

- d. The Scripture presents Abraham as the “father” of all the faithful, and the Genesis narrative explicitly associates his faith with God’s promise of descendents (ref. 15:1-6; cf. again Romans 4:1-12). The Hebrews writer followed this same pattern, emphasizing Abraham’s faith that God would indeed give him a multitude of descendents. But he also recognized the significance of this endowment, namely that these offspring would share Abraham’s covenant relation with God. It wasn’t simply that Abraham believed God for countless descendents; *rather, he understood that this promised heritage pertained to God’s pledge to bless all mankind through him*. God was going to make him a great nation, but with the goal that he should be *Abraham* – the father of many nations, all united by their mutual share in the blessing God pledged to him.

The point, then, is that this universal fatherhood concerned covenant status and relationship, not biological descent (Genesis 17:1-8). God promised Abraham a son from his own body and descendents through him, but a son who would be a *covenant heir*, not merely a male offspring. Hence God’s promise – the promise that Abraham believed – pertained to his son Isaac, not Ishmael or any of his other children (Genesis 25:1-6). Isaac alone inherited Abraham’s covenant status and calling (cf. Genesis 17:15-19, 22:1-18, 26:1-5), and he then passed that status and calling to his son Jacob (Genesis 28:10-16; cf. 25:19-26). Isaac and Jacob inherited all of what the covenant endowed (11:9), with the heart of the covenant being the grant of a unique relationship with the living God: “*I will be your God and you will be my people*” (cf. Genesis 17:7 with 26:2-3, 23-25, 28:10-22; cf. also Exodus 2:23-3:17, 6:1-8 with Deuteronomy 29:9-13).

This is the lens through which the covenant vocation of global blessing must be viewed: *The promise of universal fatherhood (“I will make you the father of a multitude of nations”) was the promise of universal blessing (“in you all the families of the earth will be blessed”) – blessing that consists in sharing in Abraham’s covenant relationship with God.*

And viewed against the backdrop of the fall and man’s exile from God’s garden-habitation, this covenant relationship involves *reconciliation* and *ingathering*. The promise of descendents, then, was the promise that Abram was God’s chosen instrument for recovering the human race. This recovery would end mankind’s exile and see all of the earth’s families brought back to their Creator-Father such that they would be His people and Him their God, dwelling with Him in the place of His habitation. *This* was the promise Abram gave his *amen* to, and it was this “belief” – this genuine ownership of God’s purpose for the world and his place in it – that God accounted as “righteous.”

This is the narrative that Genesis constructs, and that all of Israel’s scriptures reaffirm and recount as the story plays out in the life of the Abrahamic nation. So it is the story that the Hebrews writer had in mind when he stepped aside from Abraham to comment on his descendents and their relationship to the covenant and its promises (11:13-16).

The first thing to consider is the referent of the phrase, “*all these*” (v. 13). The obvious referents are Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Sarah, who are all explicitly mentioned in this context. And it is true that all four of them (as also Abel and Noah) “*died in faith, without receiving the promises.*” But the immediate referent is the full assembly of Abraham’s faithful descendents; verse 13 comments on verse 12. Thus the Hebrews writer was making a larger point than might at first appear. Yes, the patriarchs lived and died in faith of covenant promises that they themselves didn’t receive, *but this was the case for all of their faithful offspring*, and that is the issue the writer was bringing to the forefront.

One might wish to dispute this interpretation, noting that the promise of Canaan was fundamental to the Abrahamic covenant, and Jacob’s offspring (the twelve tribes of Israel) did indeed obtain this inheritance. So also God’s pledge to make Abraham a great nation was fulfilled in the Israelite people and theocracy, which reached its pinnacle of greatness and power under David and his son Solomon. From this perspective, it can’t be said of all of Abraham’s covenant descendents that they did not receive the covenant promises; Israel did indeed receive many of them (ref. Joshua 21:43-45; also 1 Kings 4:20-21). But the writer’s commentary shows that Israel’s obtainment of these things is separate from the point he was making – the point he wished his readers to apply to their own circumstance.

- He knew full well that Israel inherited the land of Canaan and became a great nation ruling over a kingdom from the Euphrates west to the Mediterranean and south to the Nile River in Egypt (cf. Genesis 15:18; Deuteronomy 11:24-25; Joshua 1:1-6), *and yet he recognized that this land inheritance and national glory didn’t fulfill God’s covenant promise.*
- The writer already observed that the enduring promise of rest proves that Joshua’s conquest of Canaan didn’t accomplish that (4:8), and here he noted that the “all these” who “died in faith without receiving the promises” acknowledged themselves to be “*foreigners and temporary residents on the earth.*” That is, they understood that God’s promise of a covenant inheritance pledged an inhabitation that transcends Canaan, and indeed the physical earth itself. It was from this perspective, and with this hope, that they “*saw the promises and embraced them from a distance.*”

This interpretation becomes all the more clear with the writer’s assertion in verses 15-16: *If these individuals had their hearts and hopes set on the place from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return to it. But as it is, they weren’t interested in returning to that land, but desired a better country – a heavenly city that God has prepared for all those who know Him as their God.*

Those who believe that the writer had the patriarchs in mind naturally interpret his statements through that lens. Thus they point to Abraham leaving his home in Haran and not thinking to return to it, though he could have. So also Jacob, when he left Haran with his family after serving Laban for twenty years (Genesis 31).

