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Jacob's Well, Shechem — Israel (as seen by an artist in 1900).
Photo: Coo-e-HPL
At regular intervals throughout the Hebrew Scriptures we read about occasions when God ‘spoke’ or God ‘appeared’. God’s presence is described in this way to give the people a clear sense that God is really acting in the lives and events in their history and to strengthen their belief of being chosen by God. When we look at the lives of the important people in the history of God’s people, these moments when God speaks or appears will be full of meaning.

When God speaks, it is an act of love for all of God’s people, and it invites a response. The people were not always faithful in responding to this love that was revealed to them. If you were asked to say in a few words what the Hebrew Scriptures are all about, you could say: ‘The Hebrew Scriptures tell about the love story between God and the Hebrew people. God was always faithful to them, but they often failed to love God in return.’
Covenant relationship

In all of the Hebrew Scriptures there is one event that stands out because it most clearly reveals God’s relationship with the people. This is the Exodus event, which is described in the book Exodus. Under the leadership of Moses, the people were led out of slavery in Egypt to freedom in the promised land. At Mount Sinai the Covenant was established (Exodus 19–20 and Deuteronomy 5–7). The covenant, expressed in the Ten Commandments, was an answer to the question: ‘How can we respond to God’s love for us?’

Read Matthew 22:34–40. What was the answer Jesus gave to the Pharisees when they tried to trick him with the question ‘What is the greatest commandment of the Law?’

ABRAHAM (1900–1800 BCE)

Abraham’s faith and God’s promise

We read in the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb. 11:8) of Abraham’s faith in leaving his father’s family in Haran and setting out with his wife, Sarah, for an unknown land. The command to set out on the journey in Genesis 12:1 is followed immediately by the promise: ‘I will make you a great nation; I will bless you and make your name so famous that it will be used for a blessing.’

Encounters with God

When he had reached Schechem in Canaan, God appeared to Abraham and told him: ‘It is to your descendants that I will give this land.’ As time passed, Abraham started to worry because his wife, Sarah, had not given birth to a child, so God appeared again to Abraham in a vision and renewed the promise (Gen. 15:18). Then Sarah began to share Abraham’s concern and suggested a plan to have a child by her maidservant Hagar. Eventually, when Abraham was 100 years old, God appeared to him and told him that Sarah, now 90 years old, would bear him a son and they were to call the son Isaac.

To emphasise the importance of trusting God, we are told that God wished to test Abraham’s faith by asking him to sacrifice his dearly loved son Isaac, through whom the promised descendants would be born (Gen. 22:1–18).

Scene around the village well (as seen by an artist in 1866).
Photo: Coo-ee HPL
Reflection on Abraham’s faith journey

Abraham made a courageous decision to leave the familiar surroundings and comforts of his parents’ home and set out for unknown lands. It would have been hard to explain why he was leaving and where he was going. He was trusting God. If you were his friend, what would you have advised?

Like Abraham, each of us has a faith journey to make. What are people looking for on their faith journeys? Is this journey of faith any easier for us today than it was for Abraham?

JACOB (1800–1700 BCE)

When Isaac was forty years old, he married the beautiful Rebekah, but she failed to bear any children for twenty years, so Isaac asked God to bless them with a child. God answered his prayer and Rebekah gave birth to twin boys, whom they named Esau and Jacob.

The birthright

Esau was born first, and therefore would be entitled to the powers and privileges of the head of the family when Isaac died. However, he did not place much value on this birthright and sold it to Jacob (Gen. 25:29–34). In chapter 27 of Genesis you can read the story of how Rebekah and Jacob used stealth and deception to trick Isaac into giving his blessing to Jacob.

