

The Elusive Nomad

God and the Nomads: Highlighting the Biblical Narrative

by Malcolm Hunter

Does God have favorites amongst all the peoples of the earth? To be politically correct, if not theologically sound, we have to say no. But certainly in the Old Testament you get the impression that God has a special interest in those who wander around in deserts looking after their animals. It is not just the experience of Abraham after God called him and his family out of the advanced urban complex of Ur. Right from the beginning of Genesis, the Book of Beginnings, it appears as if the nomadic experience was God's preferred way of life for all peoples. I realize this is a bold assertion, but after a half century of working in and amongst nomads from Mongolia to sub-Saharan Africa, I have begun to see and feel the nomad's preference for what most of us would consider stark and unreasonable circumstances. These are the very same circumstances that God called Abraham to enter. And it's become more and more apparent to me that it's in the particularities of this nomadic context that God is able to establish and shape his covenantal relation to a very special people. I offer here some reflections on the Genesis narrative and some concluding biblical perspectives.

Filling the Earth . . . through Nomads?

God's favor is noticeable very early in Genesis. The two sons of Adam should have learned a lesson for the ages when the cultivator Cain brought the fruit of the soil as an offering to the Lord, for "the Lord looked with favor" on Abel who brought some of the first born of his flock. Instead, Cain murdered his brother, and so began the enduring conflict between the farmers and the pastoralists which continues even today across Africa.

When Noah and his extended family came out of the ark and started life once again on land, the Lord twice told him to "be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth." The fact that Genesis 8:1 (NIV) specifically says that there were wild animals and livestock in the ark suggests that the only way God's command was going to be fulfilled was by hunting the wild animals and

Malcolm Hunter and his wife Jean went to Ethiopia in 1963 with a clear call to find the people who would be the least likely to hear the gospel. He was an engineer and she a nurse, and under SIM they launched five decades of work among nomadic peoples across the world. They lived for ten years on top of a Land Rover in West and East Africa doing field research that led to a PhD in Appropriate Development for Nomadic Pastoralists (OCMS). At the invitation of Dr. Ralph Winter, they started the Institute for Nomadic Studies and founded the Nomadic Peoples Network.

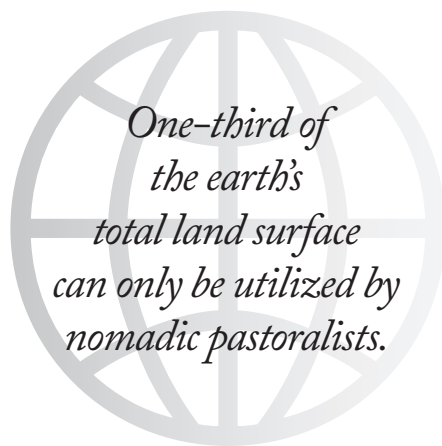
herding the domesticated livestock. This has been the pattern all over the earth at different periods and places. Early generations of men survived by hunting and gathering, and still do so to this day, until the time comes when they find it more convenient to train certain animals to stay near them and to serve their needs. In fact, God gave even more explicit details about the relationship between animals and humans:

The fear and dread of you will fall upon all the beasts of the earth and all the birds of the air, and upon every creature that moves on the ground, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hands. Everything that moves will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything.

An even clearer example of God's plan for all peoples to scatter and fill the earth comes in Genesis 11 at the tower of Babel. The stated reason for this early construction project was for men "to make a name for themselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth." God's immediate intervention resulted in a total breakdown of communication, with the inevitable outcome being, "The Lord scattered them over the face of the whole earth." Before the days of mass transportation, this could only have been accomplished by nomadic pastoralists moving with their animals to occupy the vast empty spaces of the earth. This would have been in the *paradisiac* period when there were apparently no deserts and the great Sahara was a particularly fertile pasture land with many trees and animals. Some of these global wanderers may have settled down in the most verdant areas to grow crops, but it was the nomadic pastoralists who kept moving outwards, fulfilling God's command to fill the whole earth. Farmers don't like to move unless they are desperate in times of drought, but nomads with their "harvest on the hoof" can keep moving to wherever the rain falls.

Different Types of Nomads

The nomadic way of life is described by academics as "utilizing the resource of special mobility," and applies to hunter/gatherers and nomadic pastoralists, as well as to the other smaller category of nomads—the peripatetics (service nomads). Before the farmers of the world began ploughing up the best grazing land for their crops, pastoralism must have been successful all over the earth. A good herder can double the number of his animals every year and live off their milk before choosing to kill one for special occasions or for visitors coming by. It is reckoned that even today, up to one-third of the earth's total land surface (and probably up to two thirds of Africa's



land surface) can only be utilized by nomadic pastoralists. These lands include the low altitude deserts found mostly in Africa and the Middle East, as well as high altitude lands, often covered in snow and ice, inhabited by nomads in Asia and northern Europe. The latter are frequently known as *Vertical Nomads* because they move up and down according to the snow lines, as compared with the *transhumant* nomad who migrates horizontally in lowland areas.

