

The Old Testament Concept of “The God of the Fathers”

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Abstract

This paper purposely deals with some issues which emanate from the Old Testament. The issues include the concept of God in the Old Testament; the patriarchal Fathers – who they are in the Old Testament; the covenant God made with each of them; how He chose to be God of the Fathers, His promises to them, the role He played in their life as an individual; the relationship He established with the Fathers; the complete dependency of the Fathers on God and their unerring life. The paper then concludes that people are restricted to their localities but God is not confined or limited by boundaries of any kind. As God of the Fathers (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob), He guarantees His presence and help to all who demonstrate the undiluted faith displayed by Abraham.

1. Introduction

Ilorin (2001) gives the meaning and nature of a covenant. He defines a covenant as an agreement between two parties. It is a bond that binds two or more persons or parties. It is characterized by obligations on both parties, the fulfillment of which sustains the bond.

Parity covenant is an agreement between two parties or persons of equal status, while suzerainty covenant is an agreement between two parties of unequal ranks such as between God and man, a king and his subjects, or a strong king and a weaker one. God's covenant with Abraham comes under the latter type. Under this, the suzerainty covenant, the superior party or person dictates the terms of the covenant.

2. The concept of God in the Old Testament

Ferguson, Wright and Packer (1988) posit that the Jewish view of God originates from the Old Testament revelation in which mankind's maker appears as mankind's redeemer, unchangeably and unchallengeably sovereign in creation, providence and grace. Since He is not open to direct observation, a meaningful account of Him can only be given by indicating at each point of His relation to ourselves and the world we know. Scripture does this, setting an example that this paper will follow.

2.1 The names of God

In the mainstream Christian usage, 'God' (capital 'G') functions as a proper noun, that is, it is a personal name, belonging to one being only, which draws into itself all the thoughts that the Biblical names and description of God express. The main names of God in the Old Testament, all proclaiming aspects of his nature and his link with humankind, are as follows:

2.1.1 El, Eloah, Elohim (English, 'God', ho theos), El Elyon ('God most high'). These names convey the thought of a transcendent being, superhumanly strong, and with inexhaustible life in Himself, one on whom everything that is not Himself depends.

2.1.2 Adonay ('Lord'; Kyrios). This means one who rules over everything external to him.

2.1.3 Yahweh ('the LORD' in AV (KJV), RV, RSV, NIV; ho Kyrios), Yahweh Sebaoth is God's personal name for himself, by which His people were to invoke Him as the Lord who had taken them into covenant with Himself in order to do them good. When God first stated this to Moses at the burning bush, He explained it as meaning 'I am what I am, or perhaps most accurately "I will be what I will be"'. This was a declaration of independent, self-determining existence (Exodus 3:14 - 15).

Later God 'proclaimed' - that is, expounded, 'the name of the Lord' as follows: 'the LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the Fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and

fourth generation' (Exod. 34: 6 - 7; RSV). Thus, in sum, 'Yahweh' carries the thought of a marvelously kind and patient, though also awesomely stern, commitment to the covenant people as the path chosen by the self-sustaining, self-renewing being whom the theophany of the burning bush depicted.

Furthermore, the concept of the personality of God in the Old Testament was continuous in its progressive evolution from Genesis to Malachi. He revealed Himself as Elohim, Jehovah and Adonai, which were used interchangeably. Elohim is a general Hebrew name for God as the creator and object of worship. Scott (1980) states that the word (Elohim) appeared two thousand five hundred and seventy (2,570) times in the Old Testament. Also, it is used with first person plural noun "us" in Genesis 1:26 and Isaiah 6:8. Thus, Elohim conveys the idea of unity and plural divine persons (Trinity). Payne (1980) gives the explanation that the name Jehovah/Yahweh is written in upper case as LORD or GOD in the Old Testament. And that it is personal name that speaks of Him as the Holy, self-existing God who hates sin but provides redemption. It appeared according to Payne 5,321 times in Old Testament. The final personal name for God in the Old Testament is Adonai. It appears "Lord" ("L" is upper case while "ord" are lower case) which means "Sovereign" or "Master" and is used more than three hundred (300) times Alden (1980). He further explains that "Adon" without "ai" is used to designate men who are lords over other people. Hansen and Wilson (2009) sum up that the three names refer to one true God which are sometimes combined as in Genesis 2-3 where the LORD God (meaning Jehovah is Elohim) is used.

