

## PART THIRTY-SIX

### RECAPITULATION: SURVEY OF THE PATRIARCHAL AGE

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With the death of Joseph the Patriarchal Age of Israel's history may be said to close. The *Family* had now thrown out many branches and was now on the point of emerging into the *Nation*. At this juncture, then, it may be well to look back, and review some of the chief features of the Patriarchal Life.

1. And the first of these that claims attention is its *Nomadic character*. Unlike the founders of Egypt, of Babylon, of Nineveh, the Patriarchs were not the builders of cities and towns, but *pilgrims and sojourners, dwellers in tents* (Heb. 11:9). But they were very different from rude hordes, like the Amalekites and other "sons of the desert," abhorring any higher mode of life. Abraham was no stranger to the highest form of civilization that his age afforded. He was acquainted with Ur, with Nineveh, with Damascus, with Egypt; he had left his home in one of the chief cities of Mesopotamia, not from choice, but in consequence of a direct personal call from God. Moreover, so far from regarding his present mode of life as an ultimate end, he and Isaac and Jacob were ever looking forward to a time when it would close, when their descendants should be *settled* in the Land of Promise, and become a great *nation*, when the portable *tent* should give way to the *city that had foundations* (Heb. 11:10, 13-16; comp. Gen. 24:7, 28:4, 49:4, 50:24). Hence, from time to time, as opportunity offered, we see the wandering life freely and willingly laid aside. Lot settled in Sodom (Gen. 13:10-12); Abraham in Egypt went direct to Pharaoh's

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court (Gen. 12:14); at Hebron he settled and became a "prince of God" in the midst of the Hittites (Gen. 23:6); Isaac not only lived near the Philistines, but occupied a *house* opposite the palace (Gen. 26:8), and practised *agriculture* (Gen. 26:12); and Joseph's *dream of the sheaves* points out that this was also continued in the time of Jacob (Gen. 37:7).

2. The *Family* was the center of the Patriarchal commonwealth. Its head was the source of authority and jurisdiction; he possessed the power of life and death (Gen. 38:24); he united in himself the functions of chief and priest; he offered the burnt-offering; he had his armed retainers (Gen. 14:14, 48:22, 34:25, 33:1); his intercourse with his wives (for polygamy was not forbidden) was free and unrestrained; the wife's consent was asked before wedlock (Gen. 24:57, 58); love hallowed the relations of Abraham with Sarah, of Isaac with Rebekah, of Jacob with Leah and Rachel; woman, indeed, did not occupy the position since conceded to her, but her position was far from degraded, and the sanctity of the marriage-bond was defended by severe laws, which made death the punishment for adultery (Gen. 38:24). Slavery, it is true, existed, but in the tents of Abraham the slave was ever treated with consideration, and not excluded from, but made a partaker of religious privileges (Gen. 17:13). The fidelity and attachmen of Eliezer the steward of Abraham's house, the mourning for Deborah, Rebekah's nurse (Gen. 35:8), are pleasing proofs of the peace that reigned in the Patriarchal household.

3. *Civilization*. The life of the Patriarchs was chiefly that of the shepherd, and their wealth consisted in their flocks and their herds. But besides practising agriculture they were not unacquainted with money and the precious metals. Abraham paid for the field of Machpelah with coin (Gen. 23:9-20), and the sons of Jacob took money with them into Egypt (Gen. 42:25, 35); while the gold

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ring and armlets presented to Rebekah by Eliezer (Gen. 24:22), the bracelet and signet ring of Judah (Gen. 38:18), the ear-rings of Rachel (Gen. 35:4), the many-coloured coat of Joseph, indicate an acquaintance with the luxuries of life.

4. *Religion.* While other nations were rapidly learning to deify the powers of nature, the Patriarchs believed not only in a God above and beyond nature, but in a God Personal, Omnipotent, and Holy. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was no mere abstraction, no mere law. He could and did reveal Himself by angelic appearances, by visions, by dreams; He could console, strengthen, encourage; He could punish, rebuke, and on repentance forgive. Abraham, the *Friend of God* (Jas. 2:23), intercedes with Him in behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 18:23-33); Isaac is warned by Him against going down into Egypt (Gen. 26:2); Jacob is consoled by Him at Bethel when setting out into the land of exile (Gen. 28:13-15), and wrestles with Him by the fords of Jabbok till the break of day (Gen. 32:24); Joseph believes in His invisible but ever-present help in prison and in a strange land, and ascribes to Him all his wisdom in the interpretation of dreams (Gen. 41:16). The Divine Promise of a great future Abraham believed under circumstances of greatest trial, and his faith was *counted to him for righteousness* (Rom. 4:3). Moreover, the God of the Patriarchs was not a mere "national or household God." His sphere of operation was not restricted to the Patriarchs and their families; He is the God of all the earth (Gen. 24:3), the God of Righteousness and Holiness. He punishes the people of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24-25); He plagues Pharaoh's house (Gen. 12:17); He is the God of the priest-king Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18), and of the Philistine Abimelech (Gen. 20:3); He protects not only Isaac the "child of promise," but the outcast Ishmael the "child of the bond-

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woman" (Gen. 21:13); He is with Joseph in prison, but He sends dreams to Pharaoh, and through Joseph He saves Egypt from famine (Gen. 50:20).

5. The *Religious Worship* of the Patriarchs was in keeping with the simplicity of their creed. The head of the family was also the priest of the family. Whenever Abraham, Isaac, or Jacob, reached any new spot in their pilgrimage, they invariably erected an altar, generally of stone and on a high situation (Gen. 22:9, 26:25, 35:7); there they called on the name of Jehovah, there they presented their burnt sacrifice, there they offered up their prayers. Their history also proves the existence of offering covenant-sacrifices, and celebrating covenant-feasts (Gen. 15:9-18); the making and paying of vows (Gen. 28:23); the erection of memorial pillars, and the consecration of them by pouring upon them oil and wine (Gen. 28:18); the rite of circumcision (Gen. 17:10-14); and the paying of tithes (Gen. 14:20).

6. The *Character of the Patriarchs* is never represented as perfect; their faults are freely exposed; theirs is no ideal history. If we compare the four most eminent amongst them, we seem to trace in (i) *Abraham*, "the faith that can remove mountains" in its power and in its fulness, revealing itself in unfaltering trust and unquestioning obedience under the most trying circumstances conceivable; in (ii) *Isaac*, the faith that can possess itself in patience, and discharge the ordinary duties of life in quietness and waiting; in (iii) *Jacob*, the violent contest of faith with the flesh, the higher with the lower nature, till by hard discipline the latter is purified, and the "Supplanter" becomes the "Prince," the "Prevailer with God"; in (iv) *Joseph*, the fidelity and perseverance of faith, revealed not only in the patient endurance of the most grievous trials, but in energetic action, and at length crowned with victory. "He unites in himself the noble

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trust and resolution of Abraham, with the quiet perseverance of Isaac, and the careful prudence of Jacob." He is moreover an eminent historic type of Christ, in (1) his persecution and sale by his brethren, (2) his resisting temptation, (3) his humiliation and exaltation, and (4) his dispensing to a famine-stricken people the bread of life, and (5) in the fulness of his forgiving love.