraham (*Abraham*) took his wife Sarai (*Sarah*) and Lot, his nephew (the son of the deceased brother), a few servants and probably a number of cousins, and struck out for parts unknown. Apparently taking a clue from his father's intended original destination, he eventually wandered into Canaan, stopping at the site of Shechem. Canaan was not a country or a nation, it was simply a named region, and the term "Canaan" was used then much in the same way we today talk of "The Middle East". That is, it is a generalized geographical area that has been given a title.

The widely scattered inhabitants of Canaan were called Canaanites and, although there were ancient family ties between the residents of the various city-states and villages in Canaan, they were not a homogenous people. Speaking of them as Canaanites is roughly analogous to our speaking of all the inhabitants of the Middle East as Arabs. In reality, the Arabs of the Middle

East see themselves based on a national identity (Iraqis, Iranians, Egyptians, Syrians, etc.), much as the Canaanites would have identified themselves more in relation to the city-state, tribe, king or village to which they were attached.

It's important to understand how the land of Canaan (that the Lord would assign to Israel) originally came about. Several hundred years prior to Avraham's birth, Noah had occasion to be humiliated by his son Ham (of whom Nimrod was a descendant) [**Gen. 9**]. Ham had wandered, uninvited, into his father's tent, and found him asleep, drunk, and naked. Ham went out from the tent and informed his two brothers, Shem and Japheth, who promptly covered up their father's nakedness making sure they didn't look upon him. When Noah awoke and found a cloak over him, he was incensed and asked what had happened. His sons informed him, and the irate Noah responded by issuing a curse upon one of Ham's sons: Canaan. The exact nature of the offense is unclear. And, why the grandson Canaan took the brunt of Noah's anger, we're also left to ponder.

As with many biblical curses and blessings, the one Noah pronounced upon Canaan was prophetic in nature. Some years after the incident, Ham's son Canaan left the home of his father and grandfather and moved to a region far to the south that eventually came to be known by his namethe land of Canaan. Over the centuries, the descendants of Noah's other two sons, Japheth and Shem, remained generally friendly and on favorable terms with one another. But, the descendants of Noah's third son, Ham, through the specific line of Ham's son Canaan, became enemies of the descendants of Japheth and Shem.

Many of the sons that Canaan spawned eventually spread over the area, grew and divided to become their own tribes, and then established their own city-states and villages. In time, they even warred with one another. Some 1000 years later, we find those descendents of Canaan who had stayed in the land fighting to keep Moses and the Israelites out. Tribes from other areas also settled in that region. Jebusites, Girgashites, Hittites, Hivites, and even the tribe Avraham originally belonged to, the Amorites, all eventually became enemies of Israel. NOTE: If Avraham, who it is confirmed in the Bible is a descendent of Shem, was indeed an Amorite (a tribe originating from Ham), then it must have been so through intermarriage, or perhaps simply by joining the Amorite tribe by a statement of allegiance; a customary event. For by the time of the birth of Avraham, centuries had passed since the origination of the Amorite tribe and, as happened with many other tribes, the Amorites had grown, splintered off, and some members had moved to other areas and become sub-tribes in many other regions.

The location inside the land of Canaan that Avraham first stopped at was a place called Shechem. Today, Shechem is known as the Arab city of Nablus, located in the West Bank area of dispute in Israel. There, at Shechem, God made His plan clear to Abraham. As written in **Gen. 12:7**, God said that this was the land He was going to give him for his descendants. Abraham built an altar there, presumably made an animal sacrifice (because that's what altars are used for) and, after a short stay, moved on eventually all the way south to Egypt, because a severe famine had come upon Canaan. After a run in with Egypt's Pharaoh in which Avraham (*Abraham*) gave up his wife Sarai (*Sarah*) to Pharaoh momentarily (apparently to avoid confrontation), the famine ended and Avraham took his family back to Canaan.

Abraham arrived back in Canaan a wealthier man than when he left it, because the Pharaoh thought Abraham's God was a threat to him, and so gave Abraham valuable gifts so that he might leave without incurring this God's wrath. Though Abraham now had much silver and gold, the family's real wealth was still their flocks and herds.