Abram on the Move Again

At the beginning of chapter 12 we read that the Lord said to Abram, "Leave your country, your people and

your father's household and go to the land I will show you." Perhaps he was afraid to head out alone (chapter 11), for there were at least five of his father's house with him when he got stuck at a place called Haran, presumably named after Abram's brother who died in Ur. In typical nomad practice, they waited in Haran for Abram's father to die before Abram was ready to set out again "as the Lord had told him." We don't know how long they stayed in Haran, but they must have been semi-settled for a number of years. The story tells us that besides his wife and nephew,

he took all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Haran and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there. (Gen. 12: 5)

By this time, Abram was seventy-five, he had now arrived where God wanted him, and the great promises began:

I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and whoever curses you I will curse; and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you. (Gen. 12:2-3)

The three dramatic encounters mentioned above all took place during a twenty-four-year period in which Abram travelled throughout the land and then down into Egypt at a time of famine, all the while acquiring more and more wealth. Even when this nomad showed a serious lack of faith and moral courage in Egypt and Sarah was consequently taken into Pharaoh's palace (Gen. 12:16), nevertheless, after Pharaoh had sent him on his way, he ended up with many more possessions: sheep and cattle, male and female donkeys, menservants and maidservants, and camels. This is the first recorded instance of camels appearing in the Bible, so Abram may have acquired these most important additions to desert nomadic life during his dubious venture into Egypt, where he tried to give his wife away to the Pharaoh to

save his own skin. Fortunately, for the fulfillment of God's grand purposes for the seed of Abram, the Pharaoh had more marital scruples than the chosen patriarch.

It is surprising, and yet can be encouraging for less celebrated chosen people of God, that Abram (now called Abraham in Genesis 17), showed the same lack of faith when he moved into the territory of King Abimelech. Once again, he persuaded Sarai (now called Sarah) to say she was his sister for fear he would be killed because of her beauty were it known she was indeed his wife. And once again, the Lord protected Sarah by telling Abimelech he was as good as dead if he were to touch her. When the King asked Abraham why he had done this shameful thing, he could only come up with the pathetic reason,

I said to myself, there is no fear of God in this place, and they will kill me because of my wife... When God had me wander from my father's household I said to her, 'This is how you can show your love to me: everywhere we go, say of me, "He is my brother."'

This was no doubt the custom of the day for sealing peace agreements and alliances by giving valuable unmarried sisters and daughters to important rulers. Again, however, the feared ruler showed more honor and understood the fear of God better than did Abraham when he returned Sarah to her husband with a thousand shekels of silver "...to cover the offense against you." To the erring Abraham, he brought sheep and cattle, and male and female slaves, and additionally gave him the unexpectedly generous offer, "My land is before you; live wherever you like." (Gen. 20:14–16)

Desert Life and Dependence on God

On his way back from Egypt through the Negev we read that Abram went from place to place until he came to the place between Bethel and Ai where

These examples from nomadic life help us understand why God took so long to get Abram into the place where his name could be changed.

he had earlier placed his tent and built an altar. "There Abram called on the name of the Lord" (Gen. 13:3). At last he obeyed the command he had received so long ago in Ur when he had left his father's house. He separated from Lot, who chose to go and pitch his tents near Sodom, showing what would prove to be a fatal attraction to that wicked city. After Lot had departed, the Lord said to Abram,

Lift up your eyes from where you are and look north and south, east and west. All this land you see, I will give to you and your offspring Go walk through the length and breadth of the land, for I am giving it to you. So Abram moved his tents and went to live near the great trees of Mamre at Hebron, where he built an altar to the Lord. (Gen. 13:18)

These typical examples from a meandering nomadic life help us understand why God took so long to get Abram into the place where his name could be changed and he would even be called the friend of God.

We might ask, then, just how significant was Abram's life in the desert, and his growing dependence on God, to his ultimately achieving that sort of personal relationship? It seems likely that after more than a hundred years of trying to "help" God fulfill his repeated promise of a son and heir, Abram learned the lessons most effectively from the consequences of his own efforts. The narrative includes his pitiful act of readily agreeing to Sarai's false reasoning which blamed God for her infertility.

The Lord has kept me from having children. Go, sleep with my maid servant; perhaps I can build a family through her. (Gen. 16:2)

Again, this was no doubt a culturally acceptable expedient at that time, but

it certainly was not according to the promise God had given Abraham. He even tried to put pressure on God, that if he did not soon produce a son himself, then his servant Eliezer would be his heir.