On the journey Jacob encountered God

Isaac and Rebekah did not want Jacob to marry a Canaanite woman, so they told Jacob to go to the district where his uncle Laban lived, a place called Paddan-aram. During an overnight stop on his journey, Jacob had a dream in which a ladder linked earth and heaven with angels moving up and down. In this dream God spoke to Jacob and made a promise similar to the one he had made to Abraham. You can read this promise in Genesis 28:13–15. When Jacob woke up, he was filled with an awareness of God’s presence. The words he spoke are used in the Church’s liturgy for the dedication of a church or cathedral (Gen. 28:16–19). Jacob responded to this experience by making a solemn promise or vow, and he named the place Bethel, which means ‘house of God’.

Read the promise Jacob made in Genesis 28:20–22. Do his words give any clue about his relationship with God at this time in his life?

Jacob is reconciled with Esau

On his way to meet his brother, Esau, Jacob was afraid. How will Esau feel about what happened with the birthright and the blessing years ago? In the middle of the story of this journey we come across a short story of a wrestling match with a mysterious ‘man’ who will not reveal his name. To obtain meaning from this story we need to look for symbolism. The encounter takes place on a journey; it is night and Jacob is alone. A struggle is involved, described as a wrestling match. The encounter changes Jacob, first by the wounding in the hip and then by the change of name from Jacob to Israel (Gen. 32:22–32).
Reflection on Jacob's faith and our need to be open to God

Jacob had his faults. He was a crafty man who plotted and planned to get what he wanted. He was keen on material possessions. He did not find it easy to trust God. His own cunning seemed to serve him quite well in achieving his aims. Was he becoming the sort of person God wanted him to be?

For years Jacob was haunted by the memory of the way he had cheated his brother, Esau. Eventually he was reconciled with his brother and all his fears disappeared. He was a changed man. The experience of forgiveness and reconciliation is a very important part of our lives too. When we seek forgiveness of others, we too can encounter God, just as Jacob did.

Blessing

The communication of life, strength and success from the Lord. With this gift comes inner peace and peace with the world. When a priest, king or head of a family gives a blessing, it is a prayer that the Lord will bless the person.

JOSEPH (1750-1650 BCE)

The remaining chapters of Genesis (37-50) tell the story of Joseph. In this story we do not read about any visions or encounters with God, but God is acting through the events that occur and is able to bring about good outcomes from evil deeds.

Joseph was good at explaining the meaning of dreams. His brothers were already jealous because he was the favourite son, but when he told them all how he had some dreams that meant that he was to have power over them, they could stand it no longer.

Read the following passages:

- How Joseph was sold and taken to Egypt (Gen. 37:12-36).
- How Joseph was put in jail (Gen. 39:7-20).
- How Joseph’s ability to interpret dreams obtained his release from jail (Gen. 40-41).

In chapters 42-45 of Genesis you can read the story of how Joseph met up with his brothers, who had come down to Egypt to buy grain, and how Jacob saw his lost son again.
Reflection on Joseph and our family relationships

Consider all the reasons Joseph had to dislike his brothers. In what ways did good come from Joseph's misfortunes. What does this teach us about our lives?

THE LIBERATION OF THE HEBREW PEOPLE FROM SLAVERY

MOSES (1400–1300 BCE)

Two hundred and fifty years after Joseph's time a king came to power in Egypt who knew nothing about Joseph. The number of Israel's descendants had become so great that the Egyptians considered them to be a national threat. They were treated as slaves. Moreover, Pharaoh (the king of the Egyptians) issued a command that all male children born to the Hebrews were to be drowned in the river. Only the girls were to be allowed to live.

Read the story of Moses' birth and his survival in Exodus 2:1–10.

The Passover — God delivers the people from death

In order to persuade Pharaoh to let the Hebrews leave Egypt, God sent nine plagues that failed to make Pharaoh relent. Finally, God sent a tenth plague, the death of the first-born in each family, but the families of the Hebrews were spared. It was the night the 'angel of death' passed over the houses of the Hebrews and became known as the Passover of the Lord.

Read about these dramatic events in chapters 11 and 12:1–14, events that are celebrated by Jews and Christians each year.