At about this same time, far to the north in Mesopotamia, Abraham's birthplace, thousands mourned the death of Noah (*Noah*).....yes the Noah of Noah's ark.....who died at over 900 years of age.

Canaan was a tough place to live. Totally unlike the more dependable Fertile Crescent of Avraham's origin, famines were part of life in Canaan. Everything was based on the soil, which means it depended on the fickle rains. No rain, no crops, no pastureland, no survival. Which would explain why the Canaanites might have held the world record for the number of gods they had. A god for rain, a god for wind, a god for clouds, a god for barley; you name it, they had a god for it. But, the chief god was Baal. At least, he was the most popular.

Despite the difficult living conditions apparently Avraham and his nephew Lot prospered. So much so that they had to part company because their herds and flocks were growing large enough to outstrip the land they mutually occupied, and it caused disputes among the herdsmen [**Gen. 13**]. Lot must have liked the city life because he moved to Sodom, somewhere near the southwestern bank of the Dead Sea.

A little time later, without warning, peaceful old Avraham finds himself having to be a warrior leader [**Gen. 14**]. It seems some kings (that is, several city-state rulers) from a region east of Canaan decided to invade 5 Canaanite Kings in the area Avraham lived. In the process the invading kings sacked Sodom and Gomorrah, and made Lot one of their prisoners. Family being what it is, Avraham (*Abraham*) recruits 318 men and off they go to chase down the kings of the east, in hopes of rescuing Lot. A few miles north of Damascus (Syria) they catch up to the raiders and defeat them, free Lot, and reclaim the stolen booty. Avraham returns to the cheers of the people and the gratitude of the Canaanite Kings. He is also honored by the mysterious King and High Priest of the city of Shalem (centuries later this city will be called Jerusalem).....his name is Melchizedek. It is Hebrew tradition that Melchizedek was none other than Shem, a son of Noah. This is entirely feasible; Melchizedek is more a title than a name: in Hebrew this title means "king of righteousness". And, although Shem would have been hundreds of years old by then, the table of generations in the Bible indicates that Shem was indeed alive when Abraham was living in Canaan. Surmising that Melchizedek was actually Shem answers a lot of questions about this obscure, but most interesting, Bible character, which later will be compared, in some ways, to Christ.

We now arrive at an important point in the Bible [**Gen. 14:13**]; the first known use of the word "Hebrew" is presented, and it is ascribed to Avraham. No other ancient source uses the word "Hebrew" as the **title** of a specific people group prior to this usage in Genesis. There is much conjecture as to the word's origination, and it's meaning. Some scholars think it identifies a new culture with Avraham as its founder. Others believe it is a term that represents a new religion, the first monotheistic religion. Another line of thinking is that the word "Hebrew" is a perversion of the Sumerian word "Hapiru" (which, when spoken in ancient Semitic sounds is almost identical to the word "Ipiru") meaning "wanderers and outcasts".....people that have no

particular ethnic or regional ties. Modern Hebrew scholars almost unanimously say the word meant “one who crossed over”.....likely referring in a literal way to Abraham crossing over the Euphrates River in order to journey south to Canaan. Yet, no doubt it also carried a parallel spiritual meaning in that it is one who crossed over from worshipping false gods and therefore being against God, to worshipping Yehoveh and standing with Him.

The issue of the origination of the word “Hebrew” revolves around whether the term as originally used was religious, or racial, or cultural, or simply descriptive. Regardless of its etymology, Judaism and Christianity see “Hebrew” as a term describing the biblical ancestral line of the promises made within the covenant that God gave to Avraham, and Avraham ratified, by leaving Mesopotamia and moving south to Canaan in search of the land God promised would be his. Therefore, the Hebrew line begins with Avraham as its founder, then on to his son Isaac, then Isaac’s son Jacob (eventually renamed Israel), and finally to the 12 tribes of Israel, which includes the Jews, as we know them today. All are included under the title of “Hebrew”.

Now back in Canaan after his short stay in Egypt, Avraham, having so long lived a nomadic lifestyle and again in the cyclical need of new pasturelands for his flocks and herds, decides to move on. This time, he and his clan backtracks somewhat and settles at the desert oasis known as Beersheba. Sarai (*Sarah*), his wife, still hasn’t given Avraham a child, and they both have given up hope, even though implicit in God’s promise to make them into a great nation, is children.

