

Key words

Polytheism

Covenant

**Universalism/
universality**

Brit milah

Key concepts

According to Jewish tradition, the history of the Jewish people begins with a man called Abraham who has come to be regarded as the Father of the Jewish people. The Hebrew Scriptures tell us that God changed Abram's name to Abraham, which means 'the father of many'. Abraham's response to God was revolutionary as, against a background of polytheism, he was the first to teach that there was One God, creator of Heaven and Earth.

God entered into a relationship with Abraham which came to be known as the Abrahamic covenant. It represents an unconditional covenant, initiated by the word of God; it was authoritative and would establish the Abrahamic community within the protection of God. The terms stated that Abraham would be the father of a great nation, have numerous descendants and would be given a land to live in.

The sign of the covenant relationship between God and the 'chosen people' was to be the act of circumcision (brit milah). This was an outward, physical sign in the flesh of the eternal covenant between God and the Jewish people.

Genesis 22 tells us of the ultimate test of Abraham's faith and obedience to God when he is asked to sacrifice his son Isaac. This shows an exceptional level of faith on Abraham's part as he is prepared to sacrifice his only son, through which the promise of numerous descendants would come. Scripture tells us that God intervened and spared Isaac's life by providing a ram for sacrifice instead.

Abraham's faith is significant as, through him, God established a special covenant relationship which offered unconditional future blessings to the descendants of Abraham, and thus Abraham becomes the way in which God will create a people who will live by a certain set of values.

Key quotes

'The Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him that curses you; and all the families of the earth shall bless themselves by you."' (Genesis 12:1-3)

'With raised hand I have sworn an oath to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of Heaven and earth.' (Genesis 14:22)

'Every male among you shall be circumcised ... and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and you.' (Genesis 17:10-11)

'Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, Isaac, whom you love and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you."' (Genesis 22:2)

Issues for analysis and evaluation

Key questions, arguments and debates

The extent of the covenant's universality

It could be argued that the terms of the covenant with Abraham mean that it is not universal, but that it was created for the nation of Israel alone. However, it could also be argued that it is universal in outlook as it would show the world that God was the only all-powerful God whom people should follow and worship.

Covenant as a privilege or a responsibility

It is a privilege to know that God has promised to be with the Jewish people and never abandon them, and Jews accept their responsibility to set a good example by ensuring that their lifestyles are in accordance with the mitzvot. However, the debate about the different application of the laws between Reform and Orthodox Jews might indicate that the question about 'privilege or responsibility' depends upon how one interprets the religious rules within Judaism.