

Bible Promises: November 12: The Abraham Promises: Genesis 12:1-3, Genesis 22: 15-18, Genesis 13: 15-16, Genesis 18: 19,18, Galatians 3: 16

The Abraham story is fascinating. The man himself is (for those of us who don't take the Bible literally in all that it says) the first named person who sounds like a real human being rather than a myth figure. In his strengths and weaknesses alike, he sounds credible as a man. He did things, including travelling great distances, that we can see as within human possibility. He lived to a great age, but not to a totally impossible great age. He had great faith, but he also had his doubts. He questioned and challenged God: the first grown-up conversations with God in the Bible. In his family relationships, he was fallibly human – his understanding of what God wanted him to do to Isaac seems to have ended his marriage (if you read between the lines).

BUT, there are many questions. (I'm talking questions rather than doubts.) If God wanted the Jews in the Promised Land, why the extraordinarily round-about route to get them there (effectively not until after the Exodus from Egypt!) and the extraordinarily long timetable (many generations)? When Abraham was to beget nations, and children as numerous as the stars or the grains of sand), why wait to start until long after all other men and women are long past child-bearing (even with modern techniques)? We are talking about a world record in the timetable for fulfilling promises!

Abraham is crucial for Christians, Moslems and Jews. We talk of the Abrahamic Faiths. We talk about Abraham as the exemplar of faith: "He believed the promises of God". Paul makes the point that Abraham and his faith came long (centuries) before the Law and obedience to that Law – when he is arguing about Faith having the edge on Works. [A short reminder of James's rejoinder that faith without works looks pretty wishy washy!]

Maybe, the leading message from the Abraham Promises is that God doesn't necessarily work to our timetable?

Historically, and in terms of both today's politics and today's faiths, there are two very different Abraham promises. One is the Promised Land, which is often seen as being about territorial nationalism and ethnicity: Chosen People in Promised Land. The other is the promise that "In you ALL the nations of the world will be blessed". (Or "shall be blessed" if you prefer.) That is about the Jews being chosen for the benefit of all, not just for the benefit of the Jews. In that sense, Christians owe a huge debt to those of the Jewish Faith (arguably the oldest of all developed faiths still strong today). We must never forget (as a Pentecostalist missionary reminded me at Croydon University Hospital today) was a Jew. It is interesting that it is often stated that Judaism is not a missionary faith – which would go with Judaism coinciding with being Jewish. There is some truth in this, but both Old and New Testaments are full of references to those not Jewish by birth *being attracted to and signing up to Judaism*. The Pentecost crowd in Jerusalem consisted of followers of Judaism (not Christianity) from "every nation under heaven"!

So, what do we make of the Promises to Abraham as promises to us and for us?