Sarai (*Sarah*), now very old and beyond child bearing years, gives her maidservant, Hagar, to Avraham to bear him a child in her stead. This was a completely normal and customary practice for 2000 BC. Jewish tradition says Hagar was an Egyptian, possibly even a daughter of the Pharaoh, acquired during Avraham’s stay in Egypt. Likely Hagar was one of the gifts Pharaoh gave to Abraham as a peace offering. Hagar becomes pregnant. Sarai becomes greatly jealous, and treats Hagar so terribly that she runs away. God finds Hagar, convinces her to go back, and promises her a boy child. She returns, and shortly gives birth to Yishma’el (*Ishmael*).

Before Hagar becomes pregnant, God formalizes His covenant with Abraham. In typical Middle Eastern fashion, an animal is sacrificed, cut into pieces and divided into two piles; then, the agreeing parties walk between the two piles as an indication of their acceptance of the terms. However, we’re told that ONLY God walked through the pieces of the animal. This is an important detail because it indicates that the covenant that has been made between God and Abraham is unilateral. This means that Abraham had NO duties to perform; whatever was to happen was God’s responsibility. God would carry out the terms of the covenant regardless of what Abraham, or his descendants, did. That’s why this covenant is often referred to as a promise....God promised things to Abraham, but Abraham made no promises to God.

At this point God gives Avraham the rites of male circumcision as the sign and seal of His everlasting covenant with the Hebrew people [**Gen. 15,16,17**]. It is observed to this day. Male circumcision was not uncommon in those times, but it was not known to have been associated with covenant making until this incident. A few years later, Abraham’s elderly wife

Sarai (*Sarah*) shocks everybody by becoming pregnant at the age of 90, and gives birth to Yitz'chak (Isaac). Although people at that time lived a little longer than we do now, Sarah was still way beyond childbearing age. Rather than now feeling satisfied, however, Sarai (*Sarah*) doesn't like the competition, so she throws a fit and demands that Avraham disown Hagar and her child, Yishma'el (*Ishmael*), now 13 years old. Avraham complies. Out in the desert and near death, mother and child are rescued by God who tells Hagar that Yishma'el (*Ishmael*) will father a great nation, and produce 12 princes. Yishma'el (*Ishmael*) will go on to become the forefather of the Arab races, and is often (erroneously) referred to by Muslims as the father of Islam. The dispute that began over Yishma'el (*Ishmael*) and Yitz'chak (*Isaac*), brought about by Avraham's and Sarai's disbelief and impatience, is being played out before our eyes every day in the never ending Middle East conflicts.

It is most important that we pause here and examine for a moment a key element of God's plan for mankind as outlined in Genesis; one that is apparently misunderstood even by many in today's Christian Church. And, that most important element answers this question: just exactly which of Avraham's descendants would be used to bring about the promises contained in the covenant made by God with Avraham?

Islam claims that God is going to bring about whatever His plans are for the world through Avraham's son Ishmael and Ishmael's descendants. Jews and Christians claim that God's divine plans will be carried on through the descendants of Avraham's son Isaac. Put into contemporary terms: which group is God's chosen people.....the Hebrews, from Isaac; or the Muslims, from Ishmael? This is a distinct fork in the road that cannot be bypassed: one direction is correct the other is not. No amount of religious or political tolerance can bring about compromise on this issue.

The answer to this most fundamental question is found in Genesis 17 (**READ GENESIS 17:15-22**). It's several years after Ishmael has been born, and Avraham is well satisfied that he has, in Ishmael, the male heir to his wealth, his tribe, and most importantly to the covenant promises. Quite unexpectedly God appears and tells Avraham that Sarai is going to bear him a son. And, that it is THIS son that God is going to use to carry on the promises given to Avraham. The startled Avraham argues against this. He asks God to please make it Ishmael that is blessed as his heir, and not this yet to be born child. Avraham's astonishment and disappointment is easily understandable. First, Sarai is a very old woman, and it simply cannot be possible that she could conceive in that long-dead womb of hers. But, second, and most important to Avraham, is that Ishmael is currently his much beloved, and one and only, son. All of his plans and hopes for the future rested in Ishmael. From the moment Hagar conceived, Avraham was overjoyed with the prospect of having a son, and that son was Ishmael. It is certain that Avraham told Ishmael, almost a teenager at the time God threw this curveball at him, all about God, and that someday Ishmael would carry with him God's incredible blessing and plan for mankind. Suddenly, without warning, it seems God changed Abraham's plans.