This reading might seem reasonable at a glance, but it has two notable problems: it states the obvious, and it argues against the very point the writer was making.

- First of all, the patriarchs *obviously* didn't seek to return to their homes outside of Canaan, for they regarded Canaan, which God pledged to them, as their homeland. Indeed, Isaac and Jacob were born in that land, and Isaac never lived long outside of it.
- But much more importantly, this reading makes no sense in context. For the writer's point was precisely that these who died in faith – including Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – never saw *Canaan* as the inhabitation promised to them. It wasn't that the patriarchs never looked back toward Mesopotamia because they saw Canaan as their home; rather, they lived as foreigners and transients *in that land*. And not because they had no choice, but because their gaze was fixed on a different “country” that they welcomed as their true inheritance: a “city with foundations designed and built by their God”; a city that is a “heavenly habitation” (11:9-10, 13-14).

No, the author's point was precisely that *all* of Abraham's covenant descendents died without receiving what God promised, even though multitudes of them lived and died in the promised land – many during the glory days of the Israelite kingdom under David and Solomon. Whether in Canaan or outside of it, all of the faithful consciously lived as aliens and sojourners who saw their true homeland at a distance and welcomed it, not as present, but with the assurance of faith.

But this raises the question of how the writer justified his argument in his own mind. What was it in Israel's history and experience that gave him this insight and enabled him to make such a confident claim? *How could he know that the faithful in Israel were looking for a “heavenly” inheritance beyond Canaan?* This is a question that defies a simple answer, for the writer didn't derive his understanding from a particular set of doctrines or scriptural passages, but from the entire fabric and sweep of the salvation history as recorded in Israel's scriptures. A full treatment, then, is beyond the scope of this present consideration, but a few general observations should suffice to answer the question.

- 1) The first thing to consider is the significance of Canaan in Israel's existence as the covenant household. God did indeed promise the land of Canaan to Abraham and his “seed,” but what made it the “promised land” was the fact that it was God's own habitation. The significance of Canaan in the covenant wasn't Yahweh's desire for Abraham and his offspring to have a land to call their own, but that they should be His people and He should be their God. The covenant was concerned with *relationship*, and Canaan represented the joint habitation of covenant Father and sons; Canaan was Yahweh's dwelling place, and His pledge to give it to Abraham and his descendents was His pledge to *cohabit* with them – to gather them to Himself and dwell with them (Exodus 15:17, 25:1-8).

- 2) This understanding, then, shows the significance of Israel's tumultuous relationship with the land of Canaan. Internal strife and division showed that Canaan was never truly a place of "rest" for Israel, and this perpetual unrest betrayed the underlying alienation between the covenant Father and son. Israel's cohabitation with God was chaotic and strained and marred by unbelief and unfaithfulness (Psalm 78), so that He eventually departed from them, abandoning them to desolation, exile, and subjugation.
- 3) God abandoned His sanctuary land and left it desolate and virtually without inhabitant. But after giving the land its "rest," He opened the door for the exiles to return to Judah and rebuild His sanctuary and their dwellings (Ezra 1-3). Many did return, but many more chose to remain in the places to which they'd been exiled (ref. the book of Esther). This *diaspora* gave rise to Israel's synagogue life and continued right up to 70 A.D. and the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Romans.
- 4) Many Israelites returned to Judea following the Babylonian captivity, and the temple and city of Jerusalem were eventually rebuilt. These children of Abraham were back in the land promised to him, but they actually continued in exile with their displaced Israelite brethren. They may have been living in Canaan, but Canaan was no longer the "promised land" because Yahweh no longer resided there. The land was *ichabod*, devoid of the One who was its glory (Ezekiel 10-11), but God had also stripped it of the glory of the kingdom and dominion promised to Abraham.
- 5) That palpable emptiness continued through the succeeding centuries, but with Yahweh's promise that He would one day return. Then, at last, He would fulfill all of His promises to Abraham. For, in that day He would truly take a people for Himself – a family of image-children who know him in truth and conform to His life and mind. Then He would establish His everlasting sanctuary and gather His children into it to dwell together with Him in the harmony, peace and rest He ordained from the beginning (11:16; ref. also 8:7-12). In that day, and evermore, the earth would be filled with His presence and glory as the waters cover the sea.

These considerations show how it was that the faithful in Israel regarded themselves as sojourners in the land of Canaan. They *believed* God for His promises, and their collective experience and the utterances of their prophets told them that their God had not forgotten or forsaken His covenant oaths to Abraham; He would yet fulfill them, *but in connection with a unique son of Abraham – the son first promised to Eve, and then later pledged to David*. Thus the faithful in Israel looked beyond Canaan to a glorious, everlasting habitation that God Himself would build through the Abrahamic "seed." That day had now come, and the Hebrews readers lived in its light, dwelling with their God in His sanctuary as sons in the Son (12:22ff; cf. Ephesians 2). But they, too, had to live in faith, fixing their gaze on the completion of that habitation in the new heavens and new earth.