The Exodus — God delivers the people from slavery

The great journey to the Promised Land begins. The departure of the Israelites from Egypt and their journey across the Red Sea is the beginning of a forty-year journey that is to form them into a people with a mission of revealing the true God to the world. The belief that God acted to save them from the Egyptians was so strong that the event is described in a way that emphasises God's power. The story is told with graphic details so that people could see in their minds that God was indeed acting to save the people.

Journey from the sea to Sinai

In the desert, water is precious: it is life itself. The people travelled three days without finding water to drink. When God provided water, the idea of the Covenant is given to the people: listen to God and obey God’s commandments; God will protect you and heal you (Exodus 15:26). For food, God provided quails that flew into the camp in the evening and a white honey-flavoured powder called manna. The story tells us that the people would spend forty years living on this food and learning to trust in God.

Read chapter 17 of Exodus. What lesson did the people learn from these two short and powerful stories?

The Covenant (Exodus 19:16–25; 20:1–21)

Moses and the people reached the wilderness around Mount Sinai (also called Horeb, the ‘mountain of God’, in some parts of the Bible). On this mountain, God revealed to Moses what he must tell the people. Beautiful imagery is used in Exodus 19:3–8 to tell of the promise of a Covenant. God wants a relationship of love and loyalty with the Hebrew people. To believe this wonderful and mysterious truth is very important for the people. Thunder and lightning, fire and smoke are used in the story to impress on the people how great and mysterious is the God who has chosen them. The words ‘they will be my people, and I will be their God’ are repeated by many of the prophets (for example, Ezekiel 11:18–20 is a part of a reading used in the Liturgy of the Word at the Easter Vigil). The Ten Commandments sum up how the people are to live in response to God’s love for them.

The journey from Sinai to the promised land

You can read the events on the journey from Sinai to the promised land of Canaan in Numbers 10:33–14:45, a journey that lasted forty years. The death of Moses is told in Deuteronomy 32:1–9.
THE STRUGGLE TO REMAIN FAITHFUL TO THE COVENANT

After the death of Moses and then Joshua, the people forgot about the Covenant. While they were establishing themselves in the Promised Land they were surrounded by hostile nations. They began to farm the land and worship gods who were supposed to provide favourable harvests as well as to protect them from attackers. The Judges led the Israelites in battle and reminded them of the God of their ancestors, but often the people failed to listen (Judg. 2:16–17).

Reflection on Moses and his relationship with God

The Israelite people needed a leader who would lead them out of slavery and into the Promised Land. Did Moses have natural talents that fitted him for this role as leader? Where did Moses’ power as a leader come from? What would have happened to the people if Moses had not responded to God’s call?

To what extent do we depend on others for our growth in faith? Is our faith journey a private affair between God and each individual?

THERE ARE MANY OTHER SIGNIFICANT CHARACTERS FROM THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES

Deborah was a prophetess and a Judge. She told the people what God required of them. She even went to battle with the soldiers to guide them and tell them the day God would give them victory (Judg. 4:4–10).

Gideon was called by God to deliver the people from the power of the Midianites, despite his protests that he was weak and unimportant (Judg. 6:11–16). He destroyed the altar of the god Baal. When he saw the size of the enemy armies gathering to attack, he asked God for a sign that Gideon really would deliver the Israelites (Judg. 6:36–40). To make it clear that God’s power was the cause of victory, God told Gideon to cut down the number of fighting men from 32,000 to a mere 300.

Samson was a giant with great physical strength and violent temper. He carried on a private war with the Philistines. But the story tells us that God was the source of Samson’s great strength and through God Samson was able to deliver the people from the power of the Philistines.
Reflection on life in Canaan under the Judges

In the land of Canaan the Israelites had to settle down and develop agricultural skills. The surrounding pagan tribes were more experienced farmers. The Israelites were tempted to think that the prosperity of these pagans was due to the worship of their false gods.

What are the false gods we are tempted to worship?