Then the word of the Lord came to him: 'This man will not be your heir, but a son coming from your own body will be your heir.'

And then came the promise which would have been most meaningful to a desert nomad: "Look up at the heavens and count the stars—if indeed you can count them ... So shall your offspring be." This promise is followed by the statement for which Abram, despite his later lapses of faith, is forever remembered: "He believed the Lord and it was credited to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:2–6).

The result of Abram's ready acquiescence to Sarai's suggestion of using her Egyptian maid servant, Hagar, to produce an heir led to another sub-narrative in this nomadic wilderness. Hagar was probably one of the Egyptian servants collected by Abram and Sarai on their ill-advised attempt to escape famine by going down into Egypt, contrary to God's promise to give him all the land of Canaan and bless them there. Hagar had no experience of the living God, nor a God-fearing heritage. And when she became pregnant, she began to despise her mistress to the point that she was banished from the camp. God showed his amazing compassion for the victims of Sarai's and Abram's compounded misadventure by sending an angel to meet this rejected pregnant mother. God called her by name when she was sitting beside a spring in the desert, presumably feeling very sorry for herself, and understandably resentful of Sarai. The angel of the Lord told Hagar to go

back to her mistress and submit to her, and added the unexpected promise which presumably encouraged her to do so.

You will have a son. You shall name him Ishmael, for the Lord has heard your misery. He will be a wild donkey of a man; his hand will be against everyone and everyone's hand against him, and he will live in hostility to all his brothers. (Gen. 16:7-12)

Ishmael was born when Abram was eighty-six years old, so he must have been thirteen when God appeared to the ninety-nine year old nomad with the final covenantal promise that he would, indeed, have a son through Sarai. When he heard the amazing promises Abraham fell facedown, laughing and saying to himself, "Will a son be born to a man a hundred years old? Will Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" And Abraham said to God, "If only Ishmael might live under your blessing!" Incredulous, Abraham found it easier to believe that Ishmael could somehow become the heir of promise than that Sarah could give him a son. "Yes," the Lord replied,

I have heard you and I will surely bless him; I will make him fruitful and greatly increase his numbers. He will be the father of twelve rulers, and I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will establish with Isaac, whom Sarah will bear to you by this time next year. (Gen. 17:17-21)

God continued his promise to the as-yet-unconceived son that he would establish his covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him in Genesis 17:19. Part of that covenant included instructions for the circumcision of all males. And so, as soon as God went up from Abram on that same day, he took Ishmael and all those born in his household or bought with his money and circumcised them, including himself, as God had instructed (Gen. 17:10-14). This was the introduction to the sign of the covenant practiced by all Jewish males from that time until today.

Hearing God in the Desert

It isn't so much that God loves nomads, but it appears that he is able to speak to men and women much more easily in desert places than in the hustle and bustle of the city. In the desert, it is impossible to ignore God; in fact, you will never meet a pastoral nomad who does not have a high view of a God who sends rain, abundance, and health. Notwithstanding, they may still spend much of their time and money trying to appease the bad gods, demons, or jinns (as they are referred to by Muslims), or by trying to escape the curses of enemies. And they might not have heard yet of the power of the Lord Jesus, the one who has defeated all these evil forces, and who can bring them to



the good God. This is a universal message for all people who are troubled by demonic powers and curses!

It is because of the saving power of Jesus that Christianity is so relevant to nomads. If we are prepared to enter their world of relationships, it will require we prioritize people over buildings, projects and programs. The other great advantage to entering their world is the nomadic emphasis on hospitality—when you bow your head and enter the tent, you are welcomed to stay. This common depiction of nomadic hospitality appears in Genesis 18:1-8 when "Abraham was sitting at the door of his tent in the heat of the day." Despite the heat, when "he saw three men standing

nearby he hurried to meet them and bowed low to the ground."

His gracious salutation and invitation to rest under a tree while water was brought to wash their feet are all normal traditions in most nomadic societies. Abraham's seemingly minimal offer to get them something to eat led to great efforts on the part of his wife and servants to bake bread and to kill and cook a choice calf from the herd. Much later would come the generous feast of curds and milk and well-cooked calf veal, which anyone familiar with nomadic pastoralist hospitality will appreciate. It is well worth the wait!

