

A Potted History of the Jews

God created the world to populate with beings like you and me, free-will beings He could communicate with and reveal His loving nature to. But He knew that creatures with their own free will would fall short of His standards and prove to be unfit to live with Him in a state of eternal perfection. And so, before He created anything, God made a plan to redeem and perfect weak creatures like you and me to Himself.

We don't know and surely could never comprehend the reasoning that went on before time began in the halls of glory between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit - the three persons of the Godhead. But we do know that the plan They devised would cost the Son more than we can ever appreciate.

1 Pet. 1:18-20 reads..... :“Christ the lamb ... foreordained before the foundation of the world”; Christ the lamb played the crucial part in this plan. The word “crucial” has its root in the Latin “cruX” or “crucis” which means “cross” and the cross is the hinge-pin of God's plan, the hinge on which the whole of history swings.

We see the first hint of this plan way back in Gen.3. Following Adam's fall God judged Satan and told him: “I will put enmity between you and the woman - that is Eve - and between your seed and her seed. He will bruise your head but you will bruise His heel.” 2000 years later, Jesus, the “seed of the woman”, “bruised” Satan's head at the cost of His own bruising on the cross.

We see another hint of God's plan when Cain and Abel brought offerings of their labours to God. We read that God respected Abel's lamb but didn't respect Caine's offering of grain. There was nothing wrong with grain as a thank offering and grain later became part of the thanksgiving sacrifice required in the law given at Sinai. But at this time God wanted to reveal a hint of His plan; a lamb foreshadowed the sacrifice of the Lamb of God and so He respected Abel's lamb rather than Cain's grain.

The divine plan was revealed little-by-little, in time, through many people and different circumstances. It was made actual at Calvary but won't be fully realised until Christ returns in glory to deliver the incredible benefits of this covenant to those who have responded to the two, simple demands from our side; repentance of sin and faith in the One who alone can forgive sin.

In the centuries following Adam, his decedents continued to fall ever further from God's grace, leading to many problems. Some severe judgements were delivered on delinquent humanity such as the world-wide flood of Noah's day and later the dispersion of Noah's descendants around the earth following the confusion of their language at Babel.

Then, about 4000 years ago we come to a man called Abram who God later renamed Abraham.

Gen. 12 Vs 1-3 tells us that God called Abram out from the Chaldean city of Ur where, as Joshua (24:2) tells us his family worshipped pagan gods. In spite of his pagan background, the living God revealed Himself to Abram, called him out and promised to make his descendants a great nation in a land of their own when they would become a blessing to: “All the families of the earth” - that includes each and every one of us, that's the covenant promise!

Abram was a married man with a wife called Sarai when God called him from Ur but they had no family. So, if the prophecy for Abram's descendants to become a “great nation” was to come to pass, he would need to have children but as time went on and no children came along Abram began to feel frustrated.

Years later, and still with no children, we read that God came to Abram in a vision and encouraged him with the words: “I am your shield and exceeding great reward.” I'm sure you and I would have been happy with that encouragement, but Abram brushed it aside because he felt he was already strong enough and wealthy enough. He had just returned from defeating a marauding army when he rescued his captured nephew Lot (you can read all about that in Gen.14.) Gen.13 tells us that Abram was very wealthy, so he felt he had no need of protection or reward from God.

What Abram yearned for more than anything else was a son to carry on the family line and inherit his wealth. But given the advanced age of both him and his wife Sarai at this time, a family was biologically impossible. However, age is no problem for God nor hindrance to His purposes.

We will be focusing on the intriguing, events attached to God's covenant with Abram shortly but for now were going to continue looking at its context and future fulfilment.

Gen.17 tells us that God appeared to Abram again and confirmed the covenant. And at this time God renamed Abram as Abraham and his wife Sarai as Sarah. Then in Ch 18 we read that God made the specific prophecy that: "according to the time of life" Sarah will have a son. And 9 months later Sarah gave birth to a son; Isaac. Sarah was overjoyed and cried out: "God has made me to laugh and all who hear me will laugh with me."

When Isaac became a man he married Rebekah, they had twin sons: Esau and Jacob. The name Jacob means a twister or scoundrel and Jacob was that, but God renamed him, Israel which means; one who struggles with God and he did - to his soul's blessing! God made the same promise to Jacob that He had made to his grandfather Abraham declaring: "in you and in your seed all the families of the earth will be blessed".

Jacob had 12 sons; each of these became the head of a family tribe. Those 12 tribes adopted their father Jacob's God-given name Israel as the wider family name. But none of that generation entered the land promised to Granddad Abraham and they remained nomadic shepherds until they went down to Egypt at the invitation of their brother Joseph. While they were in Egypt Israel grew dramatically in number, but the Egyptians imposed servitude and slavery on them.

After 4 generations in slavery Moses led Israel out of Egypt when they were guided through the desert to Mt. Sinai to receive a new code of Law, a law they were to live by as God's people from then on.

This law was unique and superior to the laws of other nations in many ways but especially so by setting God as the ultimate head of the nation, with every ruler and king subject to the same law as every citizen, under the sovereignty of the One True God.