THE STORY OF RUTH AND NAOMI (1100–1000 BCE)

This story, told in the Book of Ruth, is set in the period of the Judges, and tells of two brave women. They trusted in God, who protects widows and rewards those who are faithful. Ruth married Boaz, and they were the great-grandparents of David, the ancestor of Joseph, the foster-father of Jesus.

Read the Book of Ruth. Why are Ruth and Naomi considered to have been brave women?

SAMUEL (1075–1035 BCE)

Samuel was a young boy when he was called by God to be a prophet (1 Sam. 3). Later, in chapter 7 of the first book of Samuel, we read that Samuel also became a Judge and liberator of the Israelites.
THE STRUGGLE FOR UNITY UNDER THE KINGS

When Samuel was old, the elders of Israel came to him and asked him to appoint a king so they could be like the other nations. They wanted kings who would lead them and fight their battles (1 Sam. 8:19–20). The first of the kings was Saul, and their main enemy was the Philistines, but not all the tribes of Israel were united under Saul. When he disobeyed a command that God gave during a particular battle, Saul no longer enjoyed God’s favour.

Reflection on Samuel and the desire for worldly power

Under Samuel’s leadership, the people asked for a king. They were looking for a powerful leader who would make them wealthy and prosperous like the pagan peoples who had great empires. They forgot the Covenant. God told Samuel, ‘It is not you the people are rejecting but they are rejecting me as their king’.

DAVID (1050–970 BCE)

While David was still a young boy, he was chosen as king to succeed Saul. When Saul suffered bouts of depression, David, skilled with the harp, was summoned to play for Saul to soothe his spirit. In the army of the Philistines there was a giant of a man, Goliath, who challenged the Israelites to send a man to fight him, but no one dared. When David learned how the Israelites were insulted and humiliated by this Philistine, he offered to take up the challenge. David succeeded in killing Goliath and was put in charge of Saul’s soldiers. As a leader of fighting men he enjoyed success in every battle, but Saul soon became envious of David and plotted to murder him. Even Saul’s offer of his daughter Michal in marriage was part of a plot to have David killed by the Philistines. Soon David had to flee and hide in the countryside with a group of loyal followers. While hunting for David, Saul went into a cave where David and his men were hidden in the darkness. David could have killed Saul, but chose to spare his life.

Eventually Saul was killed in a battle with the Philistines, and David returned to Judah (the southern part of the kingdom). He was anointed king at Hebron (2 Sam. 2:1–4), and after seven years was asked to be king of Israel (the northern half) as well. David’s army, with God’s guidance and help, defeated the Philistines and then captured Jerusalem.
The prophecy of Nathan

The prophet Nathan expressed the hope of the Israelite nation that the Messiah would be a descendant of David (2 Sam. 10–16). Later Nathan rebuked David for his sin.

Read 2 Samuel 11 and 12. How did David arrange the death of Uriah so he could marry Uriah’s wife, Bathsheba?

David was considered by the people to be the ‘ideal’ king of Israel, not for his moral or religious life, but because he gave his people security from attack by other nations.

Reflection on David’s sin and repentance

What was David’s sin, which is described in 2 Samuel 11 and 12? David did not seem to realise the seriousness of his sin until he was rebuked by the prophet Nathan. How did he react to Nathan’s words? How would you react to someone who reminded you of a sinful action you had committed?

SOLOMON (1000–930 BCE)

David had several older sons, but he chose Solomon as his successor. Solomon’s long reign was a period of peace, and there was growth in trade and building. He built a palace and a temple, but imposed heavy taxes on the people and used forced labour. This practice was deeply resented by the Israelite people. When God asked Solomon to make any request he wished, Solomon asked for the ability to be a good ruler, and he became famous for his wisdom and judgments (1 Kings 3:16–28). His wealth was vast, but was not shared with the people. Solomon is mentioned in Matthew’s gospel (Matt. 6:29) as an example of wealth and splendour.

