

The Early Leaders of Israel

This article looks at the leadership characteristics of the Hebrew patriarchs and their wives (sometimes called matriarchs or holy women) in the Book of Genesis: Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Leah and Rachel, and Joseph. We presume that you are familiar with their stories. We will attempt to evaluate these tribal leaders through the lens of servant leadership.

Servant Leadership

The modern concept of servant leadership is attributed to Robert K. Greenleaf. In 1970 he published an essay called “The Servant as Leader,” in which he coined the terms *servant leader* and *servant leadership*. Greenleaf put into modern terms an ancient concept that was taught by Jesus himself: “Let the greatest among you be as the youngest, and the leader as the servant” (Luke 22:26).

Larry Spears of the Greenleaf Center has identified ten principles that define servant leadership. These principles are widely accepted and are briefly presented here as background to our exploration of the leadership qualities of the Genesis patriarchs and matriarchs. You can find more in-depth explanation of these principles with an Internet search.

1. **Listening.** Servant leaders listen intently to others. They seek to identify and clarify the will of a group, and they listen receptively to what is being said (and not said).
2. **Empathy.** Servant leaders place a high priority on empathizing with others. They strive to see and understand what is unique about each person they work with.
3. **Healing.** Servant leaders seek to heal the hurt and pain that others—and they themselves—experience. This can be physical, emotional, or spiritual healing. They recognize that healing and wholeness are powerful forces for transformation and integration.
4. **Awareness.** Servant leaders are marked by general awareness of other people and their situation and environment. They are especially aware of their own strengths and weaknesses.
5. **Persuasion.** Servant leaders rely on persuasion, rather than their institutional or positional authority, in making decisions. They seek to convince others, rather than exert their own authority.
6. **Conceptualization.** Servant leaders look beyond the immediate problems and opportunities and seek to keep their focus on their personal or organizational mission and vision. They keep both day-to-day needs and the big picture in balance.
7. **Foresight.** Servant leaders seek to understand the lessons of the past and the realities of the present to develop the foresight to predict the future impact of their personal or organizational decisions.
8. **Stewardship.** Servant leaders use their personal and organizational resources wisely to ensure quality of life for future generations.
9. **Commitment to the Growth of People.** Servant leaders are deeply committed to the personal, professional, and spiritual growth of each and every person within the organization.



- 10. Community Building.** Servant leaders work at building community among those who work within their organizations, knowing that the trend to ever larger organizational structures increases the danger of impersonal treatment of individuals and the likelihood of poor decision making.

The Cultural Role of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs

Arabic cultures, both ancient and modern, have clearly defined cultural roles. In ancient Arab cultures, including the biblical cultures, people were organized by family groups or clans, sometimes called tribes. The patriarch was the male head and leader of the family or tribe. These tribes could be small nuclear families, but more typically they were large groups of people related by blood. The patriarch could have several wives and concubines. Their children, their grandchildren, and even their servants were all part of the patriarch's family or tribe. The tribe could also include other blood relations such as sisters, nephews (such as Lot), cousins, and these people's families.

The patriarch was responsible for the health and welfare of each person in his family or tribe. His decisions and actions determined if they had enough food and water. He kept the family safe from other tribes and the dangers of nomadic life. Family members looked to him for decisions and in return obeyed and respected his directives. It cannot be emphasized strongly enough that people needed to belong to some social group in order to survive. People on their own were not likely to survive the rigors and dangers of nomadic life. They would die of hunger or thirst or be killed by other tribes or marauders. Typically they would have to indenture themselves into slavery to survive. This was especially true for women. And the patriarch was the heart of this system of survival.

The patriarch's primary wife, who we are calling the matriarch, was also a leader in her own right. Due to the strict separation of men and women in Middle Eastern cultures, the patriarch would not have dishonored himself by directing the work of women. This was the responsibility of the matriarch. She would direct the work and determine the responsibilities for the women of the family or tribe. She rewarded or punished the women for their behavior. The patriarch expected her to ensure that the daily life of the tribe ran smoothly while he attended to the issues of pasturing, breeding, planting, fighting, negotiating with other tribes, and making travel plans.

