

## LESSON 2 ABRAHAM

A quote from **The Gifts of the Jews** by Thomas Cahill:

“The Bible is a record par excellence of the Jewish religious experience, an experience that remains fresh and even shocking when it is read against the myths of other ancient literatures. The word bible comes from the Greek plural form *biblia*, meaning ‘books’. And though the Bible is rightly considered *the* book of the Western world—its foundation document—it is actually a collection of books, a various library written almost entirely in Hebrew over the course of a thousand years.”

“... there is no reliable record of written Hebrew before the tenth century BC—that is, till well after the resettlement of the Israelites in Canaan following their escape from Egypt under the leadership of Moses, the greatest of all proto-Jewish figures. This means that the supposedly historical stories of at least the first books of the Bible were preserved originally not as written texts but as oral tradition. So, from the wanderings of Abraham in Canaan, through the liberation from Egypt wrought by Moses to the Israelite resettlement of Canaan under Joshua, what we are reading are oral tales, collected and edited for the first (but not the last) time in the tenth century during and after the kingship of David. “

We should mention something about the oral tradition. Storytellers were and are professionals of a sort. Not just anyone could be a storyteller. You had to be able to recite the story without one single miniscule change. Not one syllable could be varied from the original. The listeners were like the small child who can tell if, while you are reading to them, you change a single syllable or omit any part of the text of a favorite story. Such storytellers still exist in the Middle East.

Many of the stories of the Jews resemble the myths of the cultures surrounding them because the Jews borrowed the myths and put their own unique spin on them. This spin makes a great difference in the story.

Ancient people formed their ideas of life and religion from the natural world surrounding them. They looked at the limitless sky and compared it to the limited earth. They observed the cycles of the moon and compared them to the cycles of women. Women live and die but the moon exists forever. They looked for correspondences between the mutable and immutable, that which changes and that which remains the same.

Another quote from Cahill:

“We may consider naïve the absolute confidence of primitive peoples in the rightness of their interpretations of reality. But we should not forget that their sense of correspondence is founded on metaphor . . . and that metaphor is the basis of all language and thought, as it is of all religion. “

What is a metaphor? A metaphor is either a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable OR a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else, especially something abstract. Metaphor is used in both senses in the stories comprising the Bible. Keeping this in mind, we continue the story of Abram later to be called Abraham. As we learned in Lesson 1, he, with all of his possessions had gone from Ur to Haran. In Haran he became rich and it is there that he was called by God to go to the land that He would show him. There is no reason to believe that Abram knew where he was headed when he set out. He arrived in Canaan at a place called Shechem.

As we learned in lesson 1, paradigm change in thinking occurred when Abram set out to better his circumstances and those of his descendants. In his day, the perception of time was that it was cyclical going around in recurring cycles forever. There was no idea of progress. An invention was looked upon as a gift from the gods, not a human achievement. The genealogy of families was not recorded. Now the idea has changed. Abram has a personal destiny. Now the perception becomes that time flows in a direction. The record of genealogies in the bible reflects this change in the perception of time.

What would the people of Abram’s time (about 2000 BC) think about this journey into the unknown?

Another quote from Thomas Cahill:

If we had lived in the second millennium BC, the millennium of Abram, and could have canvassed all the nations of the earth, what would they have said of Abram's journey? In most of Africa and Europe, where prehistoric animism was the norm and artists were still carving and painting on stone the heavenly symbols of the Great Wheel of Life and Death, they would have laughed at Abram's madness and pointed to the heavens, where the life of earth had been plotted from all eternity. His wife is barren as winter, they would say; a man cannot escape his fate. The Egyptians would have shaken their heads in disbelief. "There is none born wise," they would say, repeating the advice of their most cherished wise men. "Copy the forefathers,. Teach him what has been said in the past; then he will set a good example." The early Greeks might have told him the story of Prometheus, whose quest for the fire of the gods ended in personal disaster. Do not overreach, they would advise; come to resignation. In India, he would be told that time is black, irrational, and merciless. Do not set yourself the task of accomplishing something in time, which is only the dominion of suffering. In China, the now anonymous sages whose thoughts would eventually influence the I Ching would caution that there is no purpose in journeys or in any kind of earthly striving; the great thing is to abolish time by escaping from the law of change. The ancestors of the Maya in America would point to their circular calendars, which like those of the Chinese repeat the pattern of years in unvarying succession, and would explain that everything that has been comes around again and that each man's fate is fixed. On every continent, in every society, Abram would have been given the same advice that wise men as diverse as Heraclitus, Lao-Tsu, and Siddhartha would one day give their followers: do not journey but sit, compose yourself by the river of life, meditate on its ceaseless and meaningless flow—on all that is past or passing or to come—until you have absorbed the pattern and have come to peace with the Great Wheel and with your own death and the death of all things in the corruptible sphere.

The people of Abram's time would have thought him raving mad to go from the urban Haran out into the hinterland in a huge caravan with all of his possessions. But Abram is not mad but will be shown to be very

clever. He will con the most powerful man in the world and leave Egypt richer than when he arrived there.

**GENESIS 12:10-20** Now there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to reside there as an alien, for the famine was severe in the land. When he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, "I know well that you are a woman beautiful in appearance; and when the Egyptians see you, they will say, "This is his wife"; then they will kill me, but they will let you live. Say you are my sister, so that it may go well with me because of you, and that my life may be spared on your account." When Abram entered Egypt the Egyptians saw that the woman was very beautiful. When the officials of Pharaoh saw her, they praised her to Pharaoh. And the woman was taken into Pharaoh's house. And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels. But the Lord afflicted Pharaoh and his house with great plagues because of Sarai, Abram's wife. So Pharaoh called Abram, and said, "What is this you have done to me? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife? Why did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife? Now then, here is your wife, take her, and be gone." And Pharaoh gave his men orders concerning him; and they set him on the way, with his wife and all that he had.

While we are appalled at the treatment of Sarai, we have to admit that this story demonstrates that Abram is not a madman. His cleverness has kept him alive and made him even richer. He has outsmarted Pharaoh, the most powerful leader in the world at that time. The Jews who listened to the tale and those who later read the scriptures enjoyed this recounting in which a powerful man was kept for a fool by one of their own.