Solomon did not remain faithful to God. His many foreign wives persuaded him to worship their gods (1 Kings 11:1–13). He is regarded as the father of Israelite wisdom writings (1 Kings 4:29–34). Not long after his death, the kingdom was split into the southern kingdom of Judah and the northern kingdom of Israel.
Read 1 Kings 3:16–28. How did Solomon show his wisdom in making a judgment?

Reflection on Solomon's leadership

Solomon asked God for wisdom and not wealth, and for a time he was a wise and prudent king. But gradually wealth, power and possessions became the important things in his life, and eventually Solomon and many of the Israelites forgot to base their lives on the Covenant made through Moses.

What are some evils in our world today that result from the pursuit of power and wealth by nations?

THE STRUGGLE FOR FIDELITY CONTINUES

Following a tradition begun with Moses, the Prophets play a major role in reminding the people of the Covenant.

ELIJAH (850 BCE)

The prophet Elijah is mentioned several times in all four Gospels. He is the prophet who appeared with Moses at the Transfiguration of Jesus. It was commonly believed that he would return to earth because he had not died but was taken to heaven aboard a fiery chariot in a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11). Miraculous events are a feature of Elijah’s life, as when the widow’s son is brought back to life (1 Kings 17:17–24). Ahab was a king of Israel and he allowed his wife, Jezebel, to promote worship of the god Baal. This led to a contest between Elijah and the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:20–40). Forced to flee, Elijah journeyed to Horeb, where he encountered God in the gentle breeze (1 Kings 19:9–14).

Reflection on Elijah, God’s power and miracles

The many miracles featured in the life of Elijah give evidence of God’s power at work. Is God still working wonders? Or are we too busy to notice them?

AMOS (760 BCE)

In the years following Solomon’s reign, there was great wealth in the cities and also great poverty. Amos was a shepherd out in the countryside when God gave him the task of calling the people to true religion in place of empty and showy rituals or the worship of false gods (Amos 5:4–6) and to end injustices towards the poor (Amos 5:7–11). Of course, the message was not popular with those in positions of power, and Amos was soon exiled.
Reflection on the message of Amos for us today

Amos was called by God to urge the people to return to the Covenant and to give up the worship of idols and the pursuit of pleasure and wealth. But they laughed at him and retorted, ‘Everybody is doing it. Why should we miss out?’

If ‘everybody’ is cheating and lying to gain power and wealth, does this make it right?

ISAIAH (760–700 BCE)

The writings of the prophet Isaiah show a great sense of God’s majesty and power as well as his tender love and mercy. He writes with great poetic skill. Many of his poetic verses are used in the Christian liturgy. Like all the prophets, he warns against evil; for example, he warns against religious hypocrisy (Is. 1:11–18).

By reading the following sections of the Book of Isaiah slowly and reflectively, you will gain some idea of his prophetic thought and writing skill.

- Vision of everlasting peace (2:2–5).
- Song of the vineyard (5:1–7).
- The sign of Immanuel (God with us) (7:13–14).
- The messianic promise (9:1–7).

Look for quotations from the prophet Isaiah in Matthew’s Gospel (chapters 1, 3, 4, 8, 12, 13, 15).

MESSIAH. The word comes from the Hebrew ‘Anointed’, which in Greek is christos. One whom God will raise up to save the people and establish the reign of God for all time.
JEREMIAH (626–587 BCE)

The call of Jeremiah to speak God’s word to the people is described in Jeremiah 1:4–10. The life of a prophet was not easy. People laughed at him and insulted him (Jer. 20:7–18). Like Isaiah, Jeremiah looked forward to a Messiah who would save his people (Jer. 23:5–6). In the time of the Messiah there will be a new covenant (Jer. 31:31–34). Jeremiah warned of the destruction of Jerusalem, which eventually took place in his lifetime. He was taken prisoner and carried off to Egypt where he died.

Read Jeremiah 20:7–13. What was it like to be a prophet?