The supreme test of Abraham's trust in God came in chapter 22 when he was instructed to take his son, his only son Isaac, whom he loved, to a place about three days walk away, and offer him there as burnt offering on one of the mountains God would eventually show him. The fact that he cut enough wood to make a burnt offering before he set out presumably means that he thought he would be going to a treeless place. But when Abraham got to the mountain, it must have been thickly wooded, as he did not see the ram that was caught by its horns in a thicket until he took the knife to slay his son. Abraham showed complete obedience and willingness to sacrifice his son, even to the point of hauling the wood for three days. God, however, had already prepared a response to Abraham's unconditional obedience. Such faith and obedience must surely have impressed Isaac (whose reaction as his father bound him and placed him on top of the firewood is not recorded). We can imagine that Isaac was much relieved to hear the voice of the angel calling out from heaven telling Abraham not to lay a hand on the boy. Isaac must have been at least somewhat willing to submit to his father's readiness to sacrifice him, because he probably could have easily outrun the old man (Abraham would

have been 110 years old) if he really had wanted to escape.

I do wonder if such faith and confidence in God comes partly from life in arid and semi-desert places where a nomad has to be dependent on God for his survival. In Abraham's case, the totally unexpected gift of a son at 100 years old, and the promise to make a great nation out of him, must certainly have taught him to trust God. This excruciating test of his faith in God's promises is richly described in Hebrews 11:19: "Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking he did receive Isaac back from death."

A Storybook Made for Nomads

The middle chapters of the book of Genesis (chapters 23–37) are extremely interesting to most nomadic people, as they can so readily identify with the experiences of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (up until Joseph is sold into slavery in Egypt). Whether they are literate or not, all nomadic pastoralists are oral learners and they love stories, especially those that feature animals, deserts, and wells.

Another very important element of nomadic life is how people are buried. Some groups I have known will bury a man who has died as a respected elder or warrior above ground under a pile of rocks wrapped in the skin of his most prized cow (whose meat is eaten as part of his funeral rituals). After a few years, during which the termites will eat all the flesh and organs, the bones will be uncovered from the rocks, wrapped in a new cow skin, and the blood of that cow will be poured over the bones. All the warriors of that age-set will come to pay their respects and even pray to the dead man for his protection from sickness and enemies. Other nomadic ethnic groups bury their men vertically in a well-like hole, so that they will be remembered as standing tall to the very last, while others place them in a crouching position, as if ready for action.

Very few nomadic peoples take much trouble to bury their wives; that is why the story of the death of Sarah is so impressive to nomads.

Very few nomadic peoples take much trouble to bury their wives or even remember them. That is why the story of the death of Sarah is so impressive to nomadic people. Like most nomads, Abraham had no land of his own, so he had to buy a plot from one of the alien Hittites among whom they were living. The fact that the whole of Genesis 23 is devoted to the elaborate ritual of bargaining in the politest manner makes for a fine example of culturally exemplary behaviour. Abraham had probably chosen this grave site near the great trees of Mamre much earlier. The point of the seller overcoming his initial reluctance to take any money from Abraham is a typical move in a game played among wealthy men. "Listen to me, my lord; the land is worth 400 shekels of silver, but what is that between me and you?" (Gen. 23:15).

Even more interesting to nomads who have camels is the story in the very next chapter, where Abraham sends his trusted chief servant to get a wife for his son Isaac. Though his name is not actually given in this long chapter, the chief servant was probably the same Eliezer that Abraham thought might one day be his heir. The patriarch, now too old to make the journey back to his relatives in Haran, gave strict instructions to his servant:

I want you to swear by the God of heaven and the God of earth, that you will not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, among whom I am living, but will go to my country and my own relatives and get a wife for my son Isaac.

He also twice reiterated that in no case should Eliezer take Isaac back to the old country at Haran, for God had promised the land of Canaan to him and to his offspring, and presumably

Abraham thought that Isaac might be tempted to stay in that old homeland. Eliezer agreed to the instructions of his master and swore an oath to him in a manner that is peculiarly significant in societies where nothing is written down, putting his hand under the thigh of his master Abraham. He certainly did not make his journey alone, as he had ten camels and many valuable gifts and clothes to carry and protect. (Note that later in the chapter the men who formed the caravan are invited into the house with Eliezer to eat and drink and spend the night.)

The most fascinating part of this story is when the caravan arrives at the precise well where God's chosen wife for Isaac would make her appearance. As a shepherdess, she came to get water for her sheep. Eliezer prayed before she arrived,

O Lord, God of my master Abraham, give me success today, and show kindness to my master Abraham. See I am standing beside this spring, and the daughters of the townspeople are coming to draw water. May it be when I say to a girl, 'Please let down your jar so that I may have a drink, and she says 'Drink, and I'll water your camels too'—let her be the one you have chosen for your servant Isaac. By this I will know that you have shown kindness to my master. (Gen. 24: 12–14)

Eliezer was no doubt a God-fearing man, and the way his prayer was answered before he had even finished praying is a tremendous affirmation of his faith. This sort of experience is most significant to a pastoral nomad.

