THE BOOK OF GENESIS
INTRODUCTION, COMMENTARY, AND REFLECTIONS

BY

TERENCE E. FRETHEIM

THE BOOK OF GENESIS

INTRODUCTION

The book of Genesis stands at the head of the canon. Its range is breathtaking, moving from cosmos to family, from ordered world to reconciled brothers, from the seven days of the creation of the universe to the seventy descendants of Jacob entering the land of their sojourn. Hence, it stands as a monumental challenge to the interpreter.

The canonical placement of Genesis is important for various reasons. Genesis is a book about beginnings, from the beginnings of the universe and various orderings of humankind to the beginnings of the people of Israel. It also witnesses to the beginnings of God’s activity in the life of the world. But creation is more than chronology. Genesis stands at the beginning because creation is such a fundamental theological category for the rest of the canon. God’s continuing blessing and ordering work at every level is creational. Moreover, only in relationship to the creation can God’s subsequent actions in and through Israel be properly understood. The placement of creation demonstrates that God’s purposes with Israel are universal in scope. God’s work in redemption serves creation, the entire creation, since it reclaims a creation that labors under the deep and pervasive effects of sin. Even more, the canonical placement makes clear that God’s redemptive work does not occur in a vacuum; it occurs in a context that has been shaped in decisive ways by the life-giving, creative work of God. Redemption can never be understood as ex nihilo without denigrating God’s gifts given in creation.

<Page 321 Ends><Page 322 Begins>

THE CRITICAL STUDY OF GENESIS
For more than two hundred years, source criticism has provided the predominant literary approach to the study of Genesis and the Pentateuch. In fact, Genesis has often been studied only as part of this larger literary whole. Hence, Genesis is usually seen as a composite work, consisting primarily of three interwoven sources (Yahwist [J], Elohist [E], Priestly [P]), with some texts attributed to other traditions (e.g., chaps. 14 and 49). Genesis thus grew over time, with these sources gradually brought together by redactors over five hundred years or more, from the United Monarchy to the post-exilic era.

This long-prevailing scholarly consensus has come under sharp challenge from a number of perspectives in the last generation. From within the source-critical perspective, the nature, scope, and dating of the sources have been regular subjects of debate. Few doubt that Genesis consists of traditions from various historical periods, but there is little consensus regarding the way in which they have been brought together into their present form.1

I view Genesis as a patchwork quilt of traditions from various periods in Israel’s life. The earliest stories date from before the monarchy; over time certain traditions began to coalesce around key figures, such as Abraham and Jacob, and more extensive blocks were gradually built up. The fact that the major sections of Genesis (generally, chaps. 1–11; 12–25; 26–36; 37–50) remain identifiable clusters within a relatively thin, overarching framework sustains this theory. A redactor (probably J) wove these clusters of tradition together into a coherent whole, provided a basic framework (perhaps focused on the ancestral promises), and integrated them with the larger story of the Pentateuch. While J probably worked early in the monarchical period, arguments for a later date for the Yahwist are attractive (not least because of the sophisticated form of its anthropomorphisms). Over the centuries reworkings of this collection took place, drawing on other, as yet unintegrated, traditions (the Elohist may be one such supplementary reworking). One major redaction is to be identified with P (probably during the exile); this redactor drew on materials from a wide variety of sources, older and more recent, and placed a decisive stamp on the entire corpus. It is possible that deuteronomistic redactors worked over this material at a later time, integrating it into a still larger collection with only minor touch-ups.

The purpose of these retellings of the material is not entirely clear and may vary, involving sociopolitical and religious issues. Each reworking made it ever more difficult to discern where the inherited traditions and the retellings begin and end. It is likely, however, that theological and kerygmatic interests come more and more into play, so that finally one must speak of the essential testimonial character of the material, a witness to the complex interrelationships of divine action and human response.2

Newer literary approaches have also called into question many of the assumptions and conclusions of the source-critical consensus. These strategies focus on issues of literary criticism rather than literary history, on the texts as they are rather than any history prior
to their present shape. Such readers attempt to hear the texts as we now have them and to
discern their various rhetorical features as they work together to form a coherent whole.
At times, this analysis has been undertaken with an eye to literary parallels in other
ancient Near Eastern literature (e.g., the Gilgamesh Epic).3

The book of Genesis has been one of the most popular workshops for these approaches.
Over the last two decades hundreds of articles and sections of books have mined the
literary riches of these chapters and unearthed many insights into the ways in which they
can be read with greater profit. Yet, it is not so clear how these gains are to be integrated
with the more historical approaches. While historical issues continue to be important, this
commentary will emphasize literary approaches in order to perceive what makes these
texts work.

Literary studies and analyses of the theological movement within these texts have not
kept pace with one another. For example, many literary (and other) studies simply work
with the assumptions and conclusions of classical theism in the analysis of the theological
material the texts present. On the other hand, some studies take pains to treat the
theological elements at the same level as any other (e.g., God becomes a character like
every other). I will attend to the theological dynamic of the text and recognize its special
stature in view of the community of faith that produced it and the canonical place
eventually given to it.4

Another lively concern in Genesis studies has to do with ancient Near Eastern parallels
(and beyond, possibly even Greece). Since the unearthing of the Mesopotamian accounts
of creation and the flood over a century ago, augmented since by numerous discoveries,
scholars have devoted considerable attention to discerning possible links with Genesis.
While this is true of Genesis as a whole, parallels to chaps. 1–11 have constituted a
special focus. Although direct points of dependence do not seem common, it is clear that
Israel participated in a comprehensive ancient Near Eastern culture that had considerable
impact on its ways of thinking and writing, both in details and with larger themes. Apart
from more formal links, such as language, some have tended to view these parallels
largely in negative terms. At the same time, Israel’s deep dependence upon its cultural
context extends even to theological matters (e.g., the understanding of moral order or
creation by word) and to the very creation-disruption-flood structure of chaps. 1–11.
Interpreters must maintain a fine balance between recognizing such dependence (finally,
a witness to the work of the Creator) and Israel’s genuinely new and imaginative ideas
and formulations.

Feminist scholarship has produced important studies that have influenced this
commentary at numerous points. This work has attended particularly to the place of the
woman in chaps. 1–3 and the prominent role of women in the ancestral narratives. Phyllis
Trible’s
work, in particular, has had an immense and salutary influence. In addition, anthropological and sociological studies have expanded our knowledge of the issues of kinship and culture. Generally, a proliferation of approaches is elucidating ever new dimensions of these important biblical materials.

LITERARY FORM

There are basically two types of literature in Genesis, narrative and numerative, to use Westermann’s language. Poetic pieces are integrated into the narratives as well (e.g., 2:23; 3:14-19; 16:11-12; 25:23; 27:27-29, 39-40; 49:1-27).

1. Narratives. Little consensus has emerged regarding the proper label for these narratives, though saga has been used often. The issues in chaps. 1–11 are particularly complex (see below). “Family narrative (story)” emphasizes the family unit as central to these texts, and in a way that has no real parallel elsewhere in the OT. While not historiographical in character and with much imagination used in the telling, the narratives do possess certain features associated with history writing, e.g., a chronological framework and some cumulative and developmental character.

The language of story may be most helpful in determining how these materials functioned for Israel. They are told in such a way that they could become the story of each ensuing generation. The readers could participate in a great, yet often quite hidden, drama of divine action and human response. At this juncture of past story and present reality Israel came to know what it meant to be the people of God. The faith was not fundamentally an idea, but an embodiment, a way of life. The language and experience of faith thus remained concrete and personal. Thus it has the capacity to keep the reader anchored in this world. It does not dissolve into myth, into some mystical world of the gods that suppresses the human or the natural, or some religious world far removed from the secular sphere. By and large, the world reflected in these stories is ordinary, everyday, and familiar, filled with the surprises and joys, the sufferings and the troubles, the complexities and ambiguities known to every community.

At the same time, the story form allows (in a way that history proper does not) an admixture of Israel’s story and God’s story. But even the latter is seen to be this-worldly, as God works toward the divine purposes in and through less than perfect individuals and world. And God’s story has the ultimate purpose, not of bringing people into some heavenly sphere, but of enabling a transformation of this life.

The capacity of the story to draw one into it in such a way as to encompass the full life of the reader has the effect of overcoming the distance between past story and present reader; the horizons merge. At the same time, readers will encounter that which is often different from their own stories; there are surprises and discontinuities as past and present life stories come into contact with one another. Some hearers may reject the story, but for
those who respond positively the story may provide a means of shaping identity (a constitutive function), a mirror for self-identity (a descriptive function), or a model for the life of faith (a paradigmatic function). One may thereby not only become a member of the people of God, but also come to know who one is, and what shape the life of faith ought to take in the world.

The narratives offer an exercise in self-understanding. They become a vehicle through which a new generation can learn its identity once again as the people of Abraham, a people who have trod in his footsteps, who have taken his journey. It is one more retelling of the past, not to find patterns for moral behavior, but to understand who we are as the people of God who have inherited these commands and promises, who have ventured down similar paths. We can thereby see where we have been, who we now are, and the shape of our paths into the future.

2. Genealogies. “Genesis is a book whose plot is genealogy.”9 Israel formulated family trees, often with social and political overtones. As with us, they were concerned about kinship interrelationships and tracking family origins and “pedigrees,” especially for important figures. Also similar is the way in which genealogies are woven into family stories. Major portions of seven chapters in Genesis consist of genealogies, an interest evident in other OT texts (e.g., Chronicles) as well as in the NT (see Matthew 1; Luke 1).

The ten תֹּלֶדְתֵּים (tôledôt translated either “genealogy”/“generations” or “account”/“story”)—2:4 (heaven and earth); 5:1 (Adam); 6:9 (Noah); 10:1 (Noah’s sons); 11:10 (Shem); 11:27 (Terah); 25:12 (Ishmael); 25:19 (Isaac); 36:1, 9 (Esau); 37:2 (Jacob)—constitute a prominent structuring device in Genesis. These Priestly genealogies are supplemented by a few others (e.g., that of Cain, 4:17-26). Genealogies have an enumerative style, but at times they are “broken” by narrative pieces (e.g., 10:8-12). They usually introduce a section, but at times they look both backward and forward (2:4; 37:2). One type of genealogy is linear (one person in each generation, 5:1-32); the other is segmented (multiple lines of descent), characteristic of branches of the family outside the chosen line (table of nations; Ishmael; Esau). Because genealogies cut across the break between chaps. 11 and 12, they witness to the fundamental creational unity of Genesis.

The historical value of the genealogies is much debated, but their function of providing continuity over these chapters probably means that they were understood as some kind of historical anchor for the larger story. Their original setting was the family or tribe, those most interested in such matters, and within which they were often transmitted orally over many generations. They show that every character is kin to every other, a key to Israelite self-identity, especially in times of conflict or dispersion. Hence, Genesis is fundamentally about one big extended family. The genealogies also demonstrate that Israel is truly kin to all the surrounding peoples, a fact that helps to develop the meaning of the people’s special role. The genealogies thus are integrally related to the essential concerns of the narratives.
Because genealogies order people into families, and witness to the continued existence of families in spite of much difficulty and dysfunctionality, they fit most fundamentally within a theology of creation (so explicitly in 5:1-2). They present “the steady, ongoing rhythm of events which stamp the course of human existence—birth, length of life, begetting, death” in which both God and human beings participate. Moreover, because the first of the tôledôt includes the nonhuman, genealogies link human and nonhuman into a larger creational family, in which every creature is, in effect, kin to every other. Even more, because genealogies also encompass larger human groupings (10:1-32; 25:12-18), they witness to the range of the divine creative activity in the ordering of the world.

The narratives, on the other hand, “are inherently messy . . . take account of much that is problematic and contingent, all the vagaries of human life . . . pursuing a far less predictable course of surprise and unanticipated events.” Naomi Steinberg speaks of genealogies reintroducing equilibrium into such messy family lives, restabilizing them for the next journey into a volatile future. Yet, she shows that this perspective is too simple. Some genealogies also contain elements of disequilibrium, contingency, and open-endedness (see 11:30; 25:19-26; 37:2); hence, the genealogies do not witness so univocally to order and stability as one might initially think. Indeed, most genealogies contain such an unusual element (e.g., 5:24 on Enoch; 5:29; 6:9 on Noah; 10:8-12 on Nimrod). Such features integrate narrative messiness into the very heart of the genealogical order. They show thereby that the genealogies do not witness to a determined order of reality. Cain’s genealogy (4:17-26) testifies further to this integration; it intensifies the contingencies of the prior narratives. Genealogies are finally insufficient for ordering purposes; another type of divine activity will be needed in order to reclaim the creation—namely, redemption.

FAITH AND HISTORY IN GENESIS

The book of Genesis does not present the reader with historical narrative, at least in any modern sense. Its primary concerns are theological and kerygmatic. Those responsible for the material as we now have it (and no doubt at other stages in its transmission) were persons of faith concerned to speak or reflect on a word of God to other persons of faith. The voice of a living community of faith resounds through these texts. Rooted in history in this way, Genesis is not socially or historically disinterested; it was written—at each stage of transmission—with the problems and possibilities of a particular audience in view.

Although scholars have a difficult time discerning those audiences, the text is linked to specific times and places. While the latest redactors may well have made the witness of the text more generally available to ongoing communities of faith, the material has not been flattened out into generalities. The most basic shaping of Genesis probably occurred
in exile. Traditions in Genesis are consistent with other examples of creation language during this era, as evidenced by Isaiah 40–55, which relates Israel’s future to the universal purposes of God. Affirmations of divine faithfulness to ancient promises—a veritable litany in these texts—speak volumes in a time when the future appears to stand in jeopardy. In attending to Israel’s ancestral heritage, both in narrative and in genealogy, the authors address sharp issues of communal identity. The various stories of the ancestors often seem to mirror the history of Israel, assisting the exiles in coming to terms with their own past (this will often be noted in the commentary; e.g., the parallels between 12:10-20 and the exodus). These texts spoke a clear word of God to exiled people.

The literary vehicle in and through which this word of God is addressed narrates a story of the past. Although the ancient writers were not concerned with reconstructing a history of this early era, modern scholars have had a great interest in determining the extent to which these texts reflect “what actually happened” (on chaps. 1–11, see below). This task has been made difficult by the nature of the texts themselves as well as by the difficulties of assessing extra-biblical parallels.

Scholarly efforts at historical reconstruction of the ancestral period have had mixed results. A period of some confidence in the basic historicity of these texts within the second millennium BCE has faded in recent years in view of the character of the texts and challenges to the interpretation of putative archaeological evidence. Since the biblical texts underwent a long period of transmission, they reflect aspects of Israel’s history all along the way. For example, relationships between these texts and other tribal and genealogical OT materials suggest that various historical realities from both before and after the United Monarchy are reflected in them. Various ancient Near Eastern parallels to patriarchal names, customs, and modes of life have at times been overdrawn; yet they are not finally without historical value, even for a second-millennium dating at some points. While it is not possible to determine whether the women and men of Genesis were actual historical persons, it seems reasonable to claim that the narratives carry some authentic memories of Israel’s pre-exodus heritage. At the same time, Israel’s valuing of these materials for its own faith and life appears not to have centered on issues of historicity; however, it is likely that Israel thought these traditions derived from pre-exodus times.

The religion of the ancestors reflected in the texts also figures in this discussion about historical background. The religious (and other) practices of these chapters are often distinctive when compared to later Israelite convention. Hence, later Israelites did not simply read their own religious lives back into these texts (though nothing seems to be incompatible with later Yahwism). They preserved some memories of earlier practices, including worship of God under various forms of the name El (see 16:13; 21:33; 33:20; El is the high god in the Canaanite pantheon), referred to as the God of my/our/your father(s), the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. The ancestral
God was understood to be a personal deity who accompanied this family on its journeys, providing care and protection. Some traditions understand that Yahweh was a name revealed only at the time of Moses (Exod 3:14-16; Exod 6:2-3) and that El was an earlier name for God (although the OT generally understands El to be an alternate name for Yahweh). The frequent use of Yahweh in Genesis is anachronistic in some ways, but it conveys an important theological conviction—namely, that the God whom the ancestors worshiped under the name El had characteristics common to Yahweh and, in fact, is to be identified with Yahweh.

UNITY, STRUCTURE, AND THEME

It has long been the practice in Genesis study to drive a sharp wedge between chaps. 1–11, the so-called Primeval History (Story), and chaps. 12–50, the Patriarchal (Ancestral) History. More recently, under the impact of literary-critical readings, there has been renewed interest in the integrity of Genesis as a whole.

In some ways this division is appropriate, with chap. 12 marking a new stage in God’s relationship with the world. Even those who sharpen this division often note that 12:1-3 is a fulcrum text, linking Abraham with “all the families of the earth.” Hence, it has been common to claim that God’s choice of Abraham had a universal purpose: to extend God’s salvific goals through this family to the entire world. Even more, this theme has been tracked through chaps. 12–50, with particular attention not only to its verbal repetition (e.g., 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14), but also to the numerous contacts made between Israel’s ancestors and the “nonchosen” peoples. Remarkably little polemic is directed against outsiders in the Genesis text. The promises of God to Abraham are intended for the world. The way in which Israel’s ancestors did or did not respond to this intention served as a negative or positive model for every generation.