Eighteen months after leaving Egypt, the children of Israel arrived at Canaan, the land promised to Abraham. But fear of the inhabitants kept them from entering and they had to wander 40 years in the desert before returning when finally, after 400 years, Joshua led Israel into the promised land. Many different tribal groups lived in Canaan but under Joshua's leadership, all those who resisted were destroyed or driven out.

Many folk have problems with this period of Israel's history and ask: "Would a loving God order the destruction of a whole nation, wasn't this genocide?" However, we read in Gen 15 that God had told Abraham his descendants would not enter the promised land for 400 years because: "The iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete".

God had given these people 400 years to change for the better, but they had only become more corrupt. If God had not used Israel to destroy them, their corruption, gross immorality and violent conduct would have resulted in their self-destruction, as has happened with nations throughout history. Many nations, who were once powerful, have gone into decline and disappeared from the scene of time.

Gibbon famously wrote *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*, a work that graphically records the corruption and decay of a once proud nation. The Romans were a great nation but among their many vices they developed cruelty to a pitiless extreme in their public entertainment. Slaves and criminals were actually raped and murdered on stage for the sake of dramatic effect. Criminals, slaves, and Christians were slaughtered by their thousands in the Colosseum, simply for entertainment of the Roman population. If you visit Pompeii today you will see graphic evidence of just how corrupt Roman society was in N.T. times.

And so, 400 years after God's covenant with Abram, Israel finally took possession of the land and Abram's descendants finally had a country to call home.

Moses was Israel's first leader under the new law given at Sinai. He was followed by Joshua and then the Judges who governed for roughly 400 years. The people then asked for a king. Kings ruled for another 400 Years before disaster overtook a corrupt nation but through it all there was a remnant that sincerely practised God's law.

In spite of being the "Chosen People" there was rivalry between the 12 tribes from the start and they were only fully united under two kings: David and his son Solomon. After Solomon, Israel divided into two nations: north and south. The ten northern tribes retained the name Israel, the two southern tribes were known as Judah.

The northern tribes soon fell away from God's law and went into moral and social decline. Many of their kings were as corrupt as any of their neighbours and consequently Israel became weak and was eventually

overrun by Assyria who carried them off into exile where they intermarried, lost their identity, and disappeared as a distinct national group.

Later, at the time of Jesus, the northern region was known as Samaria and was occupied by a mixed community who lived by a neutered version of God's law confused with pagan ideas - we could say much more about the Samaritans but there isn't time this morning.

For the most part Judah remained true to God's law and many of their kings ruled righteously and sincerely but others didn't. When Judah did live by God's law they were socially and militarily strong but when they ignored God, they became corrupt, socially weak and militarily vulnerable. So, when they came under attack from hostile neighbours, they were defeated and fell under the rule of powers who didn't know God or His law.

When Judah recognised their sin and repented God restored their sovereignty. But after many backslidings and many warnings through the prophets, Judah was overrun by the Babylonians and around 700 BC they were carried off into exile. They were held under Babylonian and later Persian rule but under this pagan rule Judah turned again to the law of the One True God.

After 70 years in exile the Persian King Cyrus gave permission for the Jews to return to their homeland where they remained under Persian and later, Greek control. At the time of Jesus, the Romans were the ruling power.

But whatever power ruled over them and however far they had slipped from God's grace, God was always the ultimate authority for the Jews who at the time of Jesus refused to recognise the authority of Rome. Thirty years after Jesus the Jews rebelled against Rome, Rome reacted by sacking Jerusalem when the temple was destroyed, with not one stone left standing on another - just as Jesus had prophesied. Most of the Jewish population were then dispersed among many other nations with just a remnant remaining in Judah.

Rome eventually lost control to the Byzantine empire they in turn were defeated by the Ottomans. The Moslem Ottoman empire ruled the region for more than 500 years when the land of Israel became known as Palestine. However, throughout Judah's exiles there were always some Jews living in the land and in the early 1900s there were estimated to be 15-20 thousand living under Ottoman rule.

During WW1, the Ottomans joined forces with Germany and were defeated by the allies and so the Ottomans lost control over Palestine.

After WW1 Britain was mandated by the League of Nations to govern in Palestine and try to keep peace between the mainly Arab population and immigrant Jews who had started to filter back to their ancestral homeland. But the League of Nations strictly controlled immigration numbers to reduce friction between the immigrants and local, non-Jewish residents.

However, after WW 2 and the horrors of the Holocaust, Jews were allowed to migrate in large numbers back to their ancestral homeland. In 1948 the Jews were recognised by the United Nations as an independent state when they adopted their ancestral family name Israel. And that brings us to today.

For more than 2000 years, from the time of their exile in Babylon until 1948 the Jews had lived under the rule of foreign powers, but they never lost their national identity. Those in exile referred to themselves as the "Diaspora" and held a yearning to return to their racial homeland. A popular saying among them, when each year they celebrated the Passover festival, was: "Next year in Jerusalem".

There is much more to the history of God's covenant with Abram than we can cover here. This is a history rightly called; "His story".