It is difficult to apply the principles of modern servant leadership to this cultural system. The world of the patriarchs and matriarchs was a system with clearly defined hierarchical roles. The principles of modern servant leadership tend to "flatten out" hierarchical systems, emphasizing collaboration and interdependence. On the other hand, honorable patriarchs and matriarchs took seriously the health and welfare of the people in their family or tribe. The nature of their roles could be said to promote servant leadership, with its focus on the needs of others and the "mission" of the family, that primarily being their safety and survival. With these caveats in mind then, let's take a look at the stories of the four patriarchs of Genesis and see what we can discover about their leadership.

The Significance and Purpose of the Patriarchal Accounts

Genesis, chapters 12–50, bridges two important epochs in salvation history: the time of the first human beings recounted in Genesis, chapters 1–11, and the beginnings of the Israelite "nation" that starts in the Book of Exodus. In his relationship with the Hebrew / Israelite / Jewish people, God begins a new



approach in his plan to save humankind from sin and death. He establishes a covenant relationship with a special people who will have an intimate knowledge of him and his desire to be in communion with humanity. The “Chosen People” are to be a light for all other people, leading other peoples and nations to full communion with God.

Scholars see in the stories of the patriarchs and matriarchs a patchwork of ancient stories and diverse traditions that have been knit together to explain the origins of the Israelites and their manifest destiny as God’s Chosen People. This article does not delve into the JEPD theory of the stories’ authorship, the various doublets that occur within the text, or the historical questions raised by archeological research and other such issues raised by biblical scholars today. Rather, it focuses on the stories’ literary narrative. Imagine the first stories of the patriarchs being told around evening fires in tents and pastures. And what makes for a good story? Two elements are dramatic conflict and imminent danger, plot themes you will find in abundance in the accounts of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph.

For example, Abraham and Sarah face at least seven threats that could end God’s saving plan. Most of these are typical dangers in nomadic life:

1. Abram and Sarai could decide to stay in Haran and not leave their comfort zone (see Genesis 12:1).
2. Death by famine (see 12:10)
3. Other tribal leaders claiming Sarai as their property (see 12:11–20, chapter 20)
4. War with neighbors (chapter 14)
5. The loss of the bloodline because of a barren womb (see 18:9–15)
6. Testing God, which could lead to God’s smiting you (see 18:16–33)
7. The loss of the bloodline through child sacrifice (see chapter 22)

You can imagine the drama a good storyteller could create in the oral telling of these stories. These dangers raise the question, “Will Abraham and Sarah (or Isaac and Rebekah or Jacob, Leah, and Rachel) survive yet another threat that could lead to the end of the tribe God is trying to establish?” As you read these narratives, look carefully at how each danger is resolved. Most often the safe resolution is the result of God’s action, either direct or indirect. The underlying message is that God is active in human history and that the actions of ignorant, selfish, and sinful human beings will not be able to thwart his intent to form a unique relationship with a chosen tribe. He is their Divine Patriarch, ensuring their survival.

Abraham and Sarah

Abraham is the archetypal biblical patriarch. He is the great man of faith, the person God chose to be the father of the Chosen People. When we first meet Abraham at the end of Genesis, chapter 11, he is called Abram and he is not yet a patriarch but a loyal son of his father, Terah. Terah took his family as far as Haran while journeying from Ur (Babylon) to Canaan. When Terah dies in Haran, God calls Abram to pick up the mantle of the family patriarch and continue the journey to Canaan. Abram has only one wife, Sarai, who is barren.