The focus of such discussion has been so sharply placed on “salvation history” that creation themes have been neglected. Even more, it is striking the extent to which the more emphatic themes of chaps. 12–50 are grounded in chaps. 1–11, wherein God promises and blesses, elects and saves. God first establishes a covenant and makes promises, not to Abraham, but to Noah (6:18 and 9:8-17); God’s promissory activity in Israel participates in God’s promissory relation to the larger world (see the manifold promises to Ishmael and Esau). God’s work of blessing in the world does not begin with Abraham; it is integral to chaps. 1–11 (see 9:1, 26) and so God’s blessing work through Abraham must involve intensification and pervasiveness, not a new reality. Since God saves Noah, his family, and the animals (Ps 36:6), God does not become a savior with Abraham or Israel. Issues of creation and redemption are integrated throughout Genesis (see p. 321). God’s promises and salvific acts must finally be seen as serving all of creation. God acts to free people, indeed the entire world, to be what they were created to be.
Scholars have noted various forms of evidence for structured unity in Genesis, especially in the genealogies (extending from 2:4 to 37:2; see p. 325) and the divine promises (from 8:21 to 50:24). More refined efforts to discern structures throughout the book have been less successful, with the focus of attention on the four major, distinct sections. Links within Genesis have been discerned in chaps. 1–11 and 37–50, from family discord/harmony, to fertility (1:28 and 47:27), to the extension of life to a flood/famine-filled world (41:57), to the “good” that God is about in the creation and through this family (50:20); in some sense Joseph functions as a new Adam (41:38).

At the same time, the Joseph story does not occasion a return to Eden. Sin and its ill effects remain very much in place. Human life, more generally, becomes ever more complex as one moves from Adam to Joseph. These developments are matched by shifts in the imaging of God, whose words and deeds become less direct and obtrusive. God’s actions are never all-controlling in Genesis, but a more prominent role is given to the human in the Joseph story, from the transmission of promises to the exercise of leadership. These developments correlate with narratives that become less and less episodic.

The following themes in Genesis as a whole may be gathered; creation themes remain prominent throughout. (1) The presence and activity of God in every sphere of life, among nonchosen and chosen, for purposes of judgment and salvation. These two themes tie chaps. 1–11 closely to chaps. 12–50: God responds to ongoing human sinfulness through sentence and judgment (often involving creational realities, from flood to plague to fire and brimstone); God also responds in a gracious way to humankind, even though their lives have been deeply affected by sin and its consequences. (2) Blessing is a creational category in which both God and humankind, nonchosen and chosen, are engaged. This theme includes the continuity of the family through the struggles of barrenness and birth, and the fertility of fields and animals, often juxtaposed with famine. Blessing also relates to land, raising ecological considerations that are not far from the surface (from the flood to Sodom and Gomorrah). (3) The pervasive concern for kinship and family, an order of creation. One contemporary way of looking at chaps. 12–50 is through the lens of family systems theory and the manifestations of a dysfunctional family one sees throughout. The various dimensions of family life belong within the sphere of God’s concern. God is at work in and through family problems and possibilities for purposes of reconciliation (50:20). (4) Concern for the life of the nation also entails one of the most basic orders of creation. In the Joseph story especially, the writers devote attention to issues of economics, agriculture, and the dynamics of political and governmental life more generally, in and through which God is at work for blessing (41:53-57; 47:13-26). (5) The role of the human in the divine economy. It is not uncommon to denigrate the importance of human activity in these chapters. For example, von Rad states: “The story of Hagar shows us a fainthearted faith that cannot leave things to God and believes it necessary to help things along... [A child] conceived... in little faith cannot be the heir of
promise." But divine promise, appropriated by faith, does not entail human passivity in working toward God’s goals for the creation. The high place given to the human role, from creation to Joseph, testifies to the depth of God’s engagement with human beings as the instruments of God’s purpose.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. The following are standard commentaries that deal with the full range of issues faced by the interpreter. Those by Westermann contain the most extensive discussions of issues the text presents, from textual matters to the history of interpretation.


2. The following are commentaries or studies on Genesis geared for use in preaching, teaching, and personal study. The commentary of Brueggemann should be cited for its thoughtful discussions of the text in view of the issues presented by contemporary American culture.


3. The following are studies of special issues in Genesis from a particular angle of vision. Various articles of interest are cited in appropriate sections of the commentary.


OUTLINE OF GENESIS

I. Genesis 1:1–11:26, The Primeval Story
   A. 1:1–6:4, The Creation and Disruption of the Universe
      1:1–2:3, The Creation
      2:4-25, Another Look at Creation
      3:1-24, The Intrusion of Sin
      4:1-26, Cain and Abel
      5:1-32, Adam’s Family Tree
      6:1-4, Sin Becomes Cosmic
   C. 9:1–11:26, A New World Order
      9:1-17, God’s Covenant with Noah
      9:18-29, Curse and Blessing in Noah’s Family
      10:1-32, The Table of Nations
      11:1-9, The City of Babel
      11:10-26, From Shem to Abraham

   A. 11:27–12:9, The Call of Abram
   B. 12:10-20, Abram and Sarai in Egypt
   C. 13:1-18, Abram and Lot
   D. 14:1-24, Abram and Melchizedek
   E. 15:1-21, The Covenant with Abram
   F. 16:1-16, Hagar and Sarai
   G. 17:1-27, Covenant and Circumcision
   H. 18:1-15, God Visits Abraham and Sarah
I. 18:16–19:38, Abraham, Lot, and Sodom

18:16-33, Abraham’s Intercession
19:1-38, Sodom and Gomorrah
J. 20:1-18, Abraham, Sarah, and Abimelech
K. 21:1-34, Isaac, Ishmael, and Abimelech
21:1-7, The Birth of Isaac
21:8-21, Hagar and Ishmael
21:22-34, Abraham and Abimelech
M. 22:20-24, Rebekah’s Family
N. 23:1-20, Abraham Buys Land in Canaan
P. 25:1-18, The Death of Abraham and the Family of Ishmael


A. 25:19-34, Jacob and Esau
B. 26:1-33, Stories About Isaac
C. 26:34–28:9, Jacob, Esau, and the Blessing
D. 28:10-22, Jacob’s Dream at Bethel
E. 29:1–31:55, The Birth of Jacob’s Children
F. 32:1-21, Jacob Prepares to Meet Esau
G. 32:22-32, Jacob Wrestling with God
H. 33:1-17, Jacob’s Meeting with Esau
I. 33:18–34:31, The Rape of Dinah
J. 35:1-29, The Journeys of Jacob

IV. Genesis 37:1–50:26, Joseph, Judah, and Jacob’s Family

A. 37:1-36, Joseph and His Brothers
B. 38:1-30, Tamar and Judah
C. 39:1-23, Joseph, God, and Success
D. 40:1-23, Joseph, Interpreter of Dreams
E. 41:1-57, Joseph’s Elevation to Power
F. 42:1-38, Joseph Meets His Brothers
G. 43:1-34, The Second Journey to Egypt
H. 44:1-34, Joseph’s Final Test

<Page 333 Ends><Page 334 Begins>
I. 45:1-28, Joseph Makes Himself Known
J. 46:1–47:26, The Descent into Egypt
K. 47:27–50:26, The Emergence of Unified Israel
47:27–48:22, Joseph and His Sons
49:1-33, The Last Words of Jacob
50:1-14, The Burial of Jacob
50:15-21, The Full Reconciliation of Israel’s Sons
50:22-26, The Promise Transmitted

GENESIS 1:1–11:26
THE PRIMEVAL STORY

OVERVIEW

The last century has seen a proliferation of new directions in the study of these chapters, including comparative studies based on the discovery of ancient Near Eastern creation and flood accounts, new literary approaches and historiographical methods, innovative theological developments, and issues generated by scientific research, environmentalism, feminism, and other liberation movements. These realities have sharply complicated the interpretation of these chapters: Did Israel inherit theological perspectives from the larger ancient Near Eastern culture? How old is the earth? What about evolution? Does the dominion passage commend the exploitation of the earth? Are these texts inimical to the proper role of women in church and society?

It will not do to suggest that such questions violate the integrity of the text, which knew of no such modern problems. Every question asked of the text is contemporary; every reader will study the text through modern eyes. Indeed, personal questions can often make a text come alive. Nonetheless, the public canons of accountability, which historical-critical approaches provide, can introduce some objectivity into the interpretive process.

Even though the rest of the OT makes few specific references to these chapters (see Isa 54:9), rather too much can be made of this fact. The same may be said for other narratives in the Pentateuch. There is, for example, no mention of the Akedah (Genesis 22) and only passing reference to Jacob’s wrestling with God (see Hos 12:3-4). This situation stands in some contrast to the prominent use made of these texts in intertestamental literature, which may explain NT interest in them, at least in part (e.g., Mark 10:6-8; Rom 5:12-21).20 The NT use of these passages will, no doubt, shape one’s angle of vision in some way. Yet, the fact that these NT citations cannot be allowed to have a privileged position in interpreting the OT seems clear from the use of Genesis 2–3 in 1 Tim 2:8-15. Each NT interpretation must be integrated with other evidence and methods as one attends to the meaning of these chapters.
Determining the type(s) of literature present in these chapters has proven difficult. One confronts terms as diverse as a report of actual events or myth. Scholars generally agree that there is an admixture of narrative and numerative materials, but a more precise understanding of the former has been difficult to achieve, whether it be in terms of saga, legend, myth, fairy tale, etiology, story, or theological narrative. This discussion has not been very fruitful in helping readers understand the texts themselves, not least because there is no agreed-upon definition of words like myth. The word story, though imprecise, will probably serve us best.

One may identify these materials in two distinct, but not unrelated, ways: 1. They are typical or archetypal stories; that is, they explain aspects of human life in every age, including interhuman, human-nonhuman, and creature-Creator relationships. The various uses of the word אדâm (AdAm) point the reader in this direction (generic—1:26-27; 2:5; 3:22-24; 5:1-2; 6:1-7; the first man—2:7–4:1; Adam—4:25–5:5). This movement back and forth between humankind and first man suggests an effort to portray the human in both typical and atypical ways. The admixture of symbolic (e.g., the tree of knowledge) and literal language also pushes in this direction, as do the parallels with ancient Near Eastern myth.21

Clines emphasizes this typicality. “Genesis 1-11 is not for [Israel], as it is for us, universal history; it is their own history.”22 For example, the flood symbolizes the destruction of Jerusalem for its sinful ways, and the dispersion in chap. 11 alludes to Israel’s own Diaspora. Yet, while these texts may indeed mirror Israel’s own reality, the claims of the text are more extensive. The past and the present are not simply collapsed into each other.

2. These texts tell a story of the past, more particularly a story of beginnings. They speak, not simply of the general human condition, but also of the beginnings of life.23 This is not to say that the material is historical in any modern sense, nor does it necessarily make any historical judgments. Rather, these narratives offer Israel’s own understandings.

(a) There are atypical aspects to some texts, showing that Israel did not simply collapse their own (or any later) time into the time of the text. The long-lived patriarchs would be one clear example; Israel knew that it would never live through such a time again. Such a reality belonged to the irretrievable past; indeed, to live such a long life was totally beyond Israel’s experience. Other texts showing that the time of the text was understood to be different from Israel’s own include 2:25 (nakedness and shame); 3:23-24 (driven from Eden, never to return); 6:1; and 11:1 (explicitly unique world situations). On the other hand, 6:4 speaks of continuity between the primeval era and a later time.
(b) There is an etiological concern, wherein the origins of later practices or phenomena are rooted in the distant past. We could cite 4:20-22 and the origins of certain cultural activities, or marriage practices (2:24), or national origins (10:2-31), even certain divine decisions that God will “remember” (8:21; 9:14-16). More generally, we could cite the creation itself; e.g., the actions of God in 2:7 and 2:22 will never be repeated. Creation is not an annual event, but a once-for-all moment that stands at the beginning of time. Somewhat different are the sentences in 3:14-19, which are etiological. They too are typical, but such typicality will not happen whenever people sin; rather, these distorted relationships reflect a common human reality.

(c) The concern for chronology is evident in the various genealogies (see p. 325), which allow us to track the years from Adam (5:5) through every generation to Israel. We can discern this same motif in the flood story (7:11; 8:13-14). The presence of such chronology in chaps. 1–11 and chaps. 12–50 means that these two sections of Genesis share a fundamental understanding regarding typicality and atypicality.

In sum, these texts present an interweaving of the typical and what belongs to the past. The interpreter must regularly walk a fine line between these two possibilities.

STRUCTURE AND THEME

Numerous efforts have been made to discern the structure in Genesis 1–11.24 Most basic is the interweaving of genealogies and narratives.


Another type of structure consists of parallel panels: A/A′—Creation from watery chaos (1:1–3:24) stands parallel to the flood (6:9–9:17); B/B′—discordant sons of Adam (4:1-16) to the sons of Noah, a second Adam (9:18-29); C/C′—technological development of humankind (4:17-26) to ethnic development (10:1-32); D/D′—ten generations, Adam to Noah/three sons (5:1-32) to ten generations, Noah to Terah/three sons (11:10-26); E/E′—downfall, Nephilim (6:1-8) to the Tower of Babel (11:1-9). The Shem genealogy and Babel story are reversed in order to connect Abram in 11:26 with 12:1-3. However, this theory presents difficulties, as may be seen in the prominent role given to 6:1-8 as over against 3:1-24, which is collapsed into the creation accounts.

These structures may be linked to a more general one wherein chaps. 1–11 depict an ever-increasing growth of sin and severity of punishment. Yet, the Babel story seems anti-climactic after the flood; this episode suggests a modification, with a distinct break after the flood, and then a recapitulation. The first
movement is the primeval era, moving from sinful individuals (3:1-24) through family (4:1-26) out into the larger world (6:1–8:22), ending in catastrophe. Then there is another beginning (9:1-17, parallel to 1:1–2:25), moving also through sinful family and individuals (9:18-27) out into the world (10:1–11:9), only this time into a world that Israel clearly knows. The genealogy of Shem (11:10-26), once again, provides an individual point of reference that reaches out into the world (12:3b).

The larger structure is particularly helpful because it accounts for both stories and genealogies. It also attends to a variety of themes within these chapters: the growth and spread of sin, to which God’s acts of judgment are explicitly related (and hence not arbitrary), accompanied by continuing acts of divine grace, as well as the themes of creation-uncreation-new creation (see 6:5–8:22).

Fundamental to Genesis is the divine creative activity, which involves not only the beginnings of the cosmos and all of its creatures but also God’s continuing ordering and blessing activity within and without Israel (see p. 329). This anchor gives a horizon, scope, and purpose to God’s particular act of election and words of promise to Israel’s ancestors (see Reflections on 1:1). Indeed, even God’s promises to Israel are grounded in God’s promissory relationship to the world more generally (8:21–9:17), as is the activity of God as Savior (6:5–8:20).

Throughout these chapters issues of relationship are addressed from every conceivable perspective. Most basic are the relationships between God and the creatures, especially humans. The recurrent litany that all is created “good” stands as a beacon regarding the nature of God’s creative work and the divine intentions for the creation. The subsequent entrance of human sin, while not finally effacing the God-human relationship or the important role human beings play in the divine economy, has occasioned deep and pervasive ill effects upon all relationships (human-God; human-human at individual, familial, and national levels; human-nonhuman) and dramatically portrays the need for a reclamation of creation. Through the experience of the flood story, God rejects annihilation as the means to accomplish this reformation and graciously opts instead for a more vulnerable, long-term engagement, working from within the very life of the world itself. The world continues to live and breathe because God makes a gracious, unconditional commitment to stay with the world, come what may in the wake of human sinfulness.

GENESIS 1–11 AND MODERN SCIENCE

To claim that God created the world and all that exists is a matter of faith, grounded fundamentally in God’s self-revelation (see Heb 11:3). At this level the opening chapters of Genesis are a confession of faith. At the same time, in witnessing to God’s creative activity the biblical writers made use of the available knowledge of the natural world. Israel had no little interest in what we today would call “scientific” issues (see 1 Kgs
These chapters are prescientific in the sense that they predate modern science, but not in the sense of having no interest in those types of questions. “Pre-scientific” knowledge is evident in God’s use of the earth and the waters in mediating creation (1:11, 20, 24), the classification of plants into certain kinds and a comparable interest in animals, as well as the ordering of each day’s creation. Despite claims to the contrary (often in the interest of combating fundamentalism), such texts indicate that Israel’s thinkers were very interested in questions of the “how” of creation, and not just questions of “who” and “why.”

Israel’s theologians used this kind of “scientific” knowledge to speak of creation. They recognized that the truth about creation is not generated simply by theological reflection; we must finally draw from various fields of inquiry in order to speak the full truth about the world. The key task, finally, becomes that of integrating materials from various fields into one coherent statement about the created order. In effect, Genesis invites every generation to engage in this same process.

Difficulties arise when it becomes evident that not everything in these chapters can be made congruent with modern knowledge about the world (recognizing that no field of endeavor has arrived at the point of full understanding). If our view of the Bible insists that all information in it, of whatever sort, must correspond to scientific reality, then we will have to engage in all sorts of exegetical antics to make it work. But if we recognize that those authors did not know everything about the world (e.g., a source for light independent of the luminaries; the age of the world), then we just recognize that and move on. We have to take all the additional knowledge we have gained or will gain about the world (e.g., some form of evolution) and integrate it with our confession about God the Creator.

We are not called to separate the theological material from the “scientific” material and rewrite the chapter from our own scientific perspectives (however much that task must be accomplished for other purposes). The Genesis text remains both an indispensable theological resource and an important paradigm on the way in which to integrate theological and scientific realities in a common search for the truth about the world.
Many scholars consider the opening two chapters of Genesis as two creation stories, assigning 1:1–2:4a to the Priestly writer and 2:4b-25 to the Yahwist. Moreover, considerable effort has been expended in comparing and contrasting them (see commentary on 2:4-25). Newer approaches to biblical texts, however, have raised anew the question of the shape of the present form of the text. While the two accounts certainly have different origins and transmission histories, they have also been brought together in a coherent way by a redactor. As such, they function together to provide the canonical picture of creation. We cannot be certain that either account ever appeared in their present form, so theological perspectives based on these accounts in isolation are speculative and problematic.