In Abraham's days (Gn. 12), God revealed Himself as his God which is applicable to the rest of the patriarchs (Isaac and Jacob). God was only revealed to these three personalities and no others around them. There was an inclusion of a race or tribe to God of the Fathers in the time of Moses. He was progressively known as the creator of earth, heaven and the governor before the institution of monarchy. The advanced concept of God was presented by the prophets. As an instance, Elijah, in I Kings 18 demonstrated the power of God by overthrowing the altars of Baal and demolishing the idols of the false gods. Again, in the eighth century, He became a universal God. Amos in his declaration concerning God said that He is God of all nations. Jeremiah added his own view that God is the God of all earth and people.

From the above presentation, God revealed Himself first as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (patriarchs or Fathers). He expanded it later to Israel by His personal names of Elohim, Jehovah and Adonai. In the eighth century, a greater revelation came which makes Him a universal God. The trend of His revelation has been progressive in nature as nobody in the Old Testament can authoritatively claim to have known all about God.

This paper presents the concept of God in the Old Testament. It refers to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (also known as the patriarchs) as the Fathers. It deals extensively with issues on the God of the Fathers. It gives a rundown of the promises of God for each of the Fathers in His covenant with each of them. The role God played in the Fathers' life; the relationship between God and the Fathers; the complete dependency of the Fathers on God; and the un-erring of the Fathers are other themes reflected in this paper.

3. Who are the Fathers?

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, known as the patriarchs are the Fathers. They founded the religion now known as Judaism, and their descendants are the Jewish people.

3.1 Abraham

Flanders, Crapps and Smith (1973) opine that according to Jewish tradition, Abraham was born under the name Abram in the city of Ur in Babylonia (situated near the modern day Bagdad in Iraq) from creation 1800BC. He was the son of Terah, an idol merchant, but from his early childhood, he questioned the faith of his father and sought the truth. He came to believe that the entire universe was the work of a single Creator, thus he began to teach this belief to others.

Abram tried to convince his father, Terah, of the folly of idol worship. One day, when he (Abram) was left alone to mind the store, he took a hammer and smashed all of the idols except the largest one. He placed the hammer in the hand of the largest idol. When his father returned and asked what happened, Abram said, "The idols got into a fight, and the big one smashed all the other ones". His father said; "Don't be ridiculous. These idols have no life or power. They can't do anything". Abram

replied, "Then why do you worship them?"

Eventually, the one true Creator that Abram had worshipped called to him, and made him an offer. "Now the Lord had said to Abram. Get out of your country, from your family and from your father's house, to a land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name great; and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and I will curse him who curses you; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Gn. 12:1 - 3).

In the genealogical accounting in the last part of Genesis chapter eleven (Gn. 11), we are told the family of Abram moved from Ur to Haran, and at Haran Terah died. Genesis 12 begins by explaining why they moved "...the Lord had said to Abram: Get out of your country..." In this communication from God to Abram, we discover three distinctive promises and we may refer to the three as - the land promise, the national promise and the spiritual promise.

1. The Land Promise: "A land that I will show you". (Gn. 12:1)
2. The National Promise: "A great nation" (Gn. 12:2)
3. The Spiritual Promise: "All the families of the earth shall be blessed". (Gn. 12:3).

The original conditional covenant is based on the fact that if Abram would obey God, then God would provide seven physical blessings.

Flander, Crapps and Smith (1973) State further that the idea of covenant is fundamental to traditional Judaism. The Jews believe that they have a covenant, a contract, with God, which involves rights and obligations on both sides: they have certain obligations to God, and God has certain obligations to them.

The term of this covenant became more explicit over time, until the time of the giving of the Torah. Abraham was subjected to ten tests of faith to prove his worthiness for this covenant. Leaving his home is one of these trials. Abraham, raised as a city dweller, adopted a nomadic life style, traveling through what is now the land of Israel for many years. God promised this land to Abraham's descendant. Abram is referred to as a Hebrew (Ivri), possibly because he was descended from Eber (Gn. 11) or

possibly because he came from the "other side" (Eber) of the Euphrates River.