Reflection on Jeremiah’s message for us

Jeremiah was hated by the people and the king because he preached a message they could not accept. Do you know any leaders today who are misunderstood because they honestly speak out against injustice?

Some of the evils that Jeremiah fought against are still common in our world today. Examples are lack of trust in God, oppression of minority groups, pride, and uncontrolled ambition. What can we do to overcome such evils?
The God Who Speaks and Acts

If we forget what types of literature we are reading in the Bible, we can easily gain the impression that God has changed since biblical times. Many of the men and women we have read about in the Hebrew Scriptures heard God speak to them or had visions or dreams that convinced them of God’s presence. The writers of those stories about the patriarchs, prophets and kings would insist that God is speaking just as much today and is offering healing and forgiveness in our world as much as he was in Nineveh in Jonah’s day. Only those with faith who reflect on the experience of life sense the presence of God.

Each of the characters in the Bible reveals something of the nature of God, and when we take them all together we gradually build up a better understanding of who God is. The Hebrew people started with very primitive ideas about God, and they often borrowed gods from other nations, but God took the initiative and continually used the prophets to bring them back to belief in the truth that had been revealed to them.

Shechem – Jacob’s Well
(Mount Gerizim in the background) as drawn by an artist in 1880.
Photo: Coo-ee HPL

Images of God

Many religions use images to represent their gods. Primitive people often associated their gods with the elements of nature: sun, moon, stars, wind, rain, thunder, lightning. Some peoples used the animals who represented strength and speed for their gods. The Hebrew people were forbidden by the Covenant to worship images, but in their stories they used images from the world around them to indicate God’s presence and power.

Read Job 36:26–37:24 for an example of the use of this imagery.

God is clothed in fearful splendour;
no wonder that men fear him,
and thoughtful men hold him in awe.

Many other images of God are used by the prophets. The figure of the ‘suffering servant’ is described in Isaiah and is applied to Jesus by Christians.
Characters from the Hebrew Scriptures in the Gospel of Matthew

Matthew's Gospel was developed among a community of Jewish Christians who knew the Hebrew Scriptures well. In this Gospel they express their belief that Jesus is the fulfilment of the 'Law and the prophets'. Many of the key characters of the Hebrew Scriptures are mentioned in the Gospel, starting with the list of names at the beginning of chapter 1, which shows that Jesus was descended from Abraham and that he is the fulfilment of all the promises made by God to the patriarchs and prophets. The first two chapters of the Gospel of Matthew contain an account of the birth and childhood of Jesus, and the next two chapters give the beginning of his public ministry. In these four chapters there are eleven quotes from the Hebrew Scriptures, starting with the words of Isaiah that are applied to the birth of Jesus,

The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel (Isaiah 7:14)

and proclaiming his ministry with the words,

The people that lived in darkness has seen a great light; on those who dwell in the land and shadow of death a light has dawned (Isaiah 9:1).

Open the Gospel of Matthew and see if you can discover why Jesus mentions the following key characters from the Hebrew Scriptures:

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in chapter 8:10b–12.
Jonah in chapter 12:39.
Elijah in chapter 17:11–12 and in chapter 27:47.
Moses in chapter 23:2–3.

A FAITH-FILLED PEOPLE

What can we learn from these characters of the Hebrew Scriptures? What relevance do they have for us, today?

To begin, we can reflect on their story and their journey. Their story is a story of struggle, not just physical struggle associated with moving from place to place, but also a story about the struggle to make sense of their lives and their God. That is what we mean when we say that we are learning about the faith journey of the Hebrew people. The faith of the characters we have read about reveals to us a beautiful relationship with God. This relationship involves asking God for guidance, accepting the challenge of undertaking a difficult task, accepting the possibility of being called to do something special, thanking God for the gifts that are offered to them — but most of all, believing in God and God’s message. We are reading about people of faith.

Choose your favourite character explored in this chapter. Why did you choose this character? What is this character saying to you about faith?