

Genesis

Opening overture: creation (1:1 – 2:3)

'In the beginning God...' Genesis begins at the very beginning; the word 'Genesis' means 'beginning'. And it begins with *God*. This is a book all about God, focused on his power, character and actions. So throughout this opening chapter, the subject of almost every sentence is God himself: 'God said'; 'God made'; 'God called'... The writer's convictions are clear: behind the created world we see the powerful hand of the God who created the heavens and the earth out of nothing.

The account of creation is painted with a big brush and written in a stylized, memorable way. Having described the earth as 'formless and empty' (that is, without structure or content), the writer portrays the first three 'days' as introducing some *structure* (light, sky, land) and the next three 'days' as filling those three structures with *content* – namely the sun, moon and stars, the birds, and finally animals and humans (see diagram, p. 24). Other key points are also conveyed with great simplicity. God's word is powerful ('and God said, "Let there

Key chapters in Genesis

God's creation (chapters 1–2)

Fall of Adam and Eve (chapter 3)

Noah and the Flood (chapters 6–9)

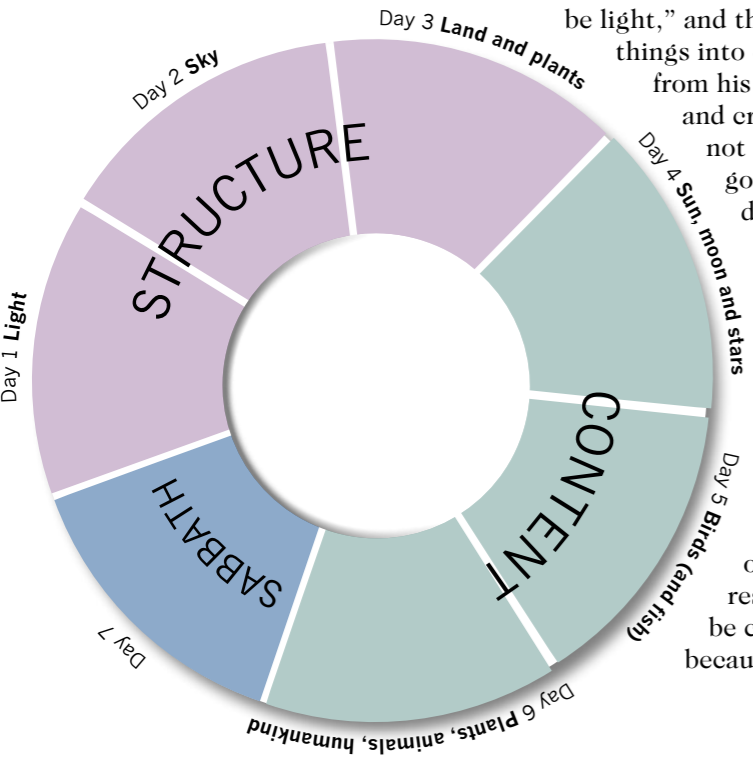
Abraham's call (chapter 12)

The sacrifice of Isaac (chapter 22)

The Joseph saga (chapters 37–50)