But Abram was concerned about his childlessness and he was growing old. His, that is, Abram's beloved wife, Sarai, knew that she was past child-bearing years, so she offered her maidservant, Hagar, as a wife to Abram. This was a common practice in the region at the time. According to tradition, Hagar was a daughter of Pharaoh, given to Abram during his travels in Egypt. She bore Abram a son, Ishmael, who, according to both Islamic and Jewish traditions, is the ancestor of the Arabs (Gn. 16).

When Abram was one hundred years old and Sarai ninety years old, God promised Abram a son by Sarai. God changed his name from Abram, meaning exalted father, or father of exaltation to Abraham, which means father of a multitude of nations or father of all nations, and Sarai which means "My Princess" to Sarah, meaning "Princess". Sarah bore Abraham a son, Isaac which in Hebrew means Yitzchak, a name derived from the word "laughter" expressing Abraham's joy at having a son in his old age (Gn. 17-18). Isaac was the ancestor of the Jewish people. Thus, the conflict between Arabs and Jews can be seen as a form of sibling rivalry Kuntz (1974).

God tested Abraham to see if he was willing to sacrifice his much loved son. Abraham proved his faith to God, and believed God would provide another sacrifice, so God reckoned Abraham as righteous, because Abraham believed, trusted and put God first (Gn. 22).

3.2 Isaac

Elisha (2005) postulates that Isaac was the subject of the tenth and most difficult test of Abraham's faith. God commanded Abraham to sacrifice Isaac as a burnt offering (Gn. 22). This test is known in Jewish tradition as the Akeidah (the Binding, a reference to the fact that Isaac was bound on the altar).

But this test is also an extraordinary demonstration of Isaac's own faith, because according to Jewish tradition, Isaac knew that he was to be sacrificed, yet he did not resist, and was united with his father in dedication. At the last moment God sent an angel to stop the sacrifice. Elisha (2005) says further that offering a child sacrifice was a common practice in the region at the time. Thus, to people of the time, the surprising thing about the story is not the fact that God asked Abraham

to sacrifice his child, but that God stopped him. This story is being used as evidence that God abhors human sacrifice. Judaism has always strongly opposed the practice of human sacrifice, common place in many other cultures at that time and place.

Kuntz (1974) states that Isaac was forty years old when he married Rebecca. Twenty years later God blessed them with twin sons, Esau and Jacob (Ya'akov) (Gn.25). Jacob being the human lineage of Christ. God had promised Rebecca that Jacob, the younger twin, would receive Isaac's blessing. Esau had hairy skin, so when the time came she dressed Jacob in goat-skin to make Isaac think he was blessing Esau for Isaac was aged and almost blind. Jacob received the blessing. Esau was angry, determined to kill his brother, so Jacob fled to his relatives in Mesopotamia, (Gn.27).

3.3 Jacob (Israel)

Laymon (1971) says that Jacob and his brother Esau were at war with each other even before they were born. They struggled within Rebecca's womb. Esau was Isaac's favourite because he was a good hunter, but the more spiritually minded Jacob was Rebecca's favourite.

Esau had little regard for the spiritual heritage of his forefathers, and sold his birthright of spiritual leadership to Jacob for a bowl of lentil stew. When Isaac was growing old, Rebecca tricked him into giving Jacob a blessing meant for Esau. Esau was angry about this, and about the birthright, so Jacob fled to live with his uncle. While Jacob was on his way to his relatives he had a dream from God. Prophecy, "I am the God of Abraham and your father Isaac, all the nations of the world shall be blessed through you and your descendants and will be with you". While living with his uncle, he met with his beloved Rachel, but he was deceived into marrying Rachel's older sister, Leah, but later married Rachel as well, and Rachel and Leah's maidservants, Bilha and Zilpah. Between these four women, Jacob fathered twelve sons and one daughter.