For thirteen chapters (12–25) we follow Abraham and Sarah’s story. We see them survive one threat after another with Yahweh’s divine protection. So what can we learn about Abraham as a servant leader



through these accounts? At the risk of imposing modern concepts on ancient cultures, we can probably claim the following:

First, Abraham was empathetic. In his intercession with God for the people of Sodom (see 18:16–32), he shows great empathy for the few just people living there, asking for God to spare the city for their sake. He is also empathetic to Hagar and Ishmael's plight, only allowing Sarah to drive them off after God vouches for Hagar and Ishmael's safety (see 21:9–13). Second, we can say that he was a man who listened, at least to God's servants. He immediately stays his hand from striking Isaac when the angel calls to him. Third, we can say that Abraham was committed to the covenant he made with God and had the foresight to work toward it. He placed his faith in God's promise even with the obvious obstacle of a barren wife. He made thoughtful and careful plans for Isaac's future by sending a servant to find an appropriate wife for Isaac (see 24:1–67) and by sending his younger sons from his second wife to other lands to avoid inheritance disputes after his death (see 25:1–6). Finally, we can say that Abraham exercised servant leadership in his commitment to building community among his growing family.

And what can we say about the matriarch, Sarah? We are given little information about Sarah, and some of what we know seems rather negative at first glance. She laughs at God's promise of a child in her old age. She treats Hagar badly and sends Hagar and Ishmael away to an almost certain death in the desert. But there is more to Sarah than what we see on the surface.

First, Sarah's laughter (see 18:9–15) could be seen as a sign of her inner healing and self-awareness rather than a sign of disrespect for God's promises. Barrenness was a shameful burden for a woman in her culture to bear. She could easily have been spiteful and resentful, but instead her laughter shows an acceptance of the life she had been given. And her driving away of Hagar and Ishmael is also understandable in her culture. Allowing them to stay in the tribe would only be ignoring the inevitable conflict between Ishmael and Isaac that would occur after Abraham's death. The conflict over who would inherit the role of patriarch could easily destroy the tribe. With foresight Sarah persuades Abraham to take the necessary action of removing this threat to the tribe's future.

Isaac and Rebekah

In the accounts of Isaac and Rebekah, there is far less information to go on. In fact, Rebekah emerges as the more interesting of the two and as the matriarch who takes the most initiative in protecting the future of the tribe. Isaac seems to be a capable leader who does an excellent job in providing for the tribe. We learn of his success in farming and husbandry (see 26:12–14), work that requires planning, stewardship, and cooperation with the men in the tribe. He listens to and protects his relationships with the other tribes who inhabit the land (see verses 16–22, 26–31).

But it is Rebekah who shows foresight, stewardship, and a commitment to protect the tribe's future. She directs Jacob to deceive Isaac, resulting in Isaac's giving Jacob his final blessing. This may seem devious to the modern reader, but Rebekah's cleverness and foresight would have been seen as an honorable thing in biblical cultures. Both Isaac and Rebekah were disappointed in Esau's taking foreign women as his wives—a dishonorable thing to do (see verses 34–35). Not to mention Rebekah had witnessed Esau's poor judgment in trading his inheritance for a bowl of soup. The story gives us the information we need to understand that Esau would have made a poor tribal leader. Rebekah had the foresight and leadership to do what had to be done for the long-term honor of the tribe.



Jacob, Leah, and Rachel

We have nine chapters (27–35) that tell the story of Jacob and his wives. In these accounts it is initially easier to identify Jacob's deficiencies as a leader. He starts as a trickster and a deceiver, first fooling his older twin, Esau, out of his inheritance (physical wealth). Then Jacob fools the dying patriarch, Isaac, into giving Jacob his blessing (see 27:29), making Jacob the designated patriarch-to-be instead of Esau.