Even more impressive to a camel herder, and maybe only fully appreciated by them, is the offer that Rebekah made to Eliezer: she did not just give him water to drink, but also drew water for his camels "until they have finished

drinking.” If his camels had traveled for ten days, as seems likely given the distance to Haran, they each would drink about thirty gallons of water. The text says explicitly that the camels did drink all they wanted “until they were finished.” The ten camels could have consumed as much as three hundred gallons of water—about three thousand pounds. The text also says that

she *quickly* emptied her jar into the trough and ran back to the well to draw more water, and drew enough for all his camels. (Gen. 24:20)

It is no wonder that Eliezer was impressed with this young lady, who was also described as “very beautiful.” The quickness was necessary since a camel can drink those thirty gallons in seven minutes.

This story is so impressive that it is recorded twice in this chapter, as Eliezer recounts it again for Rebekah’s family that night in their house where they were offered true nomad hospitality: straw and fodder for the camels first, then water for Eliezer and his men to wash their feet. The food came later, but Eliezer refused to eat anything until he had told the whole story of his wife-searching venture. When they had heard it, Rebekah’s brother and father could only say,

This is from the Lord; we can say nothing to you one way or the other. Here is Rebekah; take her and go, and let her become the wife of your master’s son, as the Lord has directed.

It is typical that neither the lady in question, nor her mother, were consulted; yet, it’s probably significant that the costly gifts were given to her mother and Laban, the dominant and acquisitive elder brother, while her father, Bethuel, is not mentioned as receiving anything. Eliezer insisted that they should return immediately, but her mother and brother wanted him to remain ten days with them before taking Rebekah away. When Rebekah was asked what she thought the next morning, her quick answer

to leave immediately gives the impression that she was quite happy to leave the shepherding life to pursue a more exciting future with marriage to a wealthy kinsman she had never seen. In proper pre-wedding custom, she would not travel alone with the men, but took along her nurse and her maids. The story concludes by saying, “they all got ready and mounted their camels and went back with the man. So the servant took Rebekah and left.” Eliezer was no doubt a very happy and successful man, departing on the day following their arrival at the house. This story is one that only a camel-herding nomad can fully appreciate; indeed, most of the book of Genesis is best understood and perhaps therefore most interesting to pastoral nomads.



God’s Purpose for the “Detestable” Nomad

The tragic-dramatic account of how Joseph went down to Egypt is worthy of a great operatic rendering, but it had to wait until the 20th century when Andrew Lloyd Weber could do it justice in his early musical, *Joseph and his Amazing Technicolor Coat*. Many of the lines in that show are highly memorable, but what seems to have been lost is that God is the one who orchestrated the whole scenario. And he did it to accomplish his grand purpose for the children of Israel—that they would become a tribe and then a nation. They became a distinctly

different tribe, as they could not assimilate with the Egyptian people, for all shepherds were “detestable” to the Egyptians (Gen. 46:34). There is no reason given for this strong repulsion, but this was the factor, which God and Joseph knew would keep them from any possibility of being accepted and assimilated by the powerful pagan peoples in Egypt. Joseph chose five of his brothers to introduce them to Pharaoh, who asked them what their occupation was. Joseph had advised them to reply:

Your servants are shepherds, just as our fathers were. We have come to live here awhile because the famine is severe in Canaan and your servants’ flocks have no pasture. So now, please let your servants settle in Goshen. Pharaoh then said to Joseph, “Your father and your brothers have come to you and the land of Egypt is before you; settle your father and your brothers in the best part of the land. Let them live in Goshen.” (Gen. 47: 3–4)

Pharaoh finished his generous invitation by adding what at first appears to be a rather selfish request, “And if you know of any among them with special ability, put them in charge of my own livestock.” This was probably an indication of Pharaoh’s high regard for Joseph’s outstanding usefulness to all of Egypt, and the basis of his assumption that one or more of Joseph’s brothers could be equally gifted and useful.

The narrative in Genesis 47:7–10 seems to indicate that immediately after the introduction of his brothers to Pharaoh, Joseph brought his father in and presented him before Pharaoh. Jacob, in true patriarchal manner, blessed Pharaoh at the beginning and the ending of their encounter before he exited his presence. It would be interesting to know what words of blessing Jacob spoke to Pharaoh, as the record we have of Jacob’s other spoken blessings shows them to be most insightful and significant.