Avraham fell on his face and begged God that Ishmael be the heir to the covenant. God emphatically said "NO!" But, then in His mercy, God told Avraham not to worry; that Ishmael would prosper, be a great man, would bear 12 princes (that is, 12 tribal leaders), and have

countless decedents. And, that is exactly what happened, as the millions of members of the various Arab tribes we see today are the result. Nonetheless, it would be Isaac, God said, the child to be born by Sarah, who would carry on with the promises of the covenant. Avraham was anything but happy with this new situation; yet, obediently, he complied. It would be Isaac, and his descendants, the Hebrews, that would carry on the promise first given to Abraham.

Despite his human failings, in **Gen. 15:6**, we see that “He (Avraham) believed Adonai (God), and He (Adonai) credited it to him as righteousness”. While on the surface it is wonderful to see God’s mercy and grace in action, there is something much deeper in this passage to consider: God has just given mankind His formula for personal salvation. That is, we are required to believe God (meaning to trust Him), and then He will credit us with righteousness. Seven hundred years before Mosheh (*Moses*) received the Torah (the Law) on Mt. Sinai, two thousand years before Yeshua (*Jesus*) was crucified, God revealed the only path to a right relationship with Him: Trust in Him.

We find that some years after Hagar and Ishmael’s desert ordeal, young Yitz’chak (*Isaac*) has his own near death experience. Out of the blue, God orders Avraham to take Yitz’chak (*Isaac*) to an altar on a hilltop and sacrifice him (let’s drop this false picture of a young, innocent child being led out for sacrifice.....Isaac was about 30 years old at this time and knew full well what was happening). Though certainly devastating, it would not have seemed all that strange to Avraham, for human sacrifice to a god was fairly normal for the day, and particularly customary within the pagan tribes of Canaan. Avraham obeys. He takes Yitz’chak (*Isaac*) to Mt. Moriah, the place where the Temple will be built some 900 years into the future. Today, this place is called the Temple Mount, in the heart of Jerusalem. Moments before Avraham is to plunge his flint blade into Yitzchak’s (*Isaac*’s) chest, God stops him, and provides a Ram, a male sheep, to be sacrificed in his stead. Another covenant follows promising to bring forth many great nations from him and millions of descendants. A relieved father and son return home. Sarai (*Sarah*), Isaac’s mother, dies soon. Hebrew tradition says the cause of her death was the strain of Yitzchak’s (*Isaac*’s) experience on the altar of sacrifice. In the city of Hebron, Avraham buys land with a cave on it, and there buries Sarai.

Avraham, now very old, appoints a trusted servant to find a suitable wife for his son, Yitz’chak (*Isaac*) [**Gen. 24**]. Abraham despises the local Canaanite women, and so directs his servant to journey northward, back to the ancestral home in Mesopotamia, to find an appropriate member of Abraham’s family for Yitz’chak (*Isaac*) to wed. In the city of Nahor, the servant finds Rivkah (*Rebecca*) the daughter of Avraham’s brother Nahor (though the place the servant went was named Nahor, it was not the namesake of Avraham’s brother, but of a distant relative by the same name); Nahor was the brother who had elected to stay behind many years earlier, rather than journey with Abraham to Canaan. About the time Rivkah (*Rebecca*) arrives back in Canaan to marry Yitz’chak (*Isaac*), Avraham dies at 175 years of age and is buried alongside his beloved Sarai. Avraham, revered by Jew, Christian, and Muslim; a man with character flaws, weaknesses, and all the other human attributes that trip every one of us up, loved and trusted God. And God blessed him for it.

We’ll continue our birds-eye overview of the formation of Israel as preparation for the book of Joshua next week.