Israel was not the only people in the ancient Near East to compose stories of creation. Sumerian, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian accounts have been unearthed in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As a result of comparing these extra-biblical texts with the biblical accounts, it is apparent that Israel participated in a culture with a lively interest in these questions. While in the past some claimed that Israel depended directly on one or more of these accounts, it is now more common to speak of a widespread fund of images and ideas upon which Israel drew and shaped into its own creation account(s). Early scholarly efforts focused on the Babylonian Enuma Elish in the century following its appearance in 1876; more recent efforts have concentrated on the Babylonian Epic of Atrahasis (about 1600 BCE), primarily because its sequence of creation-disruption-flood corresponds to the biblical account. Special attention has also been given to Egyptian parallels (e.g., creation by means of the word).

It is important to examine all such accounts and seek to determine their relationship, if any, to the biblical texts. The delineation of similarities and dissimilarities has long belonged to such work. Such dissimilarities as the basic purpose (e.g., the absence of explicit Israelite political interests), the lack of a theogony and a conflict among the gods, the absence of interest in primeval chaos, the prevailing monotheism, and the high value given human beings have often been noted. At the same time, to conceive of the biblical account’s relationship to these other stories fundamentally in disjunctive or polemical terms can miss their genuine contribution to a perception of Israel’s own reflection about creation.

Israel itself conceptualized the beginnings of things and told creation stories in several ways. Creation by word (followed by deed) is majestically presented in chap. 1; God as potter and builder working with already existing materials occurs as a prominent image in chap. 2. We may also discern traces of a creation account in which God fought with and achieved victory over chaotic forces (see Ps 74:12-15). It is notable, however, that these references are allusive in character, may refer to the exodus, and are present only in poetic literature. To assume that Israel understood such imagery in a literal way is as profound a mistake as to think of these Genesis chapters as journalistic prose.
Despite this important comparative and historical-critical work, we must not forget that these texts are most fundamentally the product of a community of faith engaged in theological reflection on creation. God is the primary subject of this chapter, which relates God in various ways to every creature. Even more, the chapter, with its rhythmic cadences, has a certain doxological character. Hence, the material may have grown out of liturgical use and the regular round of the community’s praise of God the Creator (see Job 38:7). Worship interests also clearly appear in the links among creation, tabernacle, and temple as well as in sabbath and religious festivals. Although these roots seem clear, we should not identify this chapter as an actual liturgy. While it may be identified as a didactic account, it has been shaped by liturgical use and worship interests.

At the same time, we should not collapse every concern in chapters 1 and 2 into a theological mold. This material provides considerable evidence of what we today would call scientific reflection on the natural world. Israel takes the available knowledge of that world and integrates it with theological perspectives, recognizing thereby that both spheres of knowledge must be used to speak the truth about the world (see Overview).

Structure. The first account possesses an obvious seven-day structure, signifying unity and comprehensiveness (the number 7 also serves this purpose). But other structures have been observed. Eight creative acts on six days (two acts occur on days three and six) may reflect originally diverse accounts, though such a scheme is more likely a deliberate structure in view of certain natural correspondences:

Day 1: Light
Day 2: Waters/Firmament
Day 3: Dry land/Vegetation
Day 4: Luminaries
Day 5: Fish/Birds
Day 6: Land animals/People
Vegetation for food
Day 7: Rest

In addition, the repetition of phrases provides a discernible rhythm: “God said . . . let there be . . . and it was so . . . and God made . . . and God saw that it was good . . . and it was evening and morning.” It is important to note that this rhythm is not absolutely regular (additions in the LXX sought to make it so). In sum, various structures overlap and, together, betray a less than perfect symmetry.

1:1-2, The Beginning. The difficulties in translating vv. 1-3 are evident in the NIV and the NRSV, each of which is grammatically defensible. We may note three possible translations. (1) Verse 1 is a temporal clause, subordinate to the main clause in v. 3, with v. 2 a parenthesis regarding prior conditions (see JPS). When God began to create heaven
and earth, God said, “Let there be light” (v. 2). Although this translation may be compared to 2:4-7 (cf. 5:1b-2) and ancient Near Eastern texts, each of these parallels is inexact (e.g., using the phrase “in the day”). Moreover, such a long opening sentence is uncharacteristic of the style of this chapter and other genealogies. (2) Verse 1 is a temporal clause, subordinate to the main clause in v. 2 (NRSV; also NAB; NEB; GNB). This rendering is less problematic, especially with the emphasis provided by the phrase “in the beginning.” (3) Verse 1 is an independent sentence (NIV; also KJV; RSV; JB; NJB; REB). We could interpret v. 1 as depicting the first act of creation followed by further phases, though such a view breaks up the seven-day pattern.26 Or, preferably, v. 1 may be seen as a summary of the chapter (v. 2 describes the prior conditions and v. 3 narrates the first act of creation). The most convincing evidence for this position derives from the genealogies in 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; and 11:10, all of which begin with an independent clause that provides a summary of what follows.

The word beginning probably does not refer to the absolute beginning of all things, but to the beginning of the ordered creation, including the temporal order. Time began with God’s ordering, and the seven-day time of God’s creating establishes a temporal pattern throughout all generations (see 2:1-3). The author does not deny that God created all things, but God’s creative work in this chapter begins with something already there, the origins of which are of no apparent interest. Also, the writer presupposes the existence and basic character of God.

The first of two primary words for God’s creative activity is introduced in Gen 1:1 (בָּרָא). Only God serves as the subject of this verb in the OT, and the verb has no object of material or means (though some uses refer to re-creation or a transformation of existing realities; see Pss 51:10; 102:18; Isa 41:20; 65:18). The word בָּרָא may be a technical term used to speak about the fundamental newness and uniqueness of what God brings into being. This view has sometimes led to the formulation of a creatio ex nihilo view of creation (see p. 356). While the word בָּרָא may speak of what only God can do, it remains metaphorical language. That God’s creating is analogous to the human sphere is shown by the common use of the everyday word make (נָסַר; AZâ; integrated in 1:26-27; 2:1-3; Isaiah 41–45) and the images of creating present in chap. 2 (e.g., God as potter or builder). Yet, no analogy from the human sphere can exhaust the meaning of God’s creative activity.

“Heaven and earth” specifies the ordered universe (see Ps 89:11), the totality of the world in which everything has its proper place and function. This phrase also testifies to a bipartite structure, wherein “the heavens are the LORD’s heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings” (Ps 115:16). The heavens are an integral aspect of the world as created. Other texts show that heaven as God’s abode is built into the very structure of the created order (Ps 104:1-3; Isa 40:22; Amos 9:6), a shorthand reference to the abode of God within the world.

Verse 2 describes the conditions before God began to order the cosmos. The language used to describe this pre-creation state of affairs is difficult to comprehend (on chaos, see
There are three parallel descriptions: (1) The “formless void” (חָסְרַן tohû w’Abôhû) is neither “nothing” nor an undifferentiated mass; the earth, the waters (deep), the darkness, and the wind are discrete realities (see Jer 4:23-26). As a parallel to 2:4-7, but with a watery image, it refers to the earth as “void/empty” in the sense of something desolate and unproductive. The earth, present here, only “appears” in v. 9. (2) The “deep” (תּוֹם tuhôm) has often been compared with Tiamat of the Babylonian creation story, but a specific link seems unlikely in view of both language and content. Yet, the motif of water as the primal element in other ancient accounts no doubt influenced this writer. In Genesis 1, the “deep” may be equated with the waters that cover the earth (see v. 9; cf. 49:25; Deut 33:13; Prov 8:24). Darkness may not be an absolute absence of light, given the act of separation in v. 4. As with the other realities in this verse (except wind), darkness becomes an integral part of God’s ordered world; darkness is not called “good” in v. 4, but neither are the creations of the second day; “everything” is included in the “very good” evaluation of 1:31.27

(3) A “wind/spirit from/of God” are common translations of the רְעוֹת אֱלֹהִים (NIV’s capitalized “Spirit” implies a Trinitarian view; the superlative “mighty wind” would be unique for this phrase in the OT). The verb (used in Deut 32:11 and Jer 23:9 for a hovering eagle and a drunken walk) may be translated in various ways—“move,” “sweep,” “hover over”—suggesting the ever-changing velocity and direction of the wind. But to what end? Since the wind is related to God, it involves purposeful movement. God was present, hence the activity was in some sense creative (which tips the translation toward “spirit”). A comparable use of this language occurs in the flood story (8:1) and at the Red Sea (Exod 14:21; see the creative use of spirit in Job 33:4; Ps 104:30).

The writer placed the three clauses in v. 2 in grammatical parallelism; yet the third clause works differently because the wind is the sole entity not picked up in the rest of the chapter. The reference to God moves toward the rest of the chapter; it brings God and raw material together, in motion rather than static, preparing for the ordering process to follow (see p. 355).

1:3-13, Days One–Three. God as speaker is another key metaphor for God’s creative activity (see Pss 33:6, 9; 148:5; 2 Esdr 6:38; 2 Cor 4:6). The centrality of the Word means that the creation is not an accident, but a deliberate act of the divine will; it expresses what God intends. The Word personalizes the activity; God enters into the creative deed. The Word bespeaks transcendence, expressing the separateness of God from the created order, which is not a divine emanation or birth. At the same time, God’s speech reveals divine vulnerability, for God’s speaking does not occur in isolation or function as command. The use of the jussive “let there be” leaves room for creaturely response (vv. 11, 24); the cohortative “let us make” leaves room for consultation (v. 26); the “let them have dominion” (v. 26) entails a sharing of power. God’s way of speaking creation communicates with others, makes room for others, with the attendant risks. God no longer chooses to be alone.
God’s speaking does not stand isolated from God’s making (e.g., 1:6-7, 14-16; see also Ps 33:6; Isa 48:3). This speaking-doing rhythm may reflect earlier forms of the text that have now been decisively integrated. Hence, the word itself does not explain sufficiently what comes to be; the word is accompanied by the deed. God does not create by “word events” but by “word-deed events.” Hence, existing in the image of God means having a vocation that consists of both word and deed.

The divine speaking often involves a speaking with whatever is already created (vv. 11, 20, 22, 24, 28) in such a way that the receptor of the word helps to shape the result. The earth itself assists importantly in creative activity (vv. 11, 24). While God’s work creates the potential for this creaturely response, it is creation from within the creation, not from without. Both human and nonhuman creatures are called to participate in the creative activity made possible by God.

Light. On “day” and “evening and morning,” see the commentary on 2:1-3. Inasmuch as the sun had not yet been created, this verse probably refers to a divine manipulation of light as a creative act. Light was thought to have another source (Job 38:19; Isa 30:26; e.g., light on cloudy days and before and after sunset). The sun, when created, augmented the already existing light. Israelites believed light, often a symbol of life and salvation (Pss 27:1; 56:13) and characteristic of the presence of God (Ps 104:2), was fundamental to the creation, pushing back the darkness and making life possible. Every morning was a kind of new creation.

“And God saw that it was good.” God acts as an evaluator. In this remarkable and recurring phrase, God responds to the work, making evaluations of it (2:18 implies that the evaluation is part of an ongoing process, within which improvement is possible). The “subdue” language (1:28) implies that “good” does not mean perfect or static or in no need of development. This statement carries the sense of achieving the divine intention, which includes elements of beauty, purpose, and praise. This evaluative move (as with naming or blessing) means that God remains involved with the creation once it has been brought into being. God sees the creature, experiences what has been created, and is affected by what is seen. God’s response leads to the further development of the creation and of intra-creaturely relationships. God’s creative activity may thus in part be determined by that which is not God.

“And God separated . . .” (vv. 4, 7). In this activity, too, God works with what has already been created to develop the creation still further, suggesting a continued unfolding of the creation. This divine cosmic activity may be intended to ground certain ritual distinctions (e.g., clean and unclean).

God acts as name-giver in vv. 5-10; God names the day, the night, the sky, the earth, and
God’s naming stands parallel to, but does not overlap, the human naming in 2:19-20. The naming (either divine or human) does not thereby create these realities. In naming, the deity responds to the creation. In effect, God looks at what has come into being, evaluates it, and discerns its place in the creation. The Creator thus not only speaks and acts, but also reacts to what has been brought into being and continues further. The act of creation constitutes, thus, no simple punctiliar act, but also involves a process of action and interaction with what has been created. In this process, naming entails knowledge of and relationship with the thing named.

Dome, Expanse, Firmament. Having no idea of infinite space, the writer thought the sky was something solid (Job 37:18), either metal or ice, held up by pillars (Job 26:11). This “dome” provided living space between the waters above (the source of rain and snow, flowing through windows, 7:11) and the waters on and below the earth.

The irregular placement of the recurrent phrase “and it was so” makes it likely that the divine speech announces the divine intention to create. Yet, the creative act is not complete until this phrase has so informed the reader. Sometimes this phrase occurs as a summary; sometimes it occurs between God’s speaking and acting (vv. 11, 14, 24). Even the creation of light is not complete until it is separated from the darkness (v. 4).

The creative word functions as an ordering word, especially in v. 9, where the dry land appears after the waters have been gathered into seas (the earth is already present in v. 2).

Verses 11-13 witness to a shift in God’s way of creating; the earth itself participates in the creative process (see above). The description of the plants and trees with their capacity to reproduce by themselves gives evidence for a probing interest in what we would call “natural science” (see 1 Kgs 4:33). Israel had not yet related plant growth to the sun, ascribing it entirely to the powers of the earth.

1:14-23, Days Four–Five. In vv. 14-19—arranged in a chiasm—the heavenly lights are created to divide day and night, to give (additional) light, and to serve as signs (i.e., time markers) for days, years, and fixed seasons (the word for “season” is also the word for religious festival). The tasks of separating and ruling (מַשָּׂל, Masal) are, notably, also divine roles, here delegated to certain creatures. Once again, the involvement of the nonhuman in the continuing ordering of the world achieves prominence. The fact that the sun and moon are not specifically named, and the stars are just mentioned, may reflect a polemic against religious practice in Mesopotamia, where heavenly bodies were considered divine and astrology played an important role in daily life. All are here acclaimed as the creations of the one God.

In vv. 20-23 two new elements are introduced: life and blessing. Animals and human beings alike (not plants, whose reproductive powers are inherent) share a blessing—the power of sexual reproduction. The NRSV and the NIV offer different understandings of the verbal form used in v. 20. In the NRSV, the waters would be parallel to the earth in vv. 11 and 24 in mediating the creative work of God. The NIV’s “teem” specifies a more direct creative act. In either case, ultimate responsibility lies with God. The fact that the
sea monsters (םני תניִים) are specifically mentioned may polemicize theories of a
divine chaos monster in other creation stories, ascribing their creation to God; imagery
associated with this myth occurs

in some poetic texts (e.g., Isa 27:1; Isa 51:9; Ps 74:13). In language similar to 1:28, God’s
blessing extends to birds and fish, focusing on the life-giving powers. That no land
animals receive a specific blessing is something of a puzzle.

1:24-31, The Sixth Day. God’s creations on the sixth day all share the habitat of dry
land. It may be something of a disappointment to human beings that they have to share
this day! As with the vegetation in v. 11, the earth mediates the creation of the land
animals (2:19 will speak of God’s forming the animals). The NIV interprets “creeping
things” accurately with its “creatures that move along the ground.”

On the last half of the sixth day, God creates human beings. God’s way of speaking and
acting signals the importance of this development—namely, inner divine reflection, the
cohortative “let us make” (followed by “our”), and the speaking/doing rhythm continues.
The plural may refer to the divine council or heavenly court (see Job 38:7; 1 Kgs 22:19;
Jer 23:18-23).29 Other interpretations of the plural are not convincing (the plural of
majesty is without parallel, and the plural of deliberation does not account for 3:22; see
11:7; Isa 6:8).

The “let us” language refers to an image of God as a consultant of other divine beings;
the creation of humankind results from a dialogical act—an inner-divine
communication—rather than a monological one. Those who are not God are called to
participate in this central act of creation. Far from either slighting divine transcendence or
concealing God within the divine assembly, it reveals and enhances the richness and
complexity of the divine realm. God is not in heaven alone, but is engaged in a
relationship of mutuality within the divine realm, and chooses to share the creative
process with others. Human beings are the product of such a consultation (אדם AdAm is
used generically here). The “let us make” thus implicitly extends to human beings, for
they are created in the image of one who chooses to create in a way that shares power
with others.

The phrase “image of God” has been the subject of much discussion over the centuries.30
This language occurs only in Genesis 1–11 (though implied elsewhere, e.g., Psalm 8). In
describing the relationship between Adam and Seth (5:3; cf. 5:1; 9:6), the words image
and likeness are reversed, suggesting that the second word dominates. In 1:26, likeness
may specify the meaning more closely, so that image should not be construed in the sense
of identity. Fundamentally, it means that “the pattern on which [human beings are]
fashioned is to be sought outside the sphere of the created.”31 The inner-divine
communication, which makes interhuman and God-human communication possible,
constitutes one basic element of the pattern. Generally, human beings are given such gifts
that they can take up the God-given responsibilities specified in these verses. The
“image” refers to the entire human being, not to some part, such as the reason or the will. As for likeness in body, one may suggest that this notion appears in the later physical appearances of the “messenger of God” (see 16:7).