Jacob also had a personal encounter with God on the journey down to

Egypt, where he heard the words of divine approval of this migration with a specific purpose. The opening of Genesis 46 tells us that “Israel set out with all that was his and when he reached Beersheba he offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac.” Beersheba was probably the last settlement of any significance in Canaan, and the old man Jacob knew he was going into a very uncertain future, away from the promised land, so he probably entertained many doubts about this move. God met him in a vision at night calling him by name,

Jacob! Jacob! I am God, the God of your father. Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you into a great nation there. I will go down to Egypt with you, and I will bring you back again. And Joseph’s own hand will close your eyes. (Gen. 46:2–4)

Here we see the real purpose of this diversion of the children of Israel into Egypt. Had they stayed in Canaan where everyone was a livestock herder, they would no doubt have intermarried with Canaanite women, as Esau had very deliberately done to show his resentment against his father and mother. This conniving of his led to the loss of the blessing of the first born which should have been his. Most important, there is no record of any intermarrying amidst an Egyptian civilization.

The end of Genesis 47 relates the fulfillment of that promise, as well as the death of Jacob after seventeen years in Egypt.

The Israelites settled in Egypt in the land of Goshen. They acquired property there and were fruitful and increased greatly in number... When the time came for Israel to die, he called for his son Joseph and said to him, “If I have found favor in your eyes, put your hand under my thigh and promise that you will show me kindness and faithfulness. Do not bury me in Egypt but when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried.” (Gen. 47:27–30)

The description of the death of a family patriarch is appealing to nomads who value venerable old men and elaborate funeral traditions.

These funeral instructions were repeated at the end of Genesis chapter 49, which concludes with the moving account of Jacob’s death.

When Jacob had finished giving instructions to his sons, he drew his feet up into his bed, breathed his last and was gathered to his fathers. (Gen. 49:23)

This description of the timely death of a family patriarch at a ripe old age is appealing to any society that respects their elders, but even more so to nomadic people who have such elevated values of venerable old men and elaborate funeral traditions. How they die and are buried seems more important than anything in life.

The last chapter of the book of Genesis describes the forty days needed for the embalming of the patriarch and the seventy-five days that the Egyptian nation mourned for him. After this time came the grand funeral procession that Pharaoh ordered, led by prime minister Joseph, and accompanied by all of Pharaoh’s officials—the dignitaries of his court and all the dignitaries of Egypt—as well as all the members of his father’s household. Chariots and horsemen also accompanied him (Gen. 50:7–9). So Jacob’s sons did as he had commanded them. They carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave in the field of Machpelah, near Mamre, which Abraham had bought as a burial place. To complete the story, as Joseph neared his own end, he said to his brothers,

I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (Gen. 50:24)

Joseph then made his brothers swear to carry his bones back to the land of Canaan. So Joseph died at the age of 110.

After his death he was embalmed and was placed in a coffin in Egypt.

From Clan to Nation

The first three patriarchs of the Abrahamic clan slowly learned the essential skills of herding animals that can be found most easily in a desert, but God subsequently took their descendants into a very different environment. They began their new life in Egypt in great favor under the care of their brother Joseph, and consequently their birthrate exploded. Generally, spending nights away from home looking for pasture keeps population growth in check, but that was not an issue for the people in their new home in Goshen.

The Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them.

Their population growth was such that it began to frighten the later Egyptian rulers, who did not know about Joseph or his extended family. Clearly the children of Israel were still very ethnically distinct from the Egyptians, who saw them as a potential threat. The new king said,

The Israelites have become much too numerous for us. Come, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous and, if war breaks out, will join our enemies, fight against us and leave the country. (Ex. 1:7–10)

This suspicion led to the rulers’ proclaimed policy of slave labor for all the people, and of male infanticide (an ancient Egyptian version of the more modern pro-choice policies now prevailing in supposedly civilized western nations).

Over the four hundred years that the tribe of Israel spent in Egypt, the increasing oppression of the slave masters

and the forced labor did not seem to diminish their birthrate.

The more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and spread; so the Egyptians came to dread the Israelites and worked them ruthlessly. They made their lives bitter with hard labor in brick and mortar and with all kinds of work in the fields; in all the hard labor the Egyptians used them ruthlessly. (Ex. 1:11–14)

This brutal treatment was presumably God's way of ensuring that his people would never settle comfortably in Egypt and of preparing them for that most momentous event, their exodus from Egypt.

Boot Camp in the Desert

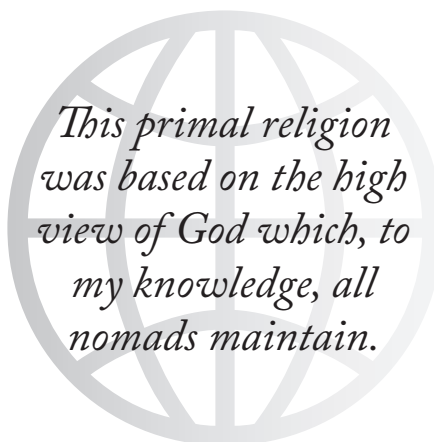
Before they could leave Egypt, God had to prepare Moses, their Deliverer, who would lead them out of Egypt. Moses was an exceptional child from birth, and by God's ingenious plan was rescued from his papyrus basket and from drowning in the River Nile by the daughter of Pharaoh.