After many years living with and working for his uncle/father-in-law, Jacob returned to his homeland and sought reconciliation with his brother Esau. He prayed to God and gave his brother gifts. The night before he went to meet his brother, he sent his wives, sons, and things across the river, and was alone with God. That night, he wrestled with a man until the break of day. As the dawn broke, Jacob demanded a

blessing from the man, and the "man" revealed himself as an angel. He blessed Jacob and gave him the name "Israel" (Yisrael), meaning "the one who wrestled with God", or the champion of God." The Jewish people are generally referred to as the children of Israel, signifying their descent from Jacob. The next day, Jacob met Esau and was welcomed by him.

4. The God of the Fathers

Anderson (1957) posits that it is hard to tell just what the religion of the patriarchs was because the traditions of Genesis have been revised in the light of Exodus and the Sinai covenant. However, many statements of the book of Genesis, when considered against the background of the culture of the Fertile Crescent, help us to understand the probable character of religious beliefs before Moses.

When the Hebrews left Mesopotamia, they brought with them a religion which in many respects was like the nature religion of the Fertile Crescent. Their chief god was apparently known as Shaddai (or El Shaddal) which means "the One of the Mountains". It was a mountain-deity or storm-deity usually known by the title Baal ("lord") among the Canaanites. As elsewhere in the Fertile Crescent, the Father of the gods was known as El. In addition other divine titles appear, such as El Elyon (Gn. 14:18 - 20), El Olam (Gn. 21:33), and EL Bethel (Gn. 35:7). The Hebrews were later, in the time of Joshua, reminded that the Fathers who once dwelt beyond the river (Euphrates) had served "other gods" (Joshua 24:2) and Joshua exhorted them to put away the remnants of their ancestral polytheism. But in spite of general similarity of patriarchal religion to the religion of the Fertile Crescent, there were certain major differences which in the course of time took on profound significance.

In Genesis 15, a curious incident is described. Abraham cut some animals in two, placing half of the carcasses over against the other half. Then after the sun had set and an eerie darkness had fallen over the place, "a smoking fire pot and a flaming touch", representing the presence of the deity, passed between the pieces. The account seems to preserve a very ancient ritual of covenant making. The story points up one of the main characteristics of patriarchal religion - the practice of entering into a personal relationship or covenant with the deity. So in this story we are

told that Abraham entered into relationship with the God who was known as the “shield” of Abraham (Gn. 15:1). Isaac was covenanted with “the kinsman of Isaac” (Gn. 31:42, 53). And Jacob was bound in covenant with “the Mighty One of Jacob” (Gn.: 49:24). In each case, the family God manifested himself personally to the patriarch and gave demands and promises. Therefore, the deity was known by the name of the patriarch who received the revelation: the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.

Further, patriarchal religion was infused with a historical sense that is characteristically Semitic or Hebraic. Unlike the settled Canaanites, who were more concerned with adjusting to the cycles of nature and preserving the social equilibrium, the unsettled Hebrews were more prone to express their faith in the dynamic language of history. They were wanderers and adventurers who, in response to a divine summons, left their homeland and went into the unknown and the uncertainty, toward a land that their God would show them in due time. They lived by a venture of faith, trusting that the future was in the hand of their God.

5. God's promises to Abraham and his descendants

Abrahams (2009) gives the following promises made by God to Abraham and his descendants through Isaac and Jacob:

5.1 Promises to Abraham

In Genesis 12:1-3, God promises

1. To make Abraham a great nation
2. To bless him (Abram)
3. To make his name great
4. Abraham shall be a blessing
5. God will bless those that bless Abram
6. God will curse those that curse Abram
7. All the families of the earth will be blessed through Abram.

All the above promises were fulfilled. This original covenant was a conditional covenant: If Abram would obey God, then God would provide seven (7) physical blessings.

In Gn. 12:7, God promises that He would give to the descendants of Abram the land of Canaan. This is a promise that some of Abraham's seed or offspring would be given the land surrounding the area of Shechem. All the land of Canaan as far as the eye can see (the land of Palestine), God would give to Abram for ever. In Gn. 13:14-15, God would make Abram's seed as numerous as the dust of the earth. This implies that Abraham's descendants would be so many that they would be impossible to count. In Gn.13:16, Abram's descendants would be as the stars in the sky. In the clear night sky of thousands of years ago it would have been physically impossible to number the stars seen across the Milky Way. In Gn.15:5, the seed of Abram would have the land from Egypt to the Euphrates. This was an unconditional covenant that God made at this time in promising Abram that his seed would inherit this area. This is yet in the future since under Solomon Abraham's descendants never totally possessed this area and soon after lost what they had.