Jacob flees Esau's wrath, seeking safety with his blood relative Laban. During his fourteen-plus-year stay with Laban, it would appear that Jacob learns some humility. Now instead of being the deceiver he becomes the deceived, ending up spending fourteen years in indentured servitude to win the hand of his true love, Rachel. When Jacob finally turns the tables on Laban, he leaves with an impressive tribe of his own, with wives and children and servants and flocks of sheep and goats. Thanks to God's protection (see 31:24) and Rachel's cleverness (see verses 32–35), a last-minute disaster is averted and Jacob is able to enter in a covenant of peace with Laban (see verses 43–54). Jacob's wiser leadership now appears as he sets up a healing encounter with his estranged brother, Esau (32:4–22, 33:1–11). Now instead of seeking wealth, he gives his wealth away to build community with his brother.

In these accounts we learn little about the sisters Leah and Rachel. Rachel is envious of Leah's fertility (see 30:1), and we can assume that Leah is envious of Jacob's love for Rachel (see 29:31). Yet despite these painful circumstances, for the welfare of the entire tribe, the two women manage to live together and fulfill their role as the tribal matriarchs.

Joseph

The story of Joseph is different from the preceding patriarchs' stories. In fact, calling Joseph a patriarch, at least in the cultural sense, is misleading. He never leads a family or tribe. He is married to an Egyptian woman rather than a woman from Abraham's bloodline, a dishonorable state in the previous patriarchal stories. Joseph is more a patriarch in the religious sense of the title, a descendent of Abraham whose faith advances God's saving plan.

The Joseph cycle is more clearly the work of a single author rather than the patchwork combination of diverse traditions. It fulfills an important narrative function at the end of Genesis by showing how Abraham's descendents ended up in Egypt. It is a masterfully told story, a classic tale of dysfunctional family relationships. Its carefully constructed narrative framework is filled with numerous betrayals and reversals of fortune that lead to a tension-filled, emotionally charged climax of forgiveness and family reconciliation. Joseph's story is timeless, touching hearts for thousands of years.

What do we learn of Joseph's leadership skills in this narrative? Again we are limited because we see his external actions only; we are not privy to Joseph's internal thoughts and motivations. The events in his early life do not indicate that he was a wise servant leader. Rather, he seems to be a spoiled favorite child whose every move antagonizes his family rather than helps to build deeper community with them. But Joseph's time spent as a slave and prisoner in Egypt seems to temper his attitude. He recognizes that his ability to interpret dreams is a gift from God (see 40:8; 41:16). When he is put in an important administrative post, he exercises foresight and implied cooperative planning with local communities to prepare for the future famine (see 41:46–49). He keeps his focus on the long-term mission God has given him and balances it with the day-to-day work required to fulfill it. Although we might find it an abuse of power, he is a faithful servant of Pharaoh, using the famine as an opportunity to secure Pharaoh's "tax base" (see 47:13–26). And he does this in such a way that the people thank him for it! He is aware of his own gifts and the opportunities and threats that affect the people around him.



When his brothers come to Egypt looking for food, Joseph does not immediately reveal his identity to them. Rather, he puts them through a series of tests, which seems to be a kind of psychological torture. Was he exacting his revenge or testing their character? One can interpret the account either way; we are not given any insight to Joseph's interior state of mind. Judah's willingness to take Benjamin's place as an Egyptian slave seems to be the tipping point. This is the sacrificial concern for family that Joseph needed to hear from one of his brothers (see 44:30—45:3). Now Joseph's love and concern for his family and their safety overcomes any desire for revenge. He is magnanimous in using his authority to care for his family, and he says to his brothers, "Let there be no recriminations" (45:24).

Perhaps the final conclusion to draw from Joseph's story is that looking at human leadership is only part of the story of the patriarchs. Joseph recognizes his success as a leader is not his doing but is ultimately God's doing: "It was really for the sake of saving lives that God sent me here ahead of you" (see 45:4–8). The central figure in these accounts is not the patriarch or matriarch, it is God. In the end it doesn't really much matter whether the patriarchs were good, wise servant leaders or selfish, foolish despots. These stories are meant to teach us that God is not limited by human sin and weakness; he will accomplish his purpose despite our frailty.