The Bible does not tell us how long Moses spent with his birth family before being handed over to Pharaoh's daughter, but it must have been long enough for him to learn his ethnic identity. The scriptures do tell us that "Moses was educated in all the wisdom of the Egyptians and was powerful in speech and action" (Acts 7:22). At forty years old he felt compelled to take action when he saw an Israelite being beaten by an Egyptian and he killed the aggressor. This could have been an impulsive reaction, but it would have come from a long held awareness of his ethnic roots, as well as from the injustice meted out to his people. This action likely emanated from his growing sense of personal obligation to his people.

Because of his impulsive actions, Moses fled from Pharaoh's palace to the desert of Midian, where God wanted him to learn how to become the leader who would deliver God's people out of

Egypt. Here again we see the spiritual value of living under the big sky in the wide-open spaces of a desert or a typical nomad grazing land. Midian is in present day northern Saudi Arabia. To get there, Moses must have crossed the Sinai Peninsula, precisely where he would bring the Hebrew nation forty years later. This initial crossing served as a useful learning experience of the geography and rugged features of that rugged desert land.

The most important lesson Moses needed to learn was dependence on God, requiring him to give up his proud confidence in his own abilities



and in the ingrained training for leadership that had come with his privileged upbringing. God knew there was no better way to bring about that transformation than for Moses to spend the next forty years looking after the sheep of his father-in-law, Jethro. This Jethro happened to be a priest of Midian, presumably a simple practitioner of a primal religion. Whatever other beliefs it held, this primal religion was based on the high view of God which, to my knowledge, all nomads maintain. Moses had transitioned from the Palace of Pharaoh, which had the most advanced technological and high religious society of his day, to probably one of the most basic and simplest of societies there in the house of Jethro and his seven daughters in the Midian desert.

This transition to the desert context must have been a devastating blow to Moses' sense of his unique ability to help deliver his people. But why did it last for forty years? Forty years was the length of time that God gave Moses to enjoy all the wisdom and pleasures of Egypt, and to learn that these would never compare to his sense of purpose in God's call on his life to be the deliverer of his people. It took another forty years to bring Moses to a place of brokenness and willingness to trust entirely in God, rather than his own leadership and eloquence.

From Leading Sheep to Leading People

I should note that sheep are the most foolish and uninspiring animal of all the livestock kept by nomads, and certainly the most unresponsive in conversation. The breakthrough for Moses came when he took those pathetic sheep to the far side of the desert, to Horeb, described in Ex. 3:1 as the mountain of God. Moses presumably had no idea of the significance of this place when he arrived, but later that day God said to him,

I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain. (Ex. 3:12)

Before the exodus, Moses had a most personal encounter with God, via a burning bush that was not consumed. Moses may have seen other bushes burning in the desert, but this one got his attention and he said to himself, "I will go over and see this strange sight—why the bush does not burn up." This is the first recorded evidence in forty years that Moses was ready to pay attention to a supernatural work of God.

When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush, 'Moses! Moses!' And Moses replied to God, 'Here I am.' (Ex. 3:4)

Moses may have thought that God had completely forgotten about him, but now the long-delayed dialogue begins with God's historic declaration, "I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob." At this, Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God (Ex. 3:6). He had already been commanded to take off his sandals, as the place where he was standing was holy ground, so his experience of God's presence must have been overwhelming from head to toe. Here was a nomad being prepared for his big migration, in which he would lead a nation, not a flock of sheep. They were to go into the wilderness for another forty years. "So now, go." God said, "I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring the Israelites out of Egypt" (Ex. 3: 9–10). The response of Moses is that of a broken man—"Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?"—showing that Moses had learned the essential lesson for a godly leader, true humility. The conversation that ensued between Moses and his now very personal God should be encouraging to any who feel inadequate for the task to which God calls them. Not in our own strength but in his!

The Discipline of Wilderness Conditions

Moses was eighty years old when he loaded his wife and children on a donkey and trekked back from the land of Midian to meet Pharaoh as God had commanded. The discipline of forty years of grinding, discouraging work in the deserts of Midian would have aided Moses when, after returning to Egypt, he faced rejection by his people and by Pharaoh.