The image functions to mirror God to the world, to be God as God would be to the nonhuman, to be an extension of God’s own dominion. In the ancient Near East the king as image of God was a designated representative of the gods, ruling on their behalf. Genesis 1 democratizes this royal image so that all humanity belongs to this sphere and inter-human hierarchical understandings of the image are set aside. That both male and female are so created (see also 5:2) means that the female images the divine as much as the male; both are addressed in the command of v. 28. The reference to both implies that their roles in life are not identical, and that likeness to God pertains not only to what they have in common but also to what remains distinctive about them (the emergence of both male and female images for God could be grounded in this text). The fact that the words male and female are not used for animals indicates that both sexuality and procreation are involved.

The involvement in the creative process of those created in the divine image takes the form of a command (1:28). These first divine words to human beings are about their relationship, not to God, but to the earth. They constitute a sharing of the exercise of power (dominion). From the beginning God chooses not to be the only one who has or exercises creative power. The initiative has been solely God’s, but once the invitation has been issued, God establishes a power-sharing relationship with humans. This initiative remains in the post-sin world as demonstrated in the use of God language in 5:1-3 and 9:6 as well as the use of these themes in Psalm 8. Hence, God appears less meticulously present in the life of the world; God serves as the supreme delegator of responsibility (for becoming like God in chap. 3, which bears negative connotations, see commentary on 3:22).

The command to be fruitful, to multiply, and to fill the earth immediately follows the word of blessing and involves a sharing of the divine creative capacities. God has brought the first human beings into existence, and the powers of propagating their own kind are now given over to the creatures (see 1:22; continued after the flood, 9:1, 7). The writer was obviously concerned about populating the earth. There was plenty of room for the human race to expand and grow. But should the point arrive at which the earth appears to be filled (the definition of which would need discussion), then the human responsibility in this area would need adjustment. New situations will teach new duties regarding the created order.

A study of the verb have dominion (יוֹדֵד rAdâ) reveals that it must be understood in terms of care-giving, even nurturing, not exploitation. As the image of God, human beings should relate to the nonhuman as God relates to them. This idea belongs to the world of the ideal conceptions of royal responsibility (Ezek 34:1-4; Ps 72:8-14) and
centers on the animals. The command to “subdue the earth” (טָבַע k'Abas) focuses on the earth, particularly cultivation (see 2:5, 15), a difficult task in those days. While the verb may involve coercive aspects in interhuman relationships (see Num 32:22, 29), no enemies are in view here. More generally, “subduing” involves development in the created order. This process offers to the human being the task of intra-creational development, of bringing the world along to its fullest possible creational potential. Here paradise is not a state of perfection, not a static state of affairs. Humans live in a highly dynamic situation. The future remains open to a number of possibilities in which creaturely activity will prove crucial for the development of the world.

When God conveys blessing (see 1:22; 2:3) God gives power, strength, and potentiality to the creatures. Such action, therefore, constitutes an integral part of the power-sharing image, a giving over of what is God’s to others to use as they will. God will not pull back from this act of commitment, which God renews after the flood (9:1).

God as a giver (מֵא nAtan, 1:29-30) provides vegetation to human beings and animals to sustain their lives. When combined with 9:2-3, we discover that human beings were intended to be vegetarians (Isa 11:7; Isa 65:25 imply that animals would be herbivorous in the new creation).

2:1-3, Creation and Sabbath. The repetitive character of this segment stresses the importance of the seventh day. The divine act of finishing the creation occurs on the seventh day (the NIV’s pluperfect, “God had finished,” is possible but not likely). The divine resting concludes creation—namely, sabbath belongs to the created order; it cannot be legislated or abrogated by human beings. “Finishing” does not mean that God will not engage in further creative acts (the absence of the typical concluding formula cannot be appealed to, for the structure of the creation account is not exact). These days did not exhaust the divine creativity! The seventh day refers to a specific day and not to an open future. Continuing creative work will be needed, but there is a “rounding off” of the created order at this point.

The meaning of the word day (יָמָה yôm) has occasioned much debate. The days, with evening and morning rhythm, are “to be understood as actual days and as a unique, unrepeatable lapse of time in this world.”32 Other possibilities (symbolic; sequential but not consecutive; liturgical) are less likely. While seven-day patterns of various sorts are present in ancient Near Eastern texts, no sabbath day or seven-day week or seven-day creation account has been discovered. Yet, the writer highlights not individual days, but the seven-day pattern. This very temporal framework, a work/rest rhythm, inheres as a part of the created order of things. Creation thus has to do, not simply with spatial order, but with temporal order as well.

Exodus 20:11 and 31:17 (which make sense only if the days are actual days) appeal to Genesis in order to claim that sabbath observance belongs to the creation as God intended.
it to be; hence its importance for all peoples, not just Israel. As with God, so with human beings; their six days of work are brought to fulfillment when integrated with keeping sabbath. On the far side of sin, resting on the sabbath becomes a sign that God’s creative order continues to exist in the present. When all the world rests on the sabbath (a sign that all are in right relationship with the Creator—Exod 31:12-17), God’s created order will once again be complete, will be realized as at the beginning. Yet, the noun for “sabbath” does not occur; this does not constitute its earthly institution (God does not command human beings about the sabbath here).

The divine act of blessing the sabbath is an unspoken report of God’s act of giving power and potentiality to a particular temporal order, in the sense that human honoring of the work/rest rhythm has the capacity of deeply affecting life itself (as does its neglect). The setting aside of one day when human beings attend, not to their own responsibilities and freedoms, but to God’s ordering of life honors the larger creative purposes of God and integrating oneself into them. It acknowledges that God is indeed the Creator and provider of all things.

In the act of sanctifying, God sets aside one day as different from other days, the full significance of which becomes apparent only later in the Pentateuch (e.g., Exod 20:11; 31:17). This work stands parallel to other divine acts of separation in the account.

Genesis 2:4-25, Another Look at Creation
Link to:

COMMENTARY

In the present form of the text, this section is probably intended to describe in detail several days of chap. 1, particularly the sixth one. Genesis 2 was likely not understood as a parallel creation account; it probably was once part of a larger story, evident particularly in vv. 5-6, which could describe a state of affairs after 1:9-10 (with dry land in place, but the separated waters not yet providing fertility).

Differences from chap. 1 have often been observed (e.g., literary type; structure, style, and vocabulary; center of concern). But there are also key similarities: God as sole Creator of a good and purposeful world, the key place of the human among the creatures, the co-creative role of the human and the nonhuman, the social character of the human as male-female. The chapter focuses on humankind and the particularities of their life, signaled by the shift from “heaven and earth” to “earth and heaven” (v. 4). Elohim, the generic term for the deity, occurs throughout 1:1–2:3. In linking the names Yahweh and Elohim in 2:4-25, the writer may have intended to identify Israel’s special name for God with the creator of the world (allowing Elohim to stand alone in 1:1–2:3 makes clear that we are dealing with pre-Israel realities).
While no parallel to this story exists elsewhere in the ancient Near East, certain paradise motifs, e.g. the tree of life, may be found elsewhere. Other OT passages suggest that this was once part of a more comprehensive story (see 13:10; Isa 51:3; Ezek 28:13-19; 31:8-9).

2:4-9, The Role of the Human. Verse 4 has long been considered the point of division between the two creation stories, with v. 4a usually associated with what precedes—with “genealogy” and “create”—and v. 4b with what follows. Some scholars view v. 4 as an introduction to the following story. I construe it as a hinge verse that looks both backward and forward (2:25 may play a similar role), signaled by the reversal of heaven/earth, the creation of which is assumed in chap. 2. The phrase “in the day that” (NIV, “when”) in v. 4b reaches back into the account of the creation of earth and heavens at a point before everything had been sorted out. Verse 5 functions similarly to v. 18, providing a perspective on the creation process before “not good” became “good.”

The word used for “generations”/“account” (תולדה ‏תּוֹלֶדָּה‏, ṭôledôt) is the first of ten such occurrences in Genesis (see Introduction), each of which introduces what is to follow. The phrase, though, remains linked with someone/something that has already been introduced in the narrative. The usage in Gen 2:4 functions most like 25:19 and 37:2, which also introduce new developments in story form.

Verse 5 startles the reader due to the parallel it draws between the rain and human labor (אָבָד ‏אָבָד‏, Abâd), both of which are considered indispensable to produce edible plants/herbs (“stream[s]” is of uncertain meaning, but insufficient for vegetation). The earth remains in a pre-creation state, not only because God has not yet done something, but also because no human beings are active. The divine purpose for the man in 2:15 is expressed with the same word (שָׁמַר, sâmâr, “keep,” “protect”). This change gives responsibility to the human being, not simply for maintenance and preservation, but for intra-creational development, bringing the world along toward its fullest possible potential. God intends from the beginning that things not stay just as they were initially created. God creates a paradise, not a static state of affairs, but a highly dynamic situation in which the future lies open to various possibilities.

Various images of God as Creator are presented in this section. (a) God as a potter (יָשָׁר‏, yâšâr; see Isa 41:25; Isa 45:9; Isa 64:8; Jer 18:1-6) shapes the man according to the divine design (2:7) and forms every animal and every bird (2:19) from the dust or clay (see Job 10:9) of the ground. The writer uses the same verb to narrate both human and nonhuman creation. The image of the deity as a potter creating humankind from clay occurs elsewhere in the ancient Near East. This image reveals a God who focuses closely on the object to be created and takes painstaking care to shape each one into something useful and beautiful. At the same time, the product of the potter’s work remains very much bound to the earth and bears essential marks of the environment from which it
derives (see 3:19). This combination of being made from clay and the image of God, being made of the same substance as the earth but made for dominion over it, constitutes a profound statement about human identity (links to royal themes have been noted). (b) God as a bellows breathes life into what has been formed. This “breath of life” is not the air in general, but God’s own living breath. God shares this divine “breath of life” with the human and with the animals (see 7:22, which adds jwr rûah). The result for both human beings and animals is “a living being” (יָמָֽה יָבֵא נְפֶשׁ חַיָּה; 2:7, 19; 1:20-30; 9:12-16). The divine act of breathing into the human (though it may be implied in 7:22) provides the only distinction between humans and animals. (c) God as farmer/gardener ([în nAtl]: 2:8-9) plants a garden and makes the trees grow out of the ground (hmda adAmâ, the source of trees, animals, and human beings). Here the garden lies in Eden (probably meaning “luxuriant”), a wider geographical area (in 3:22-24 the garden and Eden seem to be equated). These verses refer to the trees of the garden and not to vegetation generally (see 1:11-12, 29, where the earth itself acts). Verse 5 refers to edible plants/herbs of the field, which God planted, but they do not grow apart from rain and human toil. The writer devotes special attention to the beauty of the trees and to their provision of food (two characteristics of the tree of knowledge noted by Eve in 3:6), and hence placed there for the good of the human inhabitants. God provides for bodily nourishment and also for other pleasures of life—more than food and clothing! People will find that they depend on that which is outside themselves in order to live fully. The theme of a primeval paradise occurs only rarely elsewhere in the ancient Near East.

The tree of life (2:9; 3:22, 24). The awkward syntax of these texts, which occur at the beginning and end of the story, suggests that stories with different trees have been combined. Some think that only one tree is intended (“the tree of life, namely, the tree of knowledge”), but most interpreters discern two trees in the middle of the garden. The first tree mentioned symbolizes the fullest possible life, the eating of which would grant continuing life (such a tree or plant occurs in the Gilgamesh Epic and elsewhere). The reference in 3:22 indicates that one would need to eat from that tree only once, as was also the case with the tree of knowledge.

The narrator gives no indication that the man and woman know of this tree’s existence until 3:22. Readers encounter the tree of life in 2:9 and then again only in 3:22-24. Genesis 3:22 implies that the man and woman, having eaten of the other tree and knowing that death has become a near possibility, would with their new knowledge become aware of the tree of life and its import and, by eating of it, live forever.

The relationship between the tree of life and the breath of life (2:7-9; יָיִיָּה יָהַיָּה) remains uncertain. When humans are excluded from the tree of life (3:22), they obviously retain God’s breath of life. Hence, the tree must represent possibilities for life not entailed in the breath of life. The fact that more is at stake than issues of quality of life seems clear since the deity expresses concern in 3:22 regarding the possibility of humans living forever. Having the breath of life does not entail immortality. Human beings are created mortal, but eating of the tree of life was a means by which human beings might receive a special blessing—namely, ongoing life; no ontological change seems in view, hence
immortality would not be the right word to describe the result of their eating the fruit. Some this-worldly form of “eternal life” (not an afterlife) may be in mind.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil (2:9, 17). (The woman refers to it in 3:3 as implied by 3:6; the changes she makes in the command mean that her description of the trees may be less than exact.) The name of this tree gives it a symbolic value, but that value has proved to be difficult to discern. In view of 3:22 (which the serpent affirms, 3:5), God knows good and evil, and human beings attain that godlike knowledge upon eating of the tree, though it is a knowledge with which they cannot live very well. Any meaning assigned to the tree must recognize that it has to do with a “knowledge” that God has. This makes it unlikely that it has to do either with sexual knowledge/experience, which 2:24-25 and 1:27-28 already imply, or knowledge of/experience with sin or wickedness.

The phrase “good and evil” functions as an idiomatic expression in which the individual words do not have their normal meanings (hence the phrase does not speak to the question of the existence of evil; a knowledge of the “good” is assumed from 2:9; 3:5). For example, the NIV translates the phrase in 24:50 with “one way or the other,” referring to a divine decision, not the servant’s (see 31:24, 29). The phrase with the verb know (יָדַ֔עַ yāda‘) occurs twice elsewhere (Deut 1:39; 2 Sam 19:35; cf. Isa 7:15-16), specifying those too young or too old to decide for themselves what serves their own best interests. Comparable phrases in 1 Kgs 3:9 and 2 Sam 14:17 speak of kings discerning the best interests of those who come within their jurisdiction.

For the writer, the key issue involves the discernment of what is in one’s own best interests, not the fruit of the tree as fruit or any specific content of the knowledge or knowledge generally. The text defines who finally decides what is in the best interests of the human. The tree and the command together define the limits of creatureliness; to transgress these limits entails deciding about one’s own best interests, to become autonomous, independent of the will of God for one’s life. To refrain from eating recognizes creaturely limitations and the decisiveness of the will of God for true human life. This creational command presents a positive use of law, wherein certain limits are recognized as being in the best interests of human life and well-being.

2:10-14, The Rivers. This material both retards the action of the narrative and prepares for the end of chap. 3. The narrator creates a specific link between the beginning of things and the later world (see 2:24); vv. 10-14 belong to an identifiable place on the map (though its location is disputed). The Garden of Eden does not equate with the world. We have a glimpse of the world outside the garden. The river that waters the garden flows out of Eden and through the major sections of the then known world, making the latter dependent on the former. Even more, things in the garden are “good” in their own right (v. 12), hence in continuity with the good and diverse creation of chap. 1. Moreover, the
worlds out beyond Eden already have names, suggesting that they were believed to be inhabited (which would coincide with the fuller population in chap. 4). Rivers and places no longer known to us (Pishon, Gihon, Havilah, and Cush 34) combine with the known—Assyria and the Tigris-Euphrates valley. Even life outside the garden (eventually to be home to Adam and Eve) has significant continuities with life inside the garden. The two humans will not move from a world of blessing to one devoid of blessing.

2:15-17, Permission and Prohibition. God places the man in the garden—resuming v. 8—to work/serve ((Abad) the ground and care for it (šāmār) in fulfillment of the command to subdue the earth (ʾērēš and ʾādāmā are often interchangeable). Given the use of ʿābad in v. 5, this role involves not only simple maintenance or preservation, but a part of the creative process itself. The role given the human in v. 15 may be compared to the dominion/servant role in 1:28.

God addresses the man in vv. 16-17 (given the anthropomorphisms, God is probably embodied), giving permission to eat from every tree (which would include the tree of life) except the tree of knowledge, and a prohibition; in effect, this constitutes a version of the first commandment (see commentary on 2:9), a concern not evident in chap. 1. God’s first speech to humans does not center on God’s place in the world, but focuses instead on the creatures, on their place and role, and the gifts they are given. The deity expresses no concern that the creature might exalt itself at God’s expense.

The permission establishes an incredible range of freedom for the creatures; hence, the command that follows certainly does not seem repressive. The command may appear surprising, but it indicates the important role law has to play as a creational, pre-sin reality; command inheres as an integral part of the created order. To be truly a creature entails limits; to honor limits becomes necessary if the creation will develop as God intends. Yet, while the language takes the form of command, the issue involves trust in the word of God. Decisions faced by the humans will concern not only themselves, but also choices that have implications for their relationship with God. The command involves the visible and tangible (see the testing of Abraham, 22:1). Trust in God will often manifest itself in concrete matters.

Over against the tree of life, the tree of knowledge

raises the possibility of human death. The two trees represent two possible futures: life and death. To be separated from the tree of life (3:22-24) represents the broken nature of the relationship, with death being inevitable. “The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life,/ but lawlessness takes away lives” (Prov 11:30 RSV; see Prov 3:18; 13:12; 15:4; Dan 4:10-12). The metaphor of eating, so prominent in this text, signifies the taking of something into one’s very self with effects on one’s total being (“you are what you eat”).