In Gn. 15: 15-18, God asks Abram to walk before Him uprightly and He (God) will make a covenant to bless Abram's seed exceedingly. God in this context establishes a further conditional covenant when Abram was ninety-nine (99) years old. Abram was to obey and God would bless him. In Gn.17:1-2; God promises that Abram shall be a father of many nations. Nations and kings shall come from him. Here, God expands the details of the original covenant of twenty four years ago. Abraham's seed would be in many nations with a line of Kings. Here is the dual promise of birthright and sceptre again.

In Gn. 17:4-6, God promises He would establish His conditional covenant that He had with Abraham, with his descendants. This is key: the conditional covenant that God established with Abraham would also be for his descendants down through history forever. He would be their God and in return they would get the physical blessings. In Gn. 17:7, God would give the land of Canaan to Abraham's descendants as an everlasting possession. This land of Canaan has not been fully obtained as an everlasting possession, since Abraham's descendant broke the terms of the covenant. In Gn. 17:8 - 9, God establishes circumcision as a sign of the covenant. This was a conditional covenant that was to be for Abraham's descendants. Afterwards, at the time of Christ, this was modified. Now to become an heir of Abraham, circumcision is not

simply a physical act, but is done internally, a circumcision of the heart. It was a change from physical to spiritual.

In Gn. 17:10 - 15, God promises that He would bless Abraham's wife and promises that she would be a mother of nations, and kings would come from her. This means the covenant promises would come through Abraham's wife (who had not yet produced a child at age ninety). Her name was to be changed to Sarah (noble woman) to reflect this honour. One's name is changed when one's relationship with God is altered. In Gn. 17:15-16, God promised a son through Sarah and He would establish His everlasting covenant with Isaac and his seed. This means that God promised a son to be called Isaac, exactly one year later, and through him the promises would go.

In Gn. 17:19.21 God promises that He would bless Abraham's seed as the stars of heaven and as the sand on the seashore. Again, Abraham's descendants would be an innumerable number. In Gn. 22:17 a specific promise is given of national power. This is fulfilled in the British Empire and the United States which possessed every major land and sea gate of the world. Again in Gn. 22:17, it is said that all nations of the earth would be blessed through Abraham's seed. This means because of Abraham's obedience, all nations of the earth would be ultimately blessed. This is dual in nature and contains both physical and spiritual promises.

5.2 Promises to Isaac

A three part promise was made to Isaac by God:

1. His seed would be innumerable, that is, God would establish the covenant with Isaac because his father Abraham obeyed and followed God.
2. Isaac's seed would possess many nations. Again, this is a dual component of physical and spiritual blessings.
3. In Isaac's seed would all the nations of the earth be blessed. This means that through Isaac would come the lineage that produced Jesus Christ. This included gentile blood.

In Gn.: 26: 3-5, God promises that He will bless Isaac and multiply his seed for Abraham's sake. This is a promise that Isaac's seed would be blessed because of Abraham.

5.3 Promises to Jacob

The blessing Jacob received is that his descendants would obtain the choice locations of the earth and greatness among the nations. This is the birthright inheritance bestowed on Jacob by his father, Isaac. Gn. 27: 28-29 contains the dual promise of physical blessing through national greatness and the Messiah. This is the unconditional dual promise made to Abraham and now given to Jacob by God Himself. Also, it is a promise of physical greatness and a promise yet to be fulfilled, in blessing all the world through the millennial reign of Jesus Christ.

6. The role God played in the life of the Fathers

Elisha (2005), explained that God proved that He was a faithful God in the life of Abraham. And He was able to do what He said He would do. The scripture says that Abraham believed so. God promised Abraham a son but God was faithful in doing so even when Abraham was one hundred (100) years of age and Sarah's womb was dead. Genesis 17:19 (NIV): "Then God said; Yes, but your wife Sarah will bear you a son, and you will call him Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him". Isaac was born. God kept His word and was faithful to His word.