He returned to the Lord and said, 'O Lord, why have you brought trouble upon this people? Is this why you sent me? Ever since I went to Pharaoh to speak in your name, he has brought trouble upon this people, and you have not rescued your people at all.' (Ex. 5:22–23)

T*he children of Israel needed to learn to trust their God all over again, and there is no better training ground than a desert.*

And while the deliverance from Egypt must have been an incredibly exciting time for all those who joined the exodus, the transition from settled slavery to freedom in the desert was both a traumatic experience as well as an enormous learning opportunity. The children of Israel needed to learn to trust their God all over again, and there is no better training ground than a desert, where obtaining food and water are a constant struggle.

The Israelites wandered throughout at least forty-one different locations those forty years, which are listed in Numbers 33, but how long they spent in each location is not recorded. It must have taken a great deal of time to get several million people packed up and mobilized between each campsite, but that was an important part of God's teaching process: the Israelites were learning to be a pilgrim people living in very inhospitable country. They had to know that God was not only the provider of all their food and water, he was also their protector from wild animals, plagues, and enemy tribes (like the attacks and seduction of the Amalekites and the Midianites). In that hot and hostile desert, they began to understand that God alone could satisfy their deepest needs. There was nothing in that environment to entertain, amuse, or titillate them, just hard grinding survival and communal living.

Even before they finally entered the Promised Land, Moses gave them strict instructions not to forget what sort of people they were. Whenever they presented the fruit of the land to the priest they were to "declare before the Lord your God: my father was a wandering Aramean" (Deut. 26:5). God had indeed promised their forefathers that his descendants would possess the land of Canaan, but they

were not like other nations, whose identity was tied to one piece of real estate. The land was given on condition that they would not be like other nations. If they did not remain faithful to the God who gave it to them, they would lose it, but they would still be his people, and when they repented he would bless and restore them again. The history of the Jewish people has confirmed that covenant relationship, with a pattern of blessing followed by rebellion, rejection, exile, repentance, and restoration.

A Pilgrim People

The principle of God's pilgrim people remaining set-apart from settled, unbelieving people appears frequently in the New Testament. Peter gives an interesting new definition of the community of believers in Jesus before the words 'Christian' or 'church' had even emerged:

You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God that you may declare the praise of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God, once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy. Dear friends, I urge you, as aliens and strangers in the world, to abstain from sinful desires, which was against your soul. (1 Pet. 2:9–11)

The King James Bible rendering of the key word "alien" as "pilgrim" gives what I believe is a more helpful picture of people who are on the move to a more certain destination, rather than as suspect foreigners.

Finally, the fact that deserts continue to have an important purpose in the development of strong leaders in the New Testament brings us again to a certain conclusion: it's not a nomadic lifestyle

that is so valuable in learning about the nature and power of God, as it is the outcome of having lived a nomadic existence in the desert. That is where the inevitable austerity and rigors of daily survival concentrate the attention on the grandeur of empty space and the immensity of the heavens at night. This is presumably why certain key figures in the New Testament were sent into a desert or chose to spend time there in solitude. John the Baptist, Jesus himself, and the apostle Paul found the desert a threshold for new ministry.

This is apparent in the book of Hebrews which adds several other helpful insights to this principle of a pilgrim people. Referring back to the patriarchs in the book of Genesis, we read,

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them at a distance. And they admitted they were aliens [pilgrims] and strangers on

the earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own, they were longing for a better country—a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. (Heb. 11:13–16)

And more specific to the heavenly city: “Here we do not have an enduring [continuing] city, but we are looking for the city that is to come” (Heb. 13:14). There are more details of that heavenly city called the New Jerusalem in the book of Revelation, but the concern of this study is what we do here on earth before we arrive there. How then should we live? All examples indicate that we are meant to be a pilgrim people, travelling lightly through what is still a beautiful world, but alien to us in its present unredeemed state. We are pilgrims moving to a wonderful and assured destiny, but on the way there, as long as we are on the earth, we want to be available to do the work of the rightful ruler of it all. We will want to walk as does the nomad. **IJFM**



CalledTogether turns 1400 And your agency is invited to the party!

We are the world's first and only relationship website that connects globally-called singles for the dual purposes of,

- 1) Finding a godly spouse who shares their specific calling,
- 2) Finding single friends to encourage them in their work.

We've seen a fantastic response since the launch of our website, with more than 1400 members, and more than a dozen newly formed couples, some of whom are already on their way to the nations—together! This response simply underlines the felt need for community among globally-called singles. We encourage you to connect the singles within your agency to CalledTogether.

E-mail us for
a promo code:

- 1) GET A CODE
- 2) SPREAD IT AROUND
- 3) SINGLES FROM YOUR AGENCY WILL SAVE \$

Online: www.CalledTogether.us

E-mail: CalledTogetherus@gmail.com

Read More About
CalledTogether:



goo.gl/NM3jXF

Christianity
Today



goo.gl/2DUa0r

NPR