“You shall surely die” stipulates a negative consequence, a specific penalty for eating, but the meaning remains difficult to discern. It does not mean “you shall become mortal”;
they already are mortal beings. Death as such belongs to God’s created order. It seems to imply capital punishment without delay (though “in the day” could mean “when” more generally, so the NIV); yet, they do not die and God nowhere takes back the threat. It may be that death (and life) has a comprehensive meaning in this story (as in the OT generally; see Hos 13:1), associated with a breakdown in relationships to God, to each other, and to the created order. This larger view of death comes to a climax when humans are excluded from the tree of life and lose the opportunity to overcome their natural mortality. So death does become pervasive within their lives even in the garden. At the same time, physical death would not have occurred had they managed to eat from the tree of life. If God had not acted, the serpent would have been right regarding physical death.

If humans obey the command, they recognize that they do have limitations in the exercise of their God-given responsibilities and that a right relationship to God provides an indispensable matrix for the proper exercise of that power.

2:18-25, The Creation of Woman. God evaluates the situation and declares that something is not (yet?) good; the man remains alone (God’s presence does not suffice). God, probably, speaks within the divine council; so the reader, again, overhears the inner divine reflective process (see 1:26). The man’s not being alone correlates with God’s not being alone. God identifies a problem with the state of creation at this point and moves to make changes that would improve it.

For the woman to be called “helper” (ezer)—a word used by both God and the narrator—carries no implications regarding the status of the one who helps; indeed, God is often called the helper of human beings (Ps 121:1-2). The NRSV’s “partner” may capture the note of correspondence more than “suitable” or “fitting.” The notion of Eve as “helper” cannot be collapsed into procreation, not least because the immediate outcome specified in vv. 24-25 does not focus on this concern; the term does not offer evidence of a hierarchy.

Initially, God “forms” every animal and bird. Indeed, God does not simply create them, but “brings” them to the human in a kind of parade (the same verb is used in 6:19). This is a remarkable image of God. Twice, God “brings” a creature—first the animals, then the woman—before the man. God thereby is placed at the service of the “good” of the human being, presenting creative possibilities before him. Twice, God lets the human being determine whether the animals or the woman are adequate to move the evaluation from “not good” to “good.” And whatever—without qualification—the man called every living creature, that was its name (v. 19). Phyllis Trible observes that God, who dominates the narrative up to this point, now recedes into the background, “not as the authoritarian controller of events but as the generous delegator of power who even forfeits the right to reverse human decisions.” In the first case, the man does not accept what God presents; God accepts the human decision and goes back to the drawing board.

The man recognizes that the woman will address the stated need. God recognizes the creational import of this human decision, for no additional divine word or act follows.
God lets the man’s exultation over the woman fill the scene; the human word (the first one uttered) serves as an evaluation that this situation may be termed “good.” The narrator (vv. 24-25) then draws the reader into the closeness of the male-female bond, citing the implication of the human decision for the future. These verses show that the bond involves more than issues of procreation; the relationship includes companionship, intimate and otherwise. The naming by the human parallels God’s naming (1:5-10); it belongs as a part of the creative process, discerning the nature of intra-creaturely relationships. For the woman to be named by the man does not subordinate the named to the namer, any more than does Hagar’s naming of God subordinate the deity to her (16:13). Naming involves discernment regarding the nature of relationships (the male “rule” over the female derives from sin, 3:16).

God designs and builds (hbn bAnâ) woman out of already existing material. This image may be compared to that of the potter who both designs and fashions an object. The “rib” is only one step removed from the dust, and hence stresses common ultimate origins, but the different image may reflect differences in design (no known ancient parallel exists for the separate creation of woman). The relationship of the woman to the “rib” entails no subordination, any more than man’s being created from the ground implies his subordination to it. (Some suggest “side,” Exod 25:12-14, but “rib” best links with the bone/flesh reference. See “boards” in 1 Kgs 6:15-16; the word usually occurs in architectural descriptions.) Unlike the dust, the rib is living material. The theological force of this creation is implied in 1:26-27—namely, the explicit equality of man and woman in the image of God (being created first or last remains immaterial). This description of the human creation emphasizes the personal attention implicit in the image of God as builder.

Contrary to some recent opinions, the הָגוֹן (âdâm) ought not to be considered an “earth creature” without sexual identity until after the creation of woman. Without an explicit linguistic marker that the meaning of )AdAm changes from “earth creature” to “the man,” this word should be read with the same meaning throughout. Indeed, the word âdâm would have to be read with two different meanings within v. 22 if this distinction were licit. Moreover, v. 22, which speaks explicitly of God’s creation of the woman, would lack a comparable creation account for the man. Verse 23 also refers to the man by the word vya (îs; unambiguously male) as the one from whom the woman was taken.

The point at which )AdAm becomes the proper name Adam remains uncertain. Genesis 4:25 provides the first unequivocal instance of âdâm without the definite article (so NRSV), though the NRSV provides footnotes for 2:20 (NIV begins Adam here); 3:17 (so RSV); and 3:21 (so NEB). These three texts are ambiguous (the NIV also uses the proper name in 3:20 and 4:1, but footnotes “the man”). The movement of the meaning of )AdAm back and forth between generic humankind (1:26-27; 5:1-2), the first man, and
Adam probably reflects an effort both to tell a story of a past and to provide a mirroring story for every age.

The language of “one flesh” (v. 24) functions as a literal reference at one level. The man is less than what he was before this surgery, and yet humankind has become more than it was—i.e., now male and female. The writer has not depicted a “birth” of the woman from the man, as if the man’s creative powers were now in focus. The man was in a deep sleep; not to guard the mystery, but to stress that God was working creatively! The deity’s initiative remains as central in the creation of woman as it was with the man.

In the wake of this divine act, the man’s first words are recorded (note the assumption of a full-blown vocabulary), unlike the “silent” naming of the animals. The naming entails a difference from but no authority over the woman. The use of אדם (יָהּ, “man”) and אישה (יִשָּׂה, “woman”) in the naming discerns and formally recognizes the sameness and difference within humanity; the similarity in sound may emphasize equality. The narrator had already so named the woman in v. 22, contrasting the אישה with the אדם from whom she was made and to whom she was brought.

The man’s words recognize that the “not good” situation of v. 18 has now become good. “Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,” a phrase that specifies kinship (29:14; 2 Sam 19:12-13; a broader reference than in English idiom), literally highlights mutuality and equality. The immediately recognizable bodily differences between them occasions the difference in the name. The

man thereby has a new level of knowledge of his identity as a sexual being in relationship to the woman.

One Flesh. Verse 24 stands out from its context by the way in which it makes explicit reference to a later time—namely, when children are born and one can speak of fathers and mothers (the NRSV is more explicit than the NIV). The narrator thereby links God’s original intention for creation and later practice in providing an etiology of marriage. The previous verses provide the reason for this practice—namely, a man leaves his parents and clings to his wife. Inasmuch as it was usually the woman who left the parental home, such departure probably does not have a spatial reference, but alludes to leaving one family identity and establishing another with his wife. These verses make no mention of children; rather, the writer focuses on the man-woman relationship, not on the woman as the bearer of children. God’s creation values sexual intimacy as being good. Although the text does not speak explicitly about single human existence, it does not imply that, in order to be truly human, one must be married.

“One flesh” does not refer to sexual intimacy in a narrow way, but recognizes that man and woman constitute an indissoluble unit of humankind from every perspective. Hence the author refers to but does not focus on the sexual relationship. Leaving one’s parents certainly implies marriage in that culture, and marriage certainly entails sexual intimacy.
Being naked in the presence of the other was natural, with no embarrassment attached to total bodily exposure. Inasmuch as this is still generally true for married persons, nakedness must be understood in both literal and metaphorical senses (3:7, 10, 21); spouses also have no fear of exposure in the broader sense, no need to cover up.

REFLECTIONS

1. Is Genesis 1–2 an adequate statement about creation for the modern or postmodern context in which we live? In many ways this question must be answered in the negative. We have learned truths about the origins, development, and nature of the world from modern science of which the biblical authors never dreamed. We are confronted with issues never faced by these authors, from the environment to the role of women. In some ways the text, at least as it has been commonly interpreted, creates problems for any adequate consideration of these issues. While the commentary suggests that these problems have been created more by interpreters than by the text itself, the reader must not discount the history of the negative effects of such interpretations, from the exploitation of the environment to a second-class place for women. It will take generations for newer readings to overcome these effects.

In seeking finally to address these issues in a responsible manner, we must go beyond the text and draw on insights from other parts of the Scriptures and from our own experience in and through which God continues to speak. At the same time, these chapters will continue to provide the modern reader with an indispensable foundation for these reflections, including the images of God and the human, the relationship between God and the world, and human and nonhuman interrelationships. Perhaps, above all, these chapters provide a paradigm that we can use to integrate truths about the world gathered from all spheres of life.

2. The fact that the creation account rather than the birth of Israel stands at the head of the canon remains of considerable importance. The theological factors reflected in this ordering include the following: (a) The Bible begins with a testimony to the universal activity of God. God’s creative activity not only brought the world into being but also was effectively engaged in the lives of individuals and peoples long before Israel came into being. The canonical ordering reflects the actual sequence of God’s activity in the world. God was at work on behalf of the divine creational purposes before Israel understood what this activity was all about. (b) God’s actions in the world achieve priority of place over human knowledge of what God has done. When Israel does begin to articulate the place of creation in the divine economy, this amounts to Israel’s “catching up” with what God has long been about. The development of a creation theology in Israel occurs secondary to God’s actual engagement with the world. At the same time, such a creation theology probably emerged much earlier in Israel than has commonly been supposed. Creation theology seems to be a given for those who first formulated a theology of Israel’s redemption (see Exodus 15). (c) This canonical ordering
corresponds to human experience of God’s activity. Human beings in all times and places have experienced (even if they have not known) God’s creative acts prior to and alongside of God’s redemptive acts. Human beings receive their life and all their native gifts from the Creator quite apart from their knowledge of its source. The redemptive work of God takes place within a world and individual lives that have been brought into being and sustained by God’s care. God’s redemptive activity does not occur in a vacuum, but within a context decisively shaped by the life-giving work of God within and without Israel. (d) The position of Genesis 1–2 demonstrates that God’s purpose in redemption does not, finally, center on Israel. God as Creator has a purpose that spans the world, and since divine deeds are rooted in the divine will, God’s redemptive activity must be understood to serve this universal intention. Israel’s place in the purposes of God are clear only from within this creation-wide perspective. Israel’s election furthers God’s mission on behalf of the entire universe.41

3. Traditional interpretations of Genesis have tended to favor the lofty formulations and familiar cadences of chap. 1 at the expense of the more “naive” story in chap. 2. Critical decisions, which tend to see the latter as older and more primitive (J) while considering the former (P) to be the product of more sophisticated theological reflection on creation, tend to fortify this tendency. Such views reinforce the traditional image of God as a radically transcendent Creator, operating in total independence, speaking the world into being.

Whatever the history of the transmission of these accounts, they now stand together as a single witness to the creation of the world. In this canonical perspective on creation each chapter stands in interaction with the other. Praiseworthy language about a transcendent Creator has been placed in a theological context in which other images for God and the God-creature relationship come more clearly into view, providing for a more relational model of creation than has been traditionally presented.

Both God and the creatures have an important role in the creative enterprise, and their spheres of activity are interrelated. God has shaped the created order in such a way that the Creator and the creatures share overlapping spheres of interdependence and creative responsibility.42 Moreover, the creatures are interdependent among themselves. Both human beings and animals depend on vegetation for their food (1:29-30); humans are to preserve the independent role of the animals (1:22). In addition, the nonhumans depend on varying forms of dominion exercised by the humans.

God is God and freely brings into being that which is not God. The creatures depend on the Creator for their existence and continuing life. Chapter 1 stresses divine initiative, imagination, transcendence, and power in a way that chap. 2 does not. The position of chap. 1 implies that these divine characteristics should stand at the beginning and in the foreground in any discussion. Yet, no simple or static hierarchy emerges, since some features of chap. 1 already lean toward chap. 2.

On the other hand, the realm of the divine and the realm of the creature are not two radically unrelated spheres; there are overlapping powers, roles, and responsibilities, to
which image language testifies. God is not powerful and creatures powerless, as if the Godness of God could be bought at the expense of creaturely diminishment. In the very act of creating, God gives to others a certain independence and freedom. God moves over, as it were, and

makes room for others. Creation involves an ordered freedom, a degree of openness and unpredictability wherein God leaves room for genuine decisions on the part of human beings as they exercise their God-given power. Even more, God gives them powers and responsibilities in a way that commits God to a certain kind of relationship with them. Divine constraint and restraint operate in the exercise of power within the creation (e.g., God will not singlehandedly be involved in procreation), still further restrained by the promise at the end of the flood story.

Human beings have been given freedom enough to destroy themselves, though God does not will such destruction. God does not have a final and solitary will in place from the beginning regarding every aspect of the created order. Things may develop, divine and human creativity may continue (see Ps 104:30), in view of which God will make adjustments in the divine will for the world. Yet, these divine acts will always be in tune with God’s absolute will regarding the life and salvation of all.

These chapters imply that the divine sovereignty in creation is understood, not in terms of absolute divine control, but as a sovereignty that gives power over to the created for the sake of a relationship of integrity. Such a view involves risk, since it entails the possibility that the creatures will misuse the power they have been given, which does occur. A reclamation of creation will be needed.

4. Some observations on “chaos”: The “deep” is probably not related to Tiamat in the Babylonian story in terms of either language or content (see commentary). Yet, some claim that “chaos” is a reality that persists beyond God’s ordering activity, providing a negative backdrop and/or a potential threat to God’s creation. Such language of “chaos” seems problematic, since God decides when to destroy (and promises not to). No reality independent of God is a threat to the creation. Such allusions do, later, provide deeply negative images for the world (e.g., Jer 4:23-26), but these are subsumed under the wrath of God in response to creaturely wickedness. Moreover, once Noah finds favor with God (6:8), the deity no longer threatens to destroy all creation, and specific temporal limits are placed on the flood (7:4, 12, 17). In 7:11 the fountains and windows function in an intensive way; they do not break down. When the flood waters abate, the created order of chap. 1 emerges into the light of day.

A different perspective on v. 2 seems appropriate. God’s creative activity in the rest of Genesis 1 makes use of the “raw material” in v. 2 for new purposes. The author may not have had the philosophical perspective to call it “matter,” but this verse testifies to a pre-temporal reality. As such, it describes a state of affairs prior to God’s ordering that is not yet consonant with the divine purposes in creation (see the “not good” of 2:18).
God relates to this pre-ordering situation in and through the wind/spirit. The writer thus confesses that God constitutes a reality prior to the “beginning,” and in the form of an active reality (wind or spirit). Even at this point, God acts creatively. Genesis 1:2 thus leans toward the rest of the chapter when God makes use of raw materials. Hence, the situation does not run out of control or in opposition to God. God does not reject it or say no to it; God simply uses it as part of a more comprehensive creative activity. Once God has ordered creation, the realities of v. 2 become part of a new world order. No independent threat to the cosmos (or to God) occurs at any stage.

Although the doctrine of “creation out of nothing” has often been grounded in this verse (see 2 Macc 7:28; Rom 4:17; Heb 11:3), it speaks almost exclusively of the ordering of already existing reality. We may justify a very limited use of this notion, only if we think of certain creative acts (sky and its luminaries). God brings everything else into being out of the not-yet-ordered reality, in the ultimate origins of which the author has no apparent interest. Any comprehensive doctrine of creatio ex nihilo must be found in other texts or theological perspectives.

(On relationships between these chapters and contemporary science, see the Overview.)

5. In 2:18-23, God takes the human decision into account when shaping new directions for the creation. Divine decisions interact with human decisions in the creation of the world. Creation involves process as well as moment; it is creaturely as well as divine.

The future stands genuinely open here. All depends on what the humans does with what God presents. The question of not only how, but indeed whether humanity will continue beyond this first generation remains open-ended, suspended in this creative moment. What the humans decide will determine whether there will be a next human generation. Human judgment will shape the nature of the next divine decision, indeed the future of the world.

This situation is similar to our own, where ecological sensitivity or the use of nuclear weapons may have a comparable import for the world’s future. Such decisions could put an end to the human race as decisively as the man’s choice of the animals would have. Human beings do not have the capacity to stymie God in some absolute way. But God has established a relationship with human beings such that their decisions about the creation truly count.

Genesis 3:1-24, The Intrusion of Sin
Link to:
This chapter does not stand isolated. It has long been recognized as an integral part of the story, stretching from 2:4 to 4:16 (24). Some scholars have suggested that the story had an earlier form, particularly in view of the role of the trees (see p. 350), but no consensus has emerged. Given the high value this text has had through the centuries, the reader may be surprised to learn that the OT itself never refers to it (Eden is mentioned in 13:10; Isa 51:3; Ezek 31:9, 16, 18; 36:35; Joel 2:3). The closest parallel to the story is Ezek 28:11-19, a lamentation over the king of Tyre: “You were in Eden, the garden of God... were blameless in your ways from the day that you were created, until iniquity was found in you... and the guardian cherub drove you out” (vv. 12, 15-16). Ezekiel 28, however, includes no mention of prohibited trees, the serpent, eating, or cursing of the ground. Genesis 3 offers no mention of riches, precious stones, or holy mountains. Some version of Ezekiel 28 was probably a source for the writer of Genesis 3. Unlike the Mesopotamian parallels, this story develops a sharp sense of human responsibility for the disruption of God’s good creation.

One may discern a similar structure in Genesis 3 and 4:7-16. There is an unusual ordering in the appearance of the principals: vv. 1-7: Transgression—serpent, woman, man; vv. 8-13: Inquest—man, woman, (serpent); vv. 14-19: Sentence—serpent, woman, man. That the woman plays the lead role in the transgression and the man in the inquest may suggest an interest in balance.