6.1 A Providing God - God of Isaac

In the life of Isaac, the Lord sustained him during the famine in the land. It was the promise that the descendants of Abraham would be a great nation. If the famine swept away the people, then His word would fail. So even at the time of the famine, he reaped one hundred (100) times. Isaac planted crops in that land and the same year reaped a hundred fold, because the Lord blessed him (Gn. 26:12). Yes, God proved that He was a God who can provide in the midst of the famine and will keep His word.

6.2 A God who changes people's circumstances - God of Jacob

When Jacob was born, he was named as a sup-planter or deceiver. However, God changed his life and made him Israel, the prince with God. When he ran away from the presence of his brother after deceiving him, the Lord worked in his life, met him in Bethel and later changed his life. Of course, his uncle cheated him but God blessed him because of the promise to Abraham. His brother also accepted him in the end, because of God's hand, and he became the father of twelve (12) rulers as per the promise of the Lord.

7. The relationship between God and the Fathers

According to Mckenzie (1990), the God who had dealings with the patriarch was identified as “the God of Abraham” or “of Isaac” or “of Jacob”. This God of Abraham was worshipped by Abraham and his clan, and was to some extent a tribal God. Worshipping the god of one special figure is customary among nomadic people. Settled people can worship a national god associated with a particular region, but nomads need a personal or clan god who goes with them. In a sense, the theological strain of “the God of the Fathers” is important in Biblical religion because it involves a personal relationship between God and the patriarch and the clan, and this works against formalism in religion. It supplied the background of the future covenantal relationship between God and Israel and also is a deterrent against any thought that God is found in only one place.

The “God of the Fathers” is associated with the patriarch or father with whom He has established a special relationship. He is the patron of the patriarch's family or clan and guides them in history. He is not just a local deity, attached to a shrine.

8. The total dependency of the Fathers on God

The Fathers demonstrated their total dependency on God. When God told Abraham to leave his land, to go to an unknown land (leaving known for unknown), he obeyed with the belief that God who gave him the order would perfect everything for him. Also, when he was ordered by God to sacrifice his only son (Isaac) as a burnt offering, he obeyed with the hope that God would provide an alternative provision for the sacrifice, which God did.

In the case of Isaac, the test given to his father (Abraham) to sacrifice him is also an extraordinary demonstration of his own (Isaac's) faith. He knew that he was to be sacrificed, yet he did not resist, and was united with his father in dedication.

Jacob also demonstrated his own total dependent on God. While he was running away from his brother Esau) to live with his relatives in Haran,

he had a dream from God which held a prophecy, "I am the God of Abraham and your father Isaac, all the nations of the world shall be blessed through you and your descendants and I will be with you". Isaac believed this prophecy and it materialized in his life.

Though he was cheated by his uncle (Laban) he did not fight back. He resorted to faith and left Haran with his entire household to return to his land with the blessings he got from Haran.

On his way, God came to him in such a form that Jacob was able to wrestle with Him successfully. Yet, God disabled him at will, his hip was wrenched by a touch from God. Jacob would not stop wrestling until God promised to continue to bless him. God changed his name to Israel. He depended on God in totality and was reconciled with his brother Esau.

9. Did the Fathers err?

The Fathers did not in any sense err. They lived a humble, respectful, holy and emulative life.

10. Conclusion

Human beings are restricted to their own territory and different regions, but God, the One and Only True Living God, is not confined or limited by boundaries of any kind. God of the Fathers (Abraham, Isaac and Jacob) guarantees His presence and help. Believers are to rely on His wisdom and strength, and not on our own, so that the blessing of all the families of the earth which God promised in Genesis 12: 1-3 can manifest in every individual's life. God promises to direct, sustain and assure accomplishments. By asking Him to help, believers can conquer life's challenges, if they allow the help which comes from God in response to their prayer. God promises both Gentiles and Jewish believers that they can be confident that He will always be with them, never forsake or abandon them, and never fail to help no matter if a believer feels His presence or not.

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