'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.'
Genesis 1:1–2



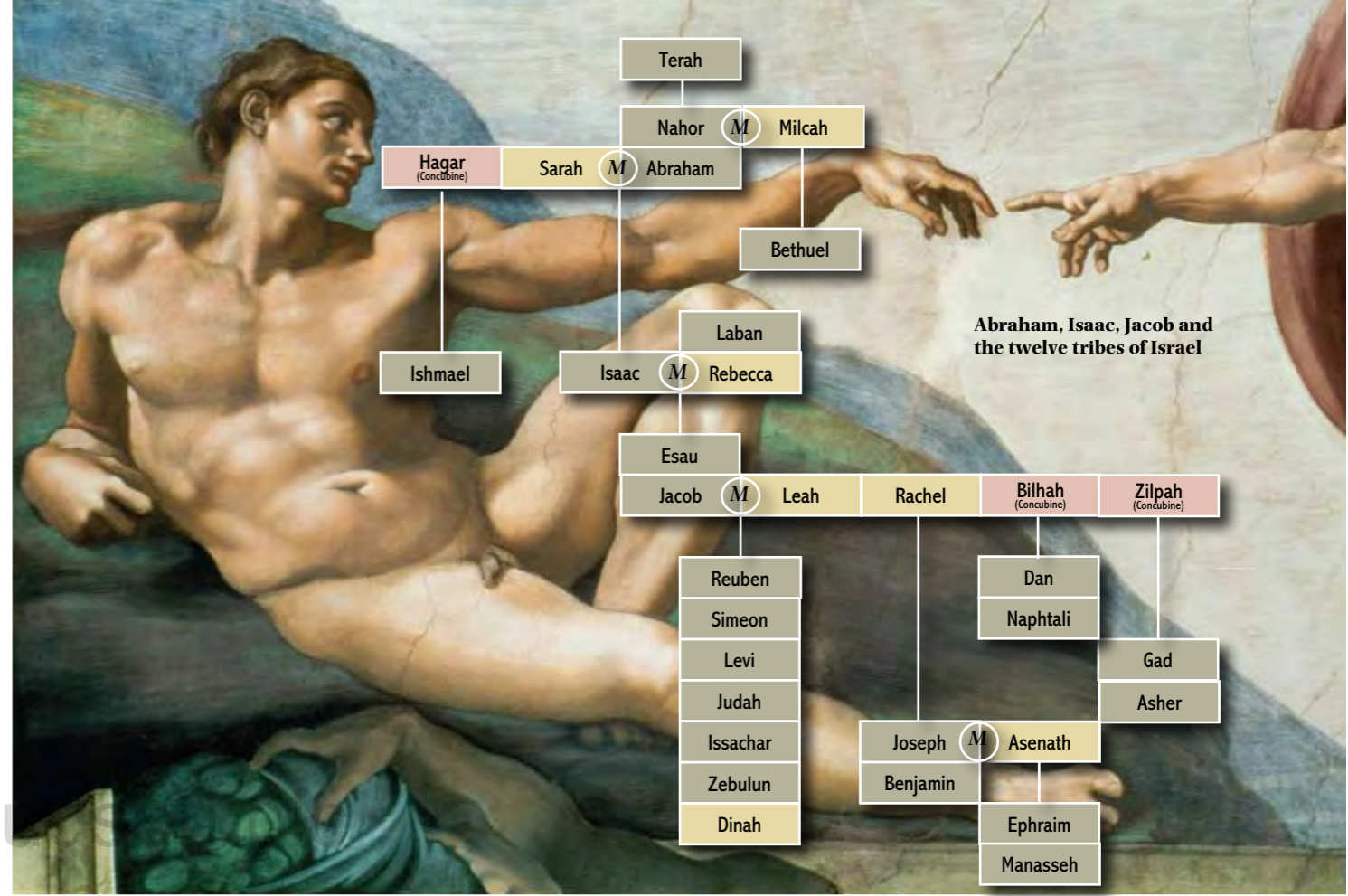


be light,” and there was light’); his simple say-so can call things into existence. This God is also utterly separate from his creation; so creation is not itself divine, and created objects (like the sun and moon) must not be worshipped. Moreover creation is ‘very good’ – the result of a loving creator who delights in his work.

And the pinnacle of God’s creation is humankind. Human beings are no mere afterthought. They may not be as impressive as the stars, but, unlike them, they have been made ‘in God’s image’ – with a unique capacity to know God and to rule over God’s creation on his behalf.

Yet if human beings are the climax of God’s creation, they are not its goal. The ultimate purpose of creation is focused on the ‘seventh day’, the day of sabbath rest – a day for the goodness of creation to be celebrated. Creativity reflects God’s image because creation is good.

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Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the twelve tribes of Israel

Verse in Genesis	Hebrew Title: ‘These are the...’	Content
2:4	‘... generations of the heavens and the earth’ [**]	Story 1: Adam and his descendants
5:1	‘... generations of Adam’	Genealogy: Adam to Noah
6:9	‘... generations of Noah’	Story 2: Noah and the flood
10:1	‘... generations of the sons of Noah’	‘Table of nations’ descended from Noah
11:10	‘... generations of Shem’	Genealogy: Shem to Abraham
11:27	‘... generations of Terah’	Story 3: Abraham and Sarah
25:12	‘... generations of Ishmael’	Genealogy of Ishmael
25:19	‘... generations of Isaac’	Story 4: Jacob and Esau
36:1, 9	‘... generations of Esau’	Genealogy of Esau
37:2	‘... generations of Jacob’	Story 5: Joseph and his brothers

** ‘Generations’ can refer either to a straightforward genealogy or to a narrative story about the persons involved. In ‘stories’ 3 to 5 this narrative focuses less on the person named and more on his children.