No word for “sin” occurs in the chapter (though in some ways that would defeat the art of storytelling; to have to name the game means one has not told the story very well). This situation parallels, in some ways, the absence of language about feeling; the chapter focuses instead on what the humans see and know and hear and do.

3:1-7, The Temptation. Verse 1 reaches back into the previous chapter in several ways. The writer identifies the serpent (“snake” would probably present fewer connotations) as a “beast”/“animal of the field” that God had formed and the man had named (the NRSV and the NIV introduce the word wild in 3:1 but not in 2:19-20, probably reflecting the history of the interpretation of the serpent). The serpent is characterized as “more crafty” (!wr (Arûm) than any of the others God formed; this is a play on the word for “naked” (!ymwr (arûmmîm) in 2:25. The link suggests that human beings may be exposed at times to shrewd or crafty elements in the world, language often associated with temptation.

Much debate has centered on the identity of the serpent. While the OT has no interest in this question, the situation changes in the intertestamental period. The association of the serpent with the “devil” in Wisd 2:24 (see Rev 12:9; 20:2) has enjoyed a long history. While this interpretation may be a legitimate extension of the
relationship between the serpent and temptation (see below), the text does not assume such metaphysical considerations.

The text does not focus on the serpent per se, but on the human response to the possibilities the serpent presents. As such, the serpent presents a metaphor, representing anything in God’s good creation that could present options to human beings, the choice of which can seduce them away from God. The tree itself becomes the temptation, while the serpent facilitates the options the tree presents.

The author introduces the serpent abruptly, in a rather matter-of-fact way. The woman shows no fear or surprise or concern; conversations with snakes about God are presented as nothing unusual. Indeed, the reader receives an initial impression that the serpent is not a villain, but a neutral observer of the God-human relationship and a conversation partner, positively disposed toward the woman. The serpent only becomes a facilitator of temptation as the conversation progresses.

The reader appears to be overhearing the middle of a theological dialogue, leaving questions about the source of the serpent’s knowledge unsettled, but suggesting that these words have grown out of a broader conversation. The reader first hears a question from the serpent to the woman (why the woman was chosen to play this role remains unknown, perhaps because she did not receive the prohibition firsthand; see 1 Tim 2:13-15; Sir 25:21-24). The question focuses on the prohibition, explicitly referring to God. The serpent raises a question about the amount of freedom God has given humans (always a sensitive topic). This tactic sets the agenda, which centers on God, and provokes a response by suggesting that the woman knows more about the prohibition than the serpent does: “Have I got this straight? Did God really say that you were not to eat of any tree?” The question is clever, to which a simple yes or no response is impossible, if one decides to continue the conversation (a key move in such situations). The “you” is plural in Hebrew, so that both the man and the woman are implied (the man stands “with her,” v. 6, and so acts as a silent partner to the entire conversation).

Eve’s response (vv. 2-3) seems motivated by an effort to explain the situation to the serpent. We may deem her response noteworthy in a number of ways. She evidences familiarity with the prohibition (not established to this point in the narrative); she both paraphrases the permission/prohibition in her own words and quotes God directly. In quoting God, she uses the plural “you,” understanding that the prohibition applies to her (as in the “we”), though God’s original prohibition was in the singular (2:16-17). One puzzles over the reference to touching (the serpent interprets her indefinite reference to the tree in the middle of the garden—see commentary on 2:9—as the tree of knowledge). She may have heard it this way from the man; yet, because the text does not settle the issue, we do not know that either the man or the woman misstated it. The text does not offer a judgment or a defense of God, as the word order shows (“God” is delayed until after the second “garden”; the NRSV and the NIV advance the reference; see TNK, NAB). That she (or the man) makes the prohibition more severe than God made it has been explained in various ways (from anxiety to confusion to innocent defensiveness to hyperbole to a contribution in the search for truth). Most likely, the woman’s reasons are
revealed in the serpent’s reply, which immediately focuses on death. The reference to touching thus reveals a key vulnerability—namely, anxiety about death. She exaggerates because she wants to avoid death at all costs (anxiety does not necessarily involve sin). The exaggeration offers evidence of reflection that the woman (and/or the man) has had about the prohibition.

The serpent responds (vv. 4-5) precisely at the point of exaggeration and vulnerability, and with a promise at that: The humans will not die. This response could be a contradiction of what God has said (but not all that the woman has said). But it may be more subtle than that. In 3:22, God recognizes that they could eat and not die, if they eat of the tree of life. Expulsion from the garden becomes necessary for death to occur. So the serpent speaks a word that has the potential of being true (at least at the physical level). The reason: They will be like God/divine beings (1:26 and 3:22 include both), knowing good and evil (the phrase could refer either to God or to minor deities, and may be purposely ambiguous). Inasmuch as God said nothing about being like God(s) a new element has been drawn into the picture (3:22 confirms that the serpent was right); yet, because this issue plays no role in the woman’s reflection (v. 6) we have difficulty assessing its importance. Hence, we should temper efforts to see the primal sin as a desire to become like God. The serpent was subtle in holding out the possibility of avoiding death, while not conveying all the possible futures, not least a broader definition of death and another option that God had available (expulsion).

The serpent, then, is correct in saying the humans would become like God(s), knowing good and evil, and that eating in itself would not necessarily mean death in at least some sense. The serpent speaks a key phrase: “God knows.” It claims that God has not told them the full truth about the matter, that God keeps something back. In this, the serpent acts not as a deceiver but as a truth-teller. But what was God’s motivation for not telling them the whole story? The serpent makes it sound as if God’s motivation is self-serving; the humans will become like God. Has God, in keeping the full truth from them, divine interests more at heart than interest in humans? The issue of knowledge thus becomes at its deepest level an issue of trust. Is the giver of the prohibition one who can be trusted with their best interests? Can the man and the woman trust God even if God has not told them everything, indeed not given them every possible “benefit”?

The writer leaves the woman to draw her own conclusions. The serpent has only presented some possibilities. The serpent engages in no coercion here, no arm-twisting, no enticement through presentation of fruit from the tree; everything happens through words. The word of the serpent ends up putting the word of God in question. At the same time, the issue focuses on the visible and tangible, which belong to God’s creation.44

The woman does not speak (the lack of communication reinforces the element of mistrust); she only looks, contemplates, and eats. She considers explicitly neither God nor the prohibition, in terms of either complaint or rejection; she focuses only on the
potential the tree offers. The observation that the tree was good for food and pleasant to
the sight means, in view of 2:9 (see 1:29), that this tree becomes like other trees to her; it
also happens to be “desirable for gaining wisdom.” While one may “desire” (dmjn
nehmAd, 2:9) the trees for their beauty, the humans shall not “desire” wisdom (i.e.,
knowledge of good and evil). The command seems to forbid an immediate acquisition of
knowledge, though without suggesting that humans should not have wisdom. The issue
involves the way in which wisdom is gained. The fear of the Lord is the beginning of
wisdom (see Rom 1:20-21). By using their freedom to acquire wisdom in this way, they
have determined that the creational command no longer applies to them. That command
refers primarily, not to the intellect, but to success in making decisions in life—true
wisdom involves knowing good and evil, the discernment of what is one’s own best
interests (see at 2:9). What it means can be seen from the result. Only God has a
perspective that can view the created order as a whole; human beings (even with their
new knowledge) will never gain that kind of breadth, for they make their decisions from
within the creation.

The woman takes some of the fruit and gives it to her husband. As a silent partner “with
her” throughout this exchange, the man puts up no resistance, raises no questions, and
considers no theological issues; he simply and silently takes his turn. The woman does
not act as a temptress in this scene; they both have succumbed to the same source of
temptation. They stand together as “one flesh” at this point as well.

The result is fourfold: Their eyes are opened (as the serpent had promised, v. 5); they
know that they are naked; they make loincloths for themselves (an interhuman act); and
they hide from God’s presence. With eyes opened, they see the world differently, from a
theological perspective. They realize that, now having to decide for themselves what is in
their own best interests, everything looks somewhat different. Having decided to be on
their own, they see the world entirely through their own eyes. They now operate totally
out of their own resources.

The humans first see each other’s nakedness.

It becomes clear (v. 10) that nakedness has more than a bodily reference. It reverses the
lack of shame between them in 2:25 (see 9:21-23; Isa 20:4; Lam 1:8; Ezek 16:37). They
respond initially by providing garments for themselves, which involves more than a
physical act; they attempt to cover up their shame. This response addresses only the
symptoms of the problem. Their human resources prove inadequate, as they recognize in
seeking to hide their nakedness from God (3:10)—their clothing reveals more than it
conceals—as God’s action in clothing the already clothed indicates (3:21).

3:8-13, The Inquest. In this section God conducts a judicial inquiry. Whereas the woman
functioned as the dialogue partner in vv. 1-5, the man serves that function in vv. 9-12.
Hence, the author creates a certain balance between them in the story as a whole.
The Creator of the universe and all creatures chooses not to relate to the world at a distance, but takes on human form, goes for a walk among the creatures, and personally engages them regarding recent events. The writer presents no naive theology, but a deeply profound understanding of how God chooses to enter into the life of the world and relate to the creatures. Even more, this God comes to the man and the woman subsequent to their sin; God does not leave them or walk elsewhere.

Hearing God walking about in the garden, the man and woman try to hide from the divine presence. Not encountering the couple (as usual?), God calls for the man (the “you” is singular). The man interprets the question correctly as a probing inquiry and attempts to deflect the conversation away from what has happened. But his response reveals that something disastrous has occurred. He is afraid—the fear is explicit—because he was naked and, feeling shame at what has happened, hides himself, even though he is now clothed (v. 7). While the nakedness in v. 7 focuses on their relationship to each other, in v. 10 it shifts to their relationship with God. Although the feelings about nakedness are new, their clothing prompts the response; “clothedness” must be hidden from God. (It is ironic that the words for “hearing” and “fearing” can also be used for “obedience” and “awe.”)

God’s response centers on their nakedness, not on their fear. How would the man have known that he was naked? Something must have happened so that nakedness had become a problem to the someone who told him so (namely, the woman). God immediately puts the right question (again, to elicit a confession), asking whether he has eaten of the prohibited tree.

The responses could be viewed as a consequence of achieving autonomy; the man could not handle the new “knowledge.” He appears fearful, insecure, and ashamed, seeking to justify himself and deflecting blame, both to God for giving him the woman and to the woman for giving him the fruit to eat, which had been guaranteed to alienate them from each other. Yet he does admit having eaten (though without mentioning motives). This situation attests to a breakdown in interhuman relationships as well as in the relationship with God, whom he does not engage in a straightforward manner.

God then turns to the woman, again asking a leading question. The woman deflects the responsibility as well (though she does not blame God as the man does), this time laying the blame on the trickery of the serpent (blaming it on the source of temptation), yet admitting that she too has eaten. That there is no inquiry of the serpent may show that the purpose in the interrogation of the humans was to elicit confession.

3:14-19. The Sentence. God proceeds with the sentencing, accepting full human responsibility and bringing all parties within the scope of the announcement. God acts as judge (see p. 369), calling each of the participants before the bench (in the order of vv. 1-6) and pronouncing sentence on each in typical courtroom speech (which immediately takes effect). Yet, even in the sentencing, God remains in relationship with the creatures involved, connected and concerned enough to identify further what has just happened.
What are the effects of the sentencing? Most basically, the sentences pertain to their primary roles in life (in that culture), roles of stature among the animals, roles of wife and mother, roles of tiller of soil and provider of food. Every conceivable relationship has been disrupted: among the animals; between an animal and humans; between the ground and humans; between human beings and God; between an animal and God; within the individual self (e.g., shame). More abstractly, one could speak of humiliation, domination and subordination, conflict, suffering, and struggle. The sentences touch every aspect of human life: marriage and sexuality; birth and death; work and food; human and nonhuman. In all of these areas, one could speak of death encroaching on life. Disharmony reigns supreme.

We may deem the judgment announced to the serpent unusual in a number of ways. First, God does not interrogate the serpent, although the judgment recognizes some responsibility on the part of the serpent for what happened. Second, the serpent receives a curse, becoming isolated from the community of animals (a word play with the initial description: “more crafty” [!wr (Arûm] becomes “more cursed” [rwra )Arûr ]), a moral order correspondence—what goes around comes around. Third, in the future the serpent will move on its belly and “eat” dust (given the role that eating plays in the temptation, this is moral order talk). While this sentence may present an explanation of why the snake crawls on its belly, it signifies humiliation; eating dust symbolizes degradation (see Mic 7:17; cf. Ps 72:9; Isa 49:23). In some sense, vv. 14-15 create a symbol out of the serpent, which will remind all who encounter it of the subtleties of temptation as well as of the humiliating and conflicting consequences.

God places enmity between the serpent and the woman, and between the offspring of both. On the surface, the writer may be offering an origin of the legendary revulsion human beings have for snakes, which may relate back to 1:28 and show how the human task of dominion has been much complicated (see 9:2-3). Interpreters through the centuries (who have often linked the serpent and the devil) have seen in this text an ongoing struggle at a deeper level, even considering the text messianic, foretelling the struggle between the seed of the woman (i.e., the Messiah) and Satan. Yet, the word for “seed” functions as a collective noun (9:9; 12:7) or refers to the immediate offspring (4:25), not a distant one. It probably refers more generally to ongoing centuries of conflict between people and various sources of temptation. The “head” and “heel” are the natural targets against each other and point to no resolution of the conflict (the NRSV correctly reflects the fact that the same verb is used in both). Yet, striking the head of the serpent would more likely prove decisive and would give at least potential superiority to the human over the animal (perhaps reflecting 4:7).

The sentence on the woman—with whom no curse language is associated—has also been much discussed. Carol Meyers has placed this material in a sociohistorical setting just before the monarchy, a time when the place of women was related to the harsh realities of
agricultural life in the central highlands. She translates (with help from different versions) the first line of v. 16 to reflect the arduous field work in which women had to participate (“I will greatly increase your toil and your pregnancies”), and thinks it has an etiological force originally not present in Gen 3:16. While this view has not been fully tested, most scholars continue to translate along the lines of the NRSV and the NIV, so that the first clause in the poetry refers only to the pain of childbirth (hence paralleling the second clause). In any case, whatever the sociohistorical background of the text, the final literary context presents these verses as a consequence of the man’s and the woman’s sin. The fulfillment of the command to multiply in 1:28 has become more difficult.

The “desire” of the woman for the man remains unclear. It could involve a desire for mastery (as with this verb in 4:7), which will be thwarted by the husband. More likely, it means that, despite the pains of childbirth, she will still long for sexual intimacy. The “rule” of the husband could be a more general reference to patriarchy, which would be a departure from what God intended in creation (see 2:18-23). Trible states that the rule of the male “is neither a divine right nor a male prerogative. Her subordination is neither a divine decree nor the female destiny. Both their positions result from shared disobedience.” The “rule” of the man over the woman is part and parcel of the judgment on the man as much as the woman. This writer understood that patriarchy and related ills came as a consequence of sin rather than being the divine intention. How easy it would have been to build patriarchy into the created order!

God allocates the most extensive sentence to the man, whose attempt to pass off the blame to his wife the deity has rejected out of hand. One

may discern moral order talk, since eating plays a role in both sin and sentence. Although the man does not receive the curse, the ground from which he was formed does. The ground brings forth thorns and thistles as well as the plants of the field, which human beings will continue to need for food, but the thistles will make it more difficult to obtain. This also means that God’s command to subdue the earth will be more difficult to fulfill. A concern for relief from the curse on the ground appears in 5:29 and 8:21. The same word that was used for “toil” in v. 16 for woman’s pain in childbirth occurs in this sentence as well (both striking at a primary role in life). The man’s work does not receive a curse (he still does in 3:23 what he was called to do in 2:15), but it has become more difficult and more energy has to be expended to gain a living from the soil.

“All the days of your life . . . You are dust and to dust you shall return” expands upon “until you return to the ground.” This part of the sentence stipulates that the toil shall not let up until death. Death seems to be assumed rather than introduced as a part of the sentence. While the word death does not occur here, certain features of death within life are evident, beginning even before the sentencing. It remains to be seen whether the still remaining possibility of eating from the tree of life and gaining immortality will be realized.
3:20-24, The Expulsion. The note about Eve in v. 20 seems intrusive, but it probably functions as a positive development in the midst of the judgment, anticipating that life will still go on (a negative assessment of this verse incorrectly associates naming with subordination). The NIV future tense seems correct (since the perfect verb expresses certainty). Adam gives his wife the more personal name Eve (“Eve” resembles the word for “living”), as a way of expressing confidence that children will be born; indeed, the unity of the human race (“all”) appears implied, which would fulfill the command in 1:28.

Verse 21 has both positive and negative dimensions. The use of clothing is a common thread throughout Genesis as a sign of many things (see Tamar in 38:14, 19; Joseph in 37:3). Here God is imaged as a tailor, using animal skins (not necessarily killing to procure them). This same image for God is used in Ezek 16:8-14, where it is a profoundly gracious act, assuring continuing divine presence in the midst of the judgment; that is likely one theme here. If nakedness has to do with shame, exposure, and vulnerability, and they already had made clothes for themselves, God’s act of clothing them may relate to issues of salvation (Job 29:14; Ps 132:16). God acts to cover their shame and defenselessness. At the same time, this act recognizes continuity in their estranged relationship; this is something with which they must now live (the more substantial skins may also stress this).

