

TODAY'S READINGS IN CONTEXT

FEBRUARY 18, 2018

Genesis 9:8-17

Genesis is the first book of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). The Torah also called the Pentateuch (five books) in Greek. Genesis covers the period from Creation to the deaths of Jacob and his 11th son, Joseph, in about 1,650 BCE, if the accounts are historical.

The Book of Genesis (like the Torah as a whole) is an amalgam of religious traditions, some of which are dated by scholars to about 950 BCE and some of which were developed as late as 450 BCE. Since the late 19th Century, Biblical scholars have recognized four major “strands” or sources in the Torah, and these sources are identified (among other ways) by their different theological emphases, names for God, names for the holy mountain, and portrayals of God’s characteristics.

Today’s reading is from the “Priestly” writers (550 to 450 BCE) whose name for God is translated “God” (not “LORD” as used by the Yahwistic writers). In these verses, God makes the first covenant recorded in the Bible. A “covenant” is different from a “contract” in that a covenant is a long-term continuing relationship, whereas a contract has a specific purpose and an end date. A covenant is often (but not always) between a superior party (such as God) and an inferior (Noah and humankind).

Covenants in the Bible are sometimes unconditional (such as God’s promise not to destroy the earth again by flood) that do not require a reciprocal action on the part of Noah or humankind. More often, however, Biblical covenants are presented as conditional so that if the “inferior” parties fulfill their obligations, the “superior” (usually God) will provide reciprocal benefits.

1 Peter 3:18-22

In the First Century, it was not uncommon to write something in another person’s name so that the writing would have extra “authority” – particularly when the writer believed he knew what the “authority” (in this case, Peter) would have said. Similarly, authorship of the Torah was historically attributed to Moses, the Psalms to David, and Wisdom Literature to Solomon.

The First Letter of Peter was likely written in the last quarter of the First Century, long after Peter’s death in the 60’s CE. It was written in sophisticated Greek and resembles Paul’s letters. Its focus is not on the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth, but on the Resurrection and the affirmation that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One of God.

In today’s reading, the author urges his audience to be willing to suffer for doing what is right, just as Jesus of Nazareth suffered for doing good. He notes that Jesus was “put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” (v.18), which is not to say that “part” of Jesus survived death, but that God raised him as the Christ to a new life in the divine realm where (metaphorically) he is “at the right hand of God” (v.22).

Writers of the Christian Scriptures often looked for analogies in the Hebrew Bible to explain practices in the Jesus Follower Movement. Here, the author presents the Flood in Noah’s time as prefiguring Baptism which is “an appeal to God through the resurrection of Jesus Christ” (v. 21).

TODAY'S READINGS IN CONTEXT

FEBRUARY 25, 2018

Genesis 17:1-7, 15-16

Genesis is the first book of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). The Torah is also called the Pentateuch (five books) in Greek. Genesis covers the period from Creation to the deaths of Jacob and his 11th son, Joseph, in about 1,650 BCE, if the accounts are historical.

Genesis (like the Torah as a whole) is an amalgam of religious traditions, some of which are dated by scholars to about 950 BCE and some of which were developed as late as 450 BCE. Since the late 19th Century, Biblical scholars have recognized four major “strands” or sources in the Torah, and they are identified (among other ways) by their different theological emphases, names for God, names for the holy mountain, and portrayals of God’s characteristics.

Today’s reading is one of the three accounts of YHWH’s covenant with Abraham to bless him with many descendants. It was written by the Priestly writers between 550 and 450 BCE. Although the readings today appeared to make an unconditional covenant with Abram about numerous offspring (v.2), the omitted verses (8 to 14) required Abram and his offspring to be circumcised. This made the covenant a conditional one in which both parties had obligations.

The reading is also about names. In the Hebrew Bible, one’s name described who you were. Abram means “exalted ancestor” and has the same root as “Abba/father”. He is renamed Abraham (“ancestor of a multitude”) (v.5). Sarai’s name was changed to Sarah (“princess”) when Abraham was told that she (at age 90) would conceive and bear a son (v.15).

The Priestly writers took the position that the name YHWH was not known to the Israelites until the Exodus (Exodus 3 and 6). In today’s reading, YHWH disclosed the divine name to Abram as “El Shaddai” – translated variously as “God Almighty” or “God of the Mountains” or even as “God with Breasts” (a fertile god).

Romans 4:13-25

Paul’s letter to the Romans was his longest, last and most complex letter. It was written in the late 50s or early 60s (CE) to a Jesus Follower community that Paul did not establish. Among other messages in the letter, Paul sought to encourage respectful and supportive relationships between the Gentile Jesus Followers and the Jewish Jesus Followers in Rome.

Nero’s predecessor (Claudius) expelled the Jews from Rome in 49 CE. During Nero’s reign (54-68 CE), he allowed Jews (including Jewish Jesus Followers) to return, and this created tensions within the Jesus Follower Community. (They were not called “Christians” until the 80’s.)

In today’s reading, Paul held up Abraham as an example of “righteousness” (being in right relation with God and man) who was blessed by God, not because of the Law (which wasn’t given until Sinai) but because of his faithfulness. Paul argued that through faithfulness to God who raised Jesus from the dead (v.24), both Gentile and Jewish Jesus Followers share in the faith of Abraham and are “justified” (*i.e.* in a righteous state with God and man as Abraham was).