Story 1: Adam and his descendants (2:4 – 6:8)

The narrator now back-tracks a little and then zooms in expressly on the story of humankind: we see the first man being created from the ‘dust of the ground’ and becoming a ‘living being’ through God’s breathing into him the ‘breath of life’; we see him located in the Garden of Eden and being presented with the other animals but ‘no suitable helper’ being found for him; and then we see the creation of woman, at which point the man bursts into a song of delight. It is a powerful picture of companionship and intimacy.

Yet it does not last. Adam (which simply means ‘the man’) and Eve (which means ‘living’) can enjoy the fruit of the garden with the exception of two trees – the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Tempted by an evil serpent, Eve takes fruit from the second tree and shares it with Adam. Immediately they sense powerful new emotions – both of shame (realizing they are naked) and of guilt (hiding from God); they also start blaming one another. So God pronounces curses on the serpent, the woman and the man: enmity and tension will now appear in their relationships, and life will be tough. They are thrust out of the garden and the way back to the tree of life from now on is strictly guarded.

The Creation of Adam, by Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564).

‘So God created man in his own image... male and female he created them.’
Genesis 1:27

‘This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh...’
Genesis 2:23

The Fall in the garden

Genesis 3 is a key chapter within the Bible. In its artless way it brilliantly encapsulates human motivations: our dislike of being told what we cannot do; our desire not just to break rules but to *make* them – to be like God and in charge of our own destiny; the tendency to question God's words or to portray God's purposes as being malign; the temptation to follow what is pleasing to the eye rather than listening with our ears to what is right.

The consequences of human sin are equally vivid: defensiveness and passing the buck; blame and shame; friction between people, and tension between the sexes. Readers see here an echo of their own lives; it truly describes our disordered world.

Genesis 1–3 thus presents us with an important balance. Human beings are *both* created in God's image *and yet* fallen; our natures are neither totally good nor totally evil. Thus, what comes naturally to us may well be wrong; on the other hand, there is no human being who is worthless. So too the created world should be neither deified (treated as divine) nor discarded (treated as junk). Thus in the Bible we will see God not abandoning his creation, but working for its renewal.

The subsequent story of Adam and Eve's descendants is a sad decline – a continued departure from the lost paradise of Eden: their son Cain murders his brother Abel; death comes into the world with its crushing force. There are some notable exceptions (such as Enoch) but overall the picture is bleak, culminating in a tragic indictment of humanity: 'every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled' (Genesis 6:5).



Story 2: Noah and the flood

(6:9 – 11:26)

This is the prelude for the story of Noah and the flood. This act of devastation is seen as God's judgment on human sin. It is a kind of *de*-creation before God *re*-creates his world, giving it a fresh start. The key point is that righteous Noah had swum against the tide of sin, walking with God; so God prepares a means of escape for him (in the building of the ark – a large boat). It is thus a story of divine salvation (or rescue) in the face of divine judgment.