Verse 22 introduces inner-divine communication once again (see 1:26 for the “us”; see also 11:6-7). The sentence could break off abruptly (see NRSV), matching the effect of the action—namely, expulsion from the garden. Or it could be concluded with an exclamation point (see TNK). We should note that AdAm functions generically here. The expulsion becomes necessary because God envisions radical possibilities regarding the tree of life and human immortality. Expulsion does not mean that an innate immortality has been lost; rather, the possibility of ever attaining it has been eliminated. Preventing humans from living forever might seem to be a defensive move by the deity, yet if death (in the comprehensive sense) has already become a significant part of life, then never-ending life offers no blessing. God continues to protect human beings. In apocalyptic literature, this motif recurs in an eternal frame, and when eternal life becomes a reality, it is not accompanied by sin and its consequences.

The author provides no specific description of the apparently coercive means used to drive the humans out of the garden. Yet, the divine vocation for the human remains the same: tilling the ground (see 2:15) from which he was taken (2:7-8). Hence, the humans leave the garden with a certain integrity, remaining an integral part of the divine purpose for the world (2:5). While being “like God” carries tremendous burdens and ambiguities, it also bears some potential for good and advancement. The cherubim—a human and animal/bird composite (a common phenomenon in the ancient Near East)—are usually associated with sanctuaries in Israel, associated with the divine presence in the ark, the tabernacle, and the temple. They assumed various functions, including guarding the sanctuary from unauthorized
intrusion. The turning sword (unique in the OT) may or may not be in the hands of the cherubim, but its purpose is clear: to prevent human beings from returning to Eden; paradise on earth no longer remains a possibility.

The ending of this chapter bears some remarkable similarities both to Israel’s being sent/driven out of Egypt (Exod 6:1) and to Israel’s exile to Babylon, a banishment from the land (see Leviticus 26). The latter, in particular, may have been viewed as a parallel experience to this primeval moment in Israel’s eyes.

REFLECTIONS

1. Inasmuch as God made the serpent, the text raises the issue of God’s responsibility for what happens. God holds ultimate responsibility in the sense that God did not create puppets, but made human beings in such a way that they could resist the will of God (human beings would not be commanded not to eat if they were unable to do so). The temptation to reach beyond the limits of creatureliness belongs to created existence for the sake of human integrity and freedom (and God does not have absolute knowledge of future human behaviors, 22:12). At the same time, the text does not bring God’s responsibility closer to hand and speak of God as the tempter or the instigator of the serpent’s wiles or the source of sin and evil. The author does not use the language of evil to describe the serpent; indeed, the word about the serpent as God’s creature recalls the litany of the goodness of all that God has created. Sin and evil have emerged only subsequent to the creation of the world. The first human beings are presented as individuals who are not sinful, but with clear choices available to them, with no response coerced or inevitable; they live in a world where choices count and God has not programmed the divine-human relationship.

We may see the serpent from a number of angles. The word crafty seems purposely ambiguous, as words like clever, cunning, and shrewd commonly are; it depends on the use to which these characteristics are put. Although used to describe human beings in both a good and a bad sense (e.g. Job 5:12; esp. Prov 12:16), no other biblical writer used this word for an animal; yet people often associate animals with characteristics usually reserved for humans (a sly fox; a wise owl). The serpent stands as an ambivalent symbol, associated with both life and death (see Num 21:4-9), often used figuratively for evil people (Pss 58:4; 140:3). Serpents were considered dangerous and probably always poisonous, a threat to life (Ps 91:13); they were “naked” in appearance, silent and “innocent” in their approach, suddenly there with little or no warning. As occasional symbols of deity, they could have been associated with that which was religiously seductive and hence dangerous to Israel’s religious health.

The writer views the serpent as an animal of the field, and when God sentences the serpent (v. 14) it is included again among these fauna. Yet, this animal’s knowledge and
abilities seem not to outmatch those of any other animal. It may have been thought, however, that animals had unusual capabilities in paradise, or even beyond (see Balaam’s ass [Num 22:22-30] and animals that have a knowledge of God, Job 12:7-9). When it comes to actions, however, the serpent seems to stand in a class by itself. Yet, a question remains: Is the serpent out to seduce human beings and challenge God or is it more of a neutral figure, serving to mediate possibilities within God’s good creation? We should note that the woman occasions no surprise or fear or wonderment about the serpent. From every sign in the text, the woman understands it to be a natural part of her world.

The serpent, neither divine nor human, stands over against both as a “third party.” In some sense, Genesis 3 reverses or makes less certain the dominion of humans over animals (1:28). God’s sentence makes enmity a part of life. The serpent elicits certain characteristics in the human. “The serpent’s ‘subtlety’ is the ability to provoke reflection on the true meaning of freedom, to reveal by means of conversation that the woman had the ability to think for herself,

to suggest to her that she had the power to decide for herself. So it is the course of the conversation that is truly important, and not the existence of a talking serpent. . . . The serpent is a tempter in a sense, but only as a catalyst, assisting the woman’s own mental processes to discover the freedom she had the power to grasp.”47

The identification of the serpent as a “beast of the field” means that the reality embodied in the serpent should not be viewed as either primordial or transhistorical. It is not an evil being or supernatural/metaphysical force opposed to the divine purposes. The serpent exists within this world and is encountered by humans there. Nevertheless, the reality embodied in the serpent is transpersonal, not simply a product of the individual will. Language about the seed of the serpent, as well as God’s judgment upon it, prevents us from seeing here simply an externalization of an inward struggle. In one sense, the serpent becomes transgenerational. The serpent may be a metaphor, yet no “mere metaphor”; it bears some correspondence with reality beyond the individuals involved.

2. Descriptions of paradise have, at times, been drawn in overly romantic terms. The text, however, shows remarkable restraint. It emphasizes basics: life, freedom, food, a place to call home, a family, harmonious relationships, and a stable natural environment. The contrast with the situation portrayed in 3:7-19 stands sharp and clear; yet, care must be used not to overdraw the differences. For example, suffering is often considered to be only part of the broken world. But it would be truer to the text to speak of the effects of sin as an intensification of suffering, so that it becomes a burden, tragic, no longer serving of life. Eden, though, does include suffering. D. J. Hall speaks of four Edenic dimensions of “the suffering of becoming” (and draws parallels with the life of Jesus): loneliness (2:18); limits (not only the command in 2:17, but the very nature of creaturely existence); temptation; and anxiety (of ignorance, dependency, uncertainty). “Life without suffering would be no life at all; it would be a form of death. Life depends in
some mysterious way on the struggle to be.”48 Genesis 1 may recognize this reality in the language of “subdue” (1:28).

3. What is the sin? Although the word sin or other such words do not appear in the chapter (4:7 is the first occurrence), we should not overvalue its absence. Stories are similar to games in that certain things do not need to be named. Nonetheless, interpreters have had difficulty identifying the nature of the primal sin. The story remains complex and devoid of abstract reflection. Even God’s responses focus on the act of eating itself and its effects (vv. 11, 13, 17). God deems what they have done to be clearly wrong. But no single word appears to be satisfactory to describe it.

Disobedience may be the most common suggestion. Yet, though humans transgress God’s prohibition (2:17), that action symptomizes a more fundamental problem. The vocabulary of pride (or hubris) also appears frequently, centered particularly in the “becoming like God(s)” theme. The serpent does mention this issue (3:5), but as part of a larger point being made regarding the divine motivation for the prohibition (for “God knows”). Moreover, the woman does not mention it in her own reflection; she uses language that normally would not be associated with pride (3:6). Even God mentions their having become like God(s) in a matter-of-fact way (3:22). Finally, language of rebellion also presents problems. No storming of the heavens language occurs here, no expressed effort to take over the divine realm. We might speak of their desire for autonomy, but not to run the universe. Even then, the reader finds no declaration of independence and no celebration of a newfound freedom.

The primal sin may be best defined as mistrust of God and the word of God, which then manifests itself in disobedience and other behaviors (e.g., blaming others). The serpent, in

telling the truth about God (v. 4, “God knows”), informs the humans of something that God had not conveyed to them. This information centers on certain benefits that would accrue to them upon eating from the tree, benefits that appear to be in their best interest. This raises the question of God’s motivation; even more, it suggests that God’s motivation might be more focused on God than on their welfare. Can the humans trust that God has their best interests at heart even if they do not know everything? Even more, can the humans trust that God will be able to discern that not all such “benefits” are in their best interests, that true creaturely freedom entails acknowledging limits?

4. Commentators often use the language of “fall” with reference to this chapter. Such language begins to emerge only in post-OT interpretation, both in Judaism (Sir 25:24; Wis 2:24; see 2 Esdr 3:7-22; 7:118) and in Christianity (Rom 5:12-21; 1 Cor 15:21-22, 45-49), and has been a staple of Christian theological reflection through the centuries.49

Readers, thereby, have given this text a level of significance found nowhere else within the OT (some themes are picked up here and there). But care must be used not to
overdraw this statistical observation (this would be particularly the case if the Yahwist wrote in the exilic period!). Canonical placement has given to this text a certain theological stature (as with chaps. 1–2). Moreover, frequency of reference does not provide an absolute criterion for determining theological importance (one thinks of the suffering servant songs in Isaiah). We can only decry the elevation of this story into a dogma, though that often develops on the basis of many other considerations. Further questions need to be raised: To what extent does the “Fall” constitute a metaphor grounded in this text? This question relates to issues raised by the postbiblical language of “original sin.” We take up the latter first.

This chapter in itself cannot support a notion of original sin. “Original” refers to the universality or inescapability of human sinfulness, not to its point of origin or to a particular mode of transmission—say, genetic (though the claim has often been made). At most one could speak of an “originating” sin (see below). Chapters 3–6 together, however, support a view approximating this, especially as seen in the snowballing effects of sin, climaxing in the statement of 6:5, “Every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually” (reaffirmed in 8:21). This suggests a process by which sin became “original.”

The text includes the image inside/outside the garden to probe this issue, with progressively greater distances from the near presence of God (3:22-24; 4:16; see also the decreasing ages of human beings). Humans live outside the garden (3:14-19 describes such conditions). Cain makes his decision to kill outside the garden, in a state of alienation from the relationship with God that presence together in the garden implies; 4:7 even gives “sin” an enticing, possessive character. At the same time, 4:7 implies that being “outside the garden” does not exhaust the analysis of a sinful act. Hence, something approximating a distinction between “sin” and “sins” is made; at the least, sin cannot be reduced to individual acts in these chapters.

What, then, of the “Fall” as a metaphor for what happens in this text? At least two issues present themselves: (1) the congruence of this metaphor with the metaphors in the text, and (2) the idea of the sin of Adam and Eve as a decisive rupture in the history of the relationship between God and humans. I believe that we may speak of a fundamental disruption, though this specific metaphor finds no textual basis. The most basic theological issue at stake involves whether sin is collapsed back into God’s creational work and intention.

“Fall” theorists commonly assume that the text presents straightforward chronological terms: creation, paradise, fall. I have sought to show that these chapters, for all their typological character, tell a story of the past. They are placed within a temporal framework, particularly

in the distinctions drawn between past and present and in the common chronological references.
Other readers assume that human beings were not created as sinful or evil creatures. If they were “perfect,” how could they have failed? Rather, they were “good,” which entails considerable room for growth and the development of potentialities. By the way human responsibility for what happens is lifted up, the writer does not assign the problem of human sinfulness to God or consider it integral to God’s creational purposes. Certainly God creates the potential for such developments for the sake of human freedom. Especially important are the effects of this human decision, which range in an amazingly wide arch; it disrupts not only their own lives, but (given the symbiotic character of creaturely relationships) that of the entire cosmos as well, issuing in disharmonious relationships at every level. The narrative signals some kind of fundamental break by the journey of the nakedness theme from 2:25 through chap. 3, to which 9:3-5 also testifies. At the same time, the attention given to “process” noted above means that such human developments are not simply collapsed into a single moment.

The metaphor of “fall” does not do justice to these texts. Traditionally, this metaphor has been used to refer to a fall “down.” Others typically emphasize the “becoming like God” theme, where human beings strive for and, indeed, assume godlike powers for themselves. This kind of a fall “up” (see above) violates the basic thrust of the metaphor (perhaps one could speak of a reaching up only to fall down, for the humans are not able to handle what they have become).

Such an upward move in the texts has been interpreted positively (at least since Irenaeus) in the sense that human beings move out from under the parental hand of God; they are pioneers on the road to moral autonomy and maturity, a necessary move if they are to become truly human. “The position reflects the mounting consciousness of the last few decades that rebellion against the yoke of authority is both an inevitable and a necessary element in human maturation.”51 However, one has difficulty in sustaining a totally positive view of God’s response to the human violation of the prohibition. We would have to assign the problem to God, who acts arbitrarily in the setting of limits, and who opposes maturity and overreacts to what has happened. There are, in fact, few signs that the human lot improves, from either the divine or the human perspective. All the signs are that death (in the comprehensive sense) has become a pervasive reality with which humanity must deal, and that far from being marked by a new maturity or freedom, human life now entails broken relationships with God and every other creature (see 9:3-5 as well).

Perhaps these themes allow a variation on the “Fall” metaphor—namely, a fall “out.” The primary images in the text are those of separation, estrangement, alienation, and displacement.52 In these respects, the story is written not only to reflect a story of the past, but also to claim that in fundamental ways it reflects the character of human life in every age, which is filled with disharmonious relationships at all levels of life. Human beings always ‘reject their God-given vocation, scorn their permission modestly to enjoy the good gifts of the Garden, and break across into the area of prohibition outside the sphere of human competence.”53

In view of these suggestions, does the text wish to claim that these events have universal
effects on all subsequent generations? This combination of considerations, particularly the cosmic motifs present in chap. 3 and 6, suggests that it does (reaffirmed in 8:21). The possible negative consequences for one’s view of God need to be considered in the light of the moral order rather than a forensic divine decision. To this end, a consideration of 3:14-19 is helpful.

5. Finding the right language to describe vv. 14-19 has been difficult. Some would say that the language functions descriptively, but not prescriptively. The language does describe what has been commonly true about the human situation; it serves more as a statement about condition than a typical effect of specific human sins. Hence, this dimension of the story has a more than typological force; it works as a story of the past, presenting consequences of human sin that have taken hold in human life.

Some interpreters have hesitated to use the language of judgment (or punishment), often narrowly conceived. Yet, God’s judgment facilitates the moral order, the working out of the effects of sinful acts. The man and woman reap the consequences of their own deeds. They wanted control over their own lives; they now have control in grievously distorted and unevenly distributed forms. They wanted to transcend creaturely limits, but they have found newly intensified forms of limitation. They now have the autonomy they so desired, but neither the perspective nor the wherewithal to handle it very well.

The language of prescription does not help if it means that God puts this particular state of affairs into place for all time to come. These judgments are not a divine effort to put a new order of creation into place. And these effects are not cast in stone, determining human fate forever. The judgment of Jerusalem in 587 BCE did not mean that it should remain forever in ruins, for it was soon rebuilt. Correspondingly, the toil of the man and the pain of the woman are not such that no effort should be made to relieve them. In fact, the intense efforts, particularly in recent years, to overcome these effects of sin harmonize with the creational intentions of God. At the same time, continuing human sinfulness impedes these efforts, and other forms of the distorting effects of sin break out among us with extraordinary regularity. We have a smoldering forest fire on our hands.

6. What about death in particular? In some sense this story includes an etiology of death (at least for human beings). Human beings were created mortal; nothing inherent in human beings would have enabled them to live forever. Death per se belongs as a natural part of God’s created world. At the same time, the tree of life presents the possibility of continuing life as a special blessing. Since humans violate the prohibition, God cuts off that possibility by excluding them from access to the tree of life (3:22). In effect, sin leads to a death that would have been possible to avoid. It would be a mistake to think of death in these chapters as defined solely in terms of the cessation of heartbeat; death becomes a pervasive reality within life before the exclusion. Yet, these intrusions of death into life would not have led to physical death if the human beings had discovered the tree of life. Only God’s act of exclusion in 3:22-24 forecloses that option.
The interpretation of Rom 5:12-21 ought not to be set up in such a way that it presents Paul as either all wrong or all right in his interpretation of the Genesis story. He certainly develops these themes beyond the scope of the story. Paul is, after all, basically interested in soteriological issues and develops an Adam-Christ typology as a way of interpreting the significance of what God has done in Jesus.54 But, in some sense, he was right to read the story in terms of an etiology of the reality of death, if not death as such.

7. In vv. 17-18 the moral order bears a close relationship to the cosmic order, since human sin has ill effects upon the ground. While human behaviors today may affect the nonhuman order in ways different from then, or the cause-and-effect relationship may have been conceived differently, the link remains important.

The concern for the relationship between the human and nonhuman, often neglected, pervades these texts. This connection ranges from the deep concern evident in the detail regarding God’s creating of the various creatures, to the assignment of the human to the further development of and care for the nonhuman world. The naming of the animals, while not finally solving human loneliness, establishes a “by name” relationship between the human and the nonhuman. God’s continuing concern for the animals in the story of Noah’s ark shows that God’s delegation of responsibility does not issue in a deistic perspective regarding the divine care for the world. The symbiotic relationship among the creatures, in which humans participate, remains a prominent theme throughout the OT (see Lev 18:24-28; 26:14, 20; Hos 4:1-3; Rom 8:19-23).

COMMENTARY

This story of conflict between brothers (assigned to J) has long captivated interpreters. Many factors no doubt contribute to this popularity, from the way in which it mirrors the reality of family life in every age to the many puzzles the text itself presents.