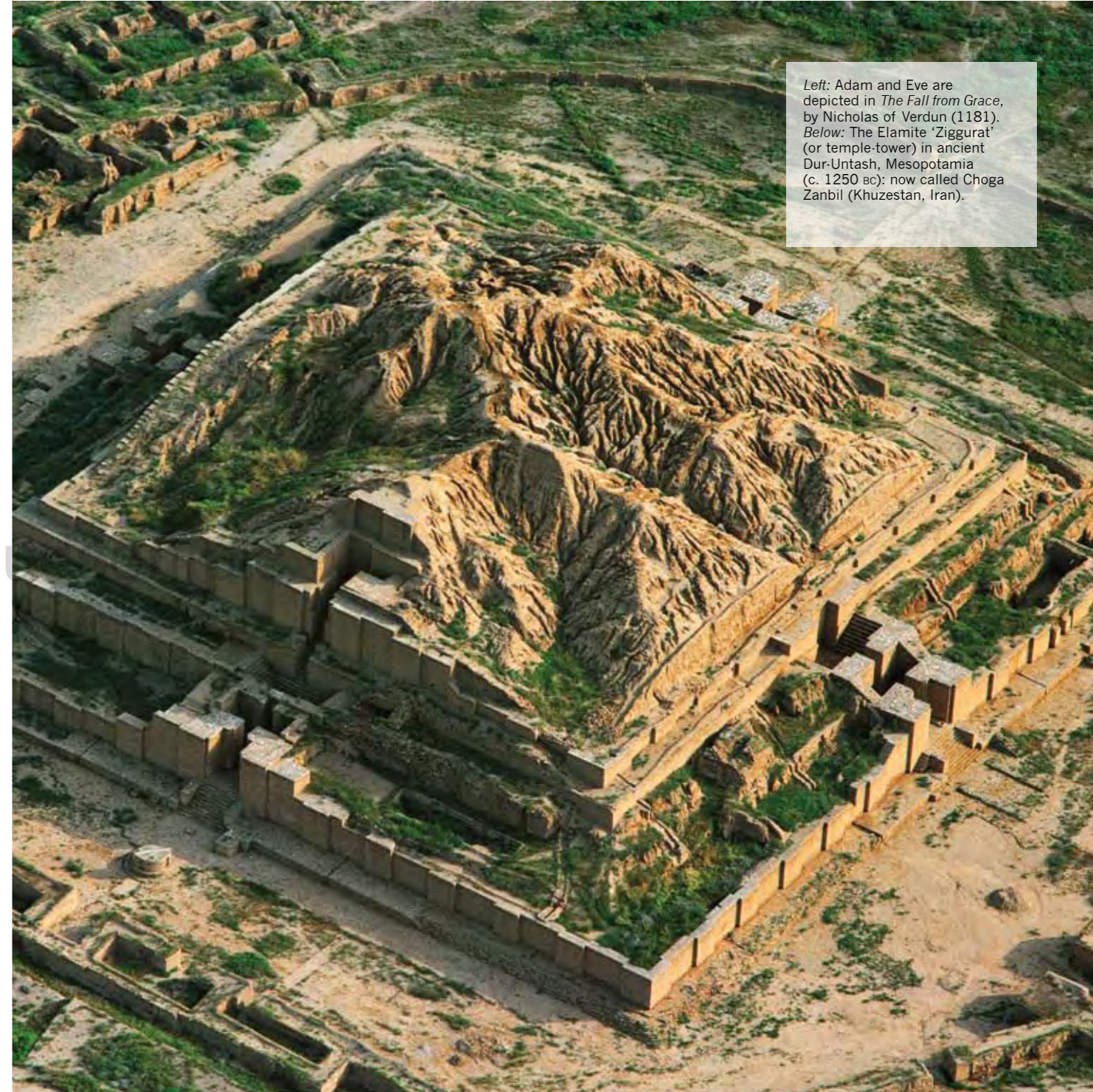
God also promises 'never again to curse the ground' and makes rainbows to be the clear guarantee of this promise. However heavy the rain in the future, Noah's descendants can be assured that this will never be the prelude to another total devastation: the sun *will* shine once more.

So the story continues, tracing Noah's descendants through his good sons (Shem and Japheth) and his evil son (Ham). At this point 'the whole world had one language and a common speech'. However, when some people plan to build a 'tower that reaches to the heavens' God responds by scattering them across the earth and confusing their language. They cannot complete their grandiose project. The story almost certainly parodies the great ziggurat built in Babylonia, the top of which was thought to reach into heaven. The narrator instead sees this as a classic instance of human folly and calls the tower 'Babel' – a word which sounds like the Hebrew for 'confused'. Human beings are reduced to speaking *babbling* nonsense.

The story thus encapsulates in pictorial form the issue of human pride and independence. Despite God's re-creation in the era of Noah, there is seemingly an endless clash between God and his creatures. There is now a universal, worldwide problem: has God got any solutions up his sleeve?

Story 3: Abraham and Sarah (11:27 – 25:11)

The answer is yes. God does have a solution to the problem of human sinfulness. He is going to call one man into a unique relationship with himself; and then, through him, he is going to build up a nation that will reflect his holiness and will produce (in due season) a key figure who will finally undo the curse of Adam's sinfulness. So we come to the call of Abram (later renamed Abraham), being told that in this one man and his descendants there lies the solution to the universal problem of



Left: Adam and Eve are depicted in *The Fall from Grace*, by Nicholas of Verdun (1181).
Below: The Elamite 'Ziggurat' (or temple-tower) in ancient Dur-Untash, Mesopotamia (c. 1250 BC); now called Choga Zanbil (Khuzestan, Iran).

NEW LIGHT ON GENESIS 1–11

Some remarkable parallels to Genesis 1–11 have been discovered from ancient Mesopotamia:

- a seventh-century BC cuneiform tablet from Nineveh, which refers to a devastating flood, from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (originally composed c. 1700 BC);
- the *Atrahasis Epic*, which recounts world history from creation to the flood (for which King Atrahasis builds an ark);
- a similar account (known as the *Eridu Genesis*) emanating from Sumeria;
- a Sumerian king list (c. 1900 BC), listing eight kings before the flood, and then numerous ones after it.

Though some of the material in these accounts is rather bizarre, these were attempted early histories (proto-histories), explaining events along the historical timeline.

Genesis 1–11 is thus the Bible's own proto-history. There are some clear parallels as well as differences – both of detail and of perspective. Thus, instead of many gods, acting in immoral ways, Genesis portrays the one creator God who, being holy, is concerned about evil. Instead of humankind being seen as an accidental afterthought (and as a threat to the gods), men and women are portrayed as God's image-bearers and encouraged to multiply. And, in contrast to the optimistic idea that history was moving in a positive direction, Genesis emphasizes that things are getting worse because of human sin.

The Israelites may have consciously adapted these pagan stories at quite a late date, but arguably they could have preserved an alternative account from very early times.

All four texts refer to a devastating flood. This strongly suggests a memory of a real cataclysmic event. Some now identify this event with the end of the last Ice Age (c. 10000 BC); others with a series of floods in Mesopotamia (known to have occurred c. 3000 BC). Others, however, focus on

the flooding of the area now covered by the Black Sea when the dam (where the Bosphorus is now) was breached around 5000 BC. These may not match the common understanding of a flood that covered the entire planet, but anyone seeing water now reaching to all four horizons might be forgiven for thinking the whole of their world had just been obliterated.

The genre of Genesis is thus perhaps best described as 'primeval history' – neither straightforward history nor pure myth. Nor was it intended to be scientific, for there are fairly clear hints that the act of creation was consciously being described in broad brush terms so that readers could be taught key theological insights (God's transcendence, his delight in his creation, the power of his word, and the importance of human beings within his purposes), all of which would have been missed by a merely scientific account. By contrast, it is remarkable how the biblical account conveys them so artlessly and so succinctly.



Cuneiform tablet (25 cm x 19.4 cm) with the Atrahasis Epic (c. 1650 BC): from Sippar, southern Iraq.

human sin: *Abram* is thus the divine response to *Adam*.

Abraham's father Terah had set out earlier from Ur of the Chaldees, travelling northwestwards to Haran. While there Abraham receives a dramatic call from God to 'Go... to the land I will show you'; God is promising to make him into a 'great nation', through which all peoples will be blessed. So Abraham courageously sets out towards the land of Canaan, accompanied by Sarah his wife and his nephew Lot.

The remainder of Abraham's story reveals how these incredible promises are fulfilled despite many setbacks. Above all, there is the key problem that Abraham has no children. Sarah suggests to Abraham a surrogate marriage with her slave-girl, Hagar (who gives birth to Ishmael), but this is not the solution God intends. Three mysterious visitors then announce that 'this time next year' Sarah will have a baby boy – at which ridiculous idea the elderly Sarah simply laughs! The prediction, however, comes true, and Isaac is born.

All eyes are now on Isaac, but in a seemingly bizarre episode Abraham receives a command from God to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham sets out with a heavy heart but then God shows him a ram caught in a nearby bush and overturns the original command: and the child of promise survives. So Abraham's story finishes on a much happier note – with Isaac being married to Terah's great granddaughter, Rebekah. Abraham's family line looks set to continue into the future.

The whole story is told at some length, giving us fascinating

'Is anything too hard for the Lord?'

Genesis 18:14

Abraham would have lived a nomadic existence (similar to modern Bedouin), so he greeted his mysterious visitors 'at the entrance to his tent' (Genesis 18:1).

The divine promises to Abraham

'Go... to the land I will show you. I will make you into a great nation... and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.'

Genesis 12:1–3

This is the foundational promise in Genesis – and indeed in the whole Bible. It outlines the essential shape of God's kingdom (above p.15) – God exercising his rule over a chosen people in a designated geographical place.

Within Genesis itself the promise is repeated often – both to Abraham and then to his descendants, Isaac and Jacob. It becomes clear that this is an 'everlasting covenant'; that circumcision is its outward sign; and that it is based simply on Abraham's faith – Abram 'believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness' (Genesis 15:6). Yet God is also evidently looking for obedience within the covenant. So when Abraham reveals his deep obedience with regard to Isaac (Genesis 22), the divine promise is confirmed even more strongly: 'all nations on earth will be blessed, because you have obeyed me'.

This long-term goal of bringing blessing to all nations is vital. The very name 'Abraham' mean the 'father of many nations'. Eventually his offspring (or 'seed') will outnumber the stars and will include 'nations and kings' – indeed a 'community of peoples'. So Paul will teach in Galatians that this promise has finally been fulfilled in Christ (the true 'seed' of Abraham) as people from all nations (both Jew and Gentile) come into the new worldwide people of God through their faith in Christ.