The story has long been recognized as having origins independent of its present context.
The verses presuppose a much more densely populated world than the immediate context would allow (e.g., the potential killer of Cain, vv. 14-15; Cain’s wife and building of a city, v. 17). Moreover, Adam and Eve are active in the opening and closing verses, but do not appear in vv. 2b-24. Many have suggested that the conflict between a shepherd (Abel) and a farmer (Cain) betrays its origin, but God’s regard for Abel’s offering has nothing to do with Cain’s occupation; after all, tilling the soil (db[ (Abad) was Adam’s vocation (2:15) and what the creation needed (2:5).

The story clearly sets themes such as primogeniture and sibling rivalry in place, providing continuity across the whole of Genesis. Yet the narrator seems especially concerned not in the brief notice of the murder itself, but in God’s interaction with the words and deeds of Cain.

The chapter combines various types of literature: a tale of two brothers (vv. 2b-16), enclosed by genealogical materials and expanded by etiological elements regarding various cultural realities (vv. 17-22), concluded by a song (vv. 23-24) and the introduction of the line of Seth (vv. 25-26), which links this genealogy to that in chap. 5. It seems likely that a more compact genealogy has been expanded along the way to include the story of Cain and Abel and the song of Lamech.

Structurally, vv. 7-15 are similar to chap. 3, moving from temptation to sinful deed to divine interrogation and response to divine sentence and its mitigation to expulsion to the east.55 This and other thematic links (e.g., 3:16 and 4:7; the pervasive concern for the ground, hmda )adAmâ ) imply that the two chapters, though having different origins, are to be interpreted in the light of each other.

Chapter 3 establishes a pattern that will be followed down through the generations. What happens in the garden in chap. 3 and begins to manifest itself in disharmonious relationships of all sorts accompanies the history of humankind outside the garden in chap. 4. The reality of sin continues and intensifies Cain’s problematic relationship to God, to other people (especially to family), to his own feelings and actions, and to the ground. On the structural similarities with other stories in chaps. 1–11, see the Introduction.

4:1-16. The rather abrupt transition to life outside the garden appears initially positive, with the intimacy between wife and husband and the birth of a child; these themes recur in the chapter (vv. 1, 17, 25). Eve lives up to her name (3:20), and the divine blessing of creation (1:28) develops appropriately. In addition, Cain and Abel, in their professions, take up the creational commands to have dominion over the animals and to subdue the earth (1:28).

Readers may find the relation between God and Eve in v. 1 ambiguous. The verb hnq (qAnâ, “produced, acquired”) plays on Cain’s name, but its meaning as well as the preposition with remain uncertain. The context suggests a creational theme, “I have created a man with the LORD” (see Exod 18:22; Num 11:17). The verb can refer to God’s creative activity (14:19, 22); the preposition can have the sense of “together with”
Eve’s word implies human-divine cooperation in fulfillment of 1:28 (see 16:2; 17:16). Her words also refer to Adam’s cry that woman was taken out of man (vya ]îs; 2:23); now the woman cries out that she has produced an ]îs (the link explains the unusual use of this word for a child). Her cry expresses no more a prideful boast than does that of the man. Eve’s response appears similar to that of Leah and Rachel (29:32–30:24), expressing gratitude to Yahweh (a woman first speaks this name) for the child and acknowledging divine participation, which probably refers generally to God’s blessing of fertility and child-bearing capability.

The writer handles the birth of Abel more perfunctorily as the narrator quickly moves toward the heart of the story. Abel’s status as the younger brother sets the stage for the issue of primogeniture in the rest of Genesis. The brothers grow up to become shepherd and farmer (see 1:28). Although these occupations were often at odds with each other, the text presents no specific signs of such conflict.

The text initially focuses on their worship, thereby placing the reality of worship within a creational context, distinct from God’s revelation to Israel. They bring offerings without any command to do so; the writer assumes that human beings worship and conduct sacrifices. No altars or cult personnel are evident, and it seems unlikely that later Israelite regulations would apply. The narrator stipulates no motive, but gratitude seems likely. Since the offerings derive from the yield of their labors, they are an extension of the two brothers. All seems to be in order. Cain even brings his offering “to Yahweh” (which entails invoking the name, see v. 26). God clearly could accept both kinds of offerings (as in Israel’s worship); neither appears inherently right or wrong.

It thus comes as something of a surprise that God accepts Abel’s offering but not Cain’s. Two puzzles emerge: (1) We are not told how Cain discovered that neither he nor his offering was accepted. Given God’s way of responding in the story, Cain may have been told directly. (2) No rationale is given, hence God’s action appears arbitrary (to readers and probably to Cain).56 Most commonly, scholars have appealed to differences in their offerings. Abel offers the firstlings (Exod 22:19) and choice fat portions (Lev 3:3-17); Cain’s offering is not described in such detail. Yet it seems unlikely that later Israelite practice would apply. Their motivation or attitudes may have differed; God looks at both the offerer and the offering (so Heb 11:4; cf. 1 Sam 16:7). God’s response suggests that Cain did not “do well.” In any case, God makes a decision for the younger brother. Cain’s response to that decision sets the rest of the story in motion.

Cain’s response (NAB, “resentful”; TNK, “distressed”)—the downcast face (the external manifestation of the inner feeling [see 3:7])—reveals more the idea of dejection, feelings associated with rejection, than anger. Cain must care about what God thinks of him and his sacrifice. But the basic issue becomes not that Cain acts in a dejected fashion, but how he responds to God’s interaction with him about his dejection. That God responds at all reveals a divine concern for Cain, and God’s questions (v. 6)—repeating the description
of v. 5b—disclose an insightful empathy for his situation. They imply that God’s decision should not be the occasion for dejection, that a further response from Cain can put the situation right.

Although clearly a key to the entire story, v. 7 presents difficulties. In view of Cain’s rejection and dejection, God graciously lays out Cain’s options and their consequences. If he acts properly in response to his brother’s acceptance and his own rejection (see Jer 7:5), then he will be accepted (namely, God will have regard for him and he can lift up his head again). On the other hand, if he does not do what is right, sin—occurring here for the first time in Genesis—lurks/crouches at the door (of his life), desiring to gain entrance. The image of sin lurking (the “enmity” of the serpent in 3:15 may be in mind; see Deut 19:11) symbolizes temptation. The reality of temptation is portrayed as something active, close at hand, predatory, eager to make inroads into Cain’s life; it can consume his life, take over his thinking, feeling, and acting. Cain must not let it rule his life; he (the “you” is emphatic) can or must master it (see Ps 19:13). The text reflects the implications of 3:16 in the use of the words desire and rule/master, specifying continuity in such post-sin realities. Cain responds to a particular situation—namely, the working out of his feelings toward his brother (see p. 377).

Cain does not attend well to God’s warning. When the brothers are in open country, Cain overpowers Abel and kills him (note the lack of emotion or drama). Cain may have invited Abel, but the explicit invitation was not preserved in the Hebrew text. Although God warns that the violation of the command will lead to death (2:17), the fact that a human being and not God sounds death into the world introduces an ironic note.

Once again, God immediately interrogates the offender in order to elicit Cain’s response (cf. 3:9-13). Cain takes the road of denial rather than hiding from God; even more, he turns the question back to God (“Am I my brother’s keeper?”), implying impropriety in God’s question. “Keeping” is not something human beings do to one another in the OT; only God keeps human beings (see Num 6:24; Ps 121:3-8); hence God should know the answer to the question. In effect, if God does not know Abel’s whereabouts, God has not been “keeping” him and should be blamed for his present situation. Cain seeks to relieve himself of any responsibility for Abel by focusing on God’s task of “keeping.”

God ignores the counterquestion and offers a sharp reply that keeps the conversation on course. Human actions are evaluated by the deity. Once again, God asks Cain a question (actually more an accusation), prompted by Abel’s blood crying out to God from the ground (see Job 16:18; the verb often describes those experiencing injustice, see commentary on 18:20-21; 19:13; see also blood as polluting the land in 6:11-13; Num 35:33). This idea assumes that blood as the conveyor of life belongs to God and spilled blood cannot be covered up, leaving the issue of exacting justice in divine hands. God knows Abel has been killed by Cain and seeks to elicit from him a confession to that end.
God does not wait for a response, but proceeds to sentence Cain for his crime (vv. 11-12)—though technically he has violated no law against murder (9:6). Nonetheless, Cain’s acts certainly violated God’s creational intentions. The penalty in 9:6 does not apply to Cain.

God does not curse Cain directly (“from the ground”; unlike 3:17), but the ground, which has opened its mouth and received Abel’s blood, mediates the curse to him by rejecting his labors and no longer yielding its fruit (vv. 11-12 belong together). In effect, the earlier curse of the ground (3:17) applies to Cain in an intensified way so that it does not yield produce at all (the banishment, the hiddenness from God, and the journey east are also intensifications of earlier judgments on humanity). God condemns Cain to be a “restless wanderer” (the NIV captures the hendiadys), rootless, living from hand to mouth, away from the supportive relationships of family. As Cain recognizes, he has received the equivalent of a death penalty. The breakdown of the human relationship to the ground, begun in 3:17, continues here and reaches a climax in the flood story (6:11-13).

Cain does not passively accept the divine sentence. He complains that his punishment—i.e., the consequences of his sin (the word @w[ (Awôn, a common word for “sin,” refers to a continuum from sinful act to its effects; see 1 Sam 28:10) is greater than he can bear. (When faced with his own murder, the murderer laments!) In his use of sin language, he accepts the relationship between his sin and God’s sentence; he admits guilt. He picks up on language God has just used: If the ground will not yield its produce and he must wander, he will be the target of Abel’s avengers (perhaps God or siblings, 5:4, but see p. 377). Even more, being driven away from the soil will break his basic relationship to the land itself. Speaking theologically, he will be hidden from the face (i.e., presence) of God (note the implied relationship with God, v. 16), i.e., driven from the near presence of the garden. God will no longer be available to him for care and protection, or even prayers relating thereto.

God disagrees emphatically, though without taking back the basic sentence. Cain’s plea occasions a divine amelioration of the sentence, reflecting a divine responsiveness to a human cry, an openness to taking a different way into the future in view of what human beings have to say (see 18:22-33; Exod 32:9-14). God promises (“Not so” could be translated, “I promise,” so TNK) that should anyone kill Cain, he will be avenged sevenfold (an idiom expressing intensity or severity). The story depicts not vengeance in the sense of revenge, but an effort to stop the violence from spiraling out of control by intensifying the workings of the moral order. The legal formulation gives it the force of law, hence applicability to all people. God will be Abel’s brother’s keeper. God’s mercy embraces the murderer.

God then puts a mark on Cain as a protective device (the “mark of Cain” mistakenly carries a sense of public stigma). Only he would know why he received it; probably this mark (tattoo?; see Exod 12:13; Ezek 9:4-6) would be understood by any who encountered him. The mark does not protect him absolutely, as the word about vengeance shows.
The narrator leaves him as one who has been placed under the very special care of God. Hence,

the story ought not to be interpreted in basically negative terms, but rather as the activity of one who lives under divine protection and care.

Cain leaves the presence of the Lord—i.e., the region of the garden, where God’s presence was especially evident (see v. 14). This move does not refer to an absolute separation from God; indeed, God remains present in the conception and birth described in v. 17 (see Jonah [1:3], who does not leave God’s presence absolutely either). The divine blessing follows Cain through all his wandering. He settles still further to the east of Eden (see 3:24), in a place called Nod (location unknown; it means “wandering” and plays on the word dn [nAd, “wander”] in vv. 12, 14). To “settle” in “Wandering,” an ironic comment (see also the city he builds), may refer to a division within the self, wherein spatial settledness accompanies a troubled spirit (see Isa 7:2). That Cain founded a city (nothing is said about the nature of this city) suggests that rootlessness means more than simple physical wandering. Those who live in cities can also be restless wanderers.

4:17-26. This section begins as did 4:1 (see v. 25). The genealogy of Cain, seven generations in all, occurs in linear form, with only the firstborn mentioned until Lamech, whose wives and three sons are named (5:32; 11:26). We hear nothing of Cain or any of his descendants beyond this chapter (an association with the Kenite peoples is problematic and of no evident concern here; on the relationship to similar names in chap. 5, see commentary on 5:1-32).

What are we to make of the origins of certain cultural advances—namely, urban life, animal husbandry (a more general reference than Abel’s work), music (both stringed and wind instruments) and metallurgy? Inasmuch as such developments were ascribed to divine beings in the Mesopotamian world, this genealogy may provide a demythologized form of that tradition.

Many scholars have suggested that, inasmuch as these developments belong to the genealogy of Cain, these cultural achievements should be interpreted negatively. However, a positive assessment seems more likely. The seven generations of Cain may mirror the seven days of creation, thus placing human creativity parallel to the divine. Just as one may marvel at the great diversity of God’s creation, so also human creativity mirrors God’s in producing numerous gifts and interests (and to which the Creator God seems related). This relation may be evident even in the names of Lamech’s four children; the similar names of the three sons are related to a semantic root having to do with capability and productivity, while the name of the daughter, Naamah, means “pleasant” or “beautiful.”

The writer does not condemn Lamech for having two wives (cf. Abraham; Jacob).
Lamech’s song, probably of ancient origin, occurs in poetic form; in its parallelism, the second line uses different words to repeat the essential point of the first (e.g., listen to me/hear my words; wounding me/injuring me). He probably makes reference to only one incident (though “man” and “young man” are not strictly identical). The piece may be identified as a taunt song by one about to do battle (hence translated future, NIV footnote) or a boasting song upon completion of a mission (revenge), a macho song performed before women. Commentators usually interpret it negatively.57 Whereas God avenged the death of Abel, Lamech takes vengeance into his own hands; he exacts death only for an injury; he appropriates God’s own measures and intensifies the level of retribution, so much so that only a blood feud could ensue (see Matt 18:21-22 for Jesus’ reversal of Lamech’s boast). The song shows how Cain’s violence had been intensified through the generations. Progress in sin and its effects matches the progress in civilization.

The birth of Seth constitutes an important moment; through him the human line will move into the future. Yet, his line involves no less evil than Cain’s, as the introduction to the flood story soon reminds the reader. Eve’s response at his birth, recalling the names of all her children, plays on Seth’s name (tīv sīt, “put,” “set”) as God’s replacement for Abel. The word translated “child” (ḥāzārā) may also be translated “seed” or “offspring” (see 3:15). Genesis 4:25 offers the first certain instance of (”)AdAm) as a proper name (without article or preposition; so NRSV, with footnotes to possible prior instances in 2:20; 3:17, 21). The name of Seth’s son, Enosh, has the same meaning as )AdAm; there is no good reason for giving it a sense of weakness or frailty.

““To invoke” the name of Yahweh (v. 26b) refers in general to worship. Such activity should not be linked to Seth in any special way. The phrase refers to this primeval period and parallels other notes about the beginnings of culture. Cain’s offerings to Yahweh (4:3; see also 4:1) already imply the invocation of the deity’s name. Yahweh’s name was probably first associated with Israel at the time of Moses (see Exod 3:14-16; 6:2-3); using the name here attests that Israel’s God should be identified with the God active from the morning of the world. Even more, pre-Israelite worship should not be written off as illegitimate. It was genuine and stands in continuity with Israel’s later worship (see also the phrase in 12:8; 13:4; 26:25). This language testifies to a relationship with God that people had before there ever was an Israel and must, in some ways, have continued alongside Israel at a later time (see Mal 1:11).

REFLECTIONS

1. The first story of human life outside the garden includes elements regarding human potential for the best and the worst: from creating life to destroying life, from intimacy to jealousy and resentment, from invoking the name of the Lord to lying to God, from the development of the arts and culture to the use of human ingenuity for violent purposes, from living in the presence of God to alienation from God, from being at home to being displaced.
2. Gowan proposes that the story provides an illustration of the often savage inequalities that life inexplicably visits upon equally gifted or qualified people and the issue of how people should appropriately respond. Yet, the narrator understands that God created the problem, and one ought not risk the inference that divine action lies behind each inequality of life. Hence, the text may address more narrowly ways of approaching seemingly unjust and arbitrary divine preferences (e.g., God’s choice of the younger son in the stories that follow).

3. Verse 7 presents difficulties, but to claim that it is secondary or that God’s response is “feeble” is not helpful. God’s word evidences a deep concern about Cain’s future and the two courses he can take with his life. God gives a gift to Cain by naming his feelings (v. 6) and pointing out the character of his inner struggle. Cain now knows that God understands him. Cain knows how God relates to people in the midst of such struggles; God will not intervene and force Cain to decide one way or another. Cain must decide how to respond, with the help of the knowledge God has given him. More generally, Cain ought not to view even such a divinely generated moment in life as devastating; God wills people to move on from such moments and be on with life.

The text implies that human beings are able to make decisions about specific matters of temptation (the issue is not whether to be sinless or not); we do not have to do with compulsion here, as if God holds out illusory possibilities to Cain. God clearly speaks an “if” and an “if not”; what human beings decide to do makes a difference regarding the shape of the future.

4. Cain’s feelings or actions are not directed toward God, the one who made the decision, but misdirected toward Abel. In effect, Abel becomes a scapegoat, the one who takes the blame for something God did. In some sense, God’s action leads to Abel’s death. Does this fact explain why God mitigates the penalty for Cain? We should note the importance of the lament psalms and remonstrating responses on the part of persons like Abraham and Moses when confronted with difficult circumstances. In these expressions, God takes the “guff”; the deity helps prevent the blame from being misdirected toward other human beings. The suffering and death of Jesus, who takes on himself the violence and blame for something human beings have done, can be helpfully related to this text (see Heb 12:24 for the Abel-Jesus link).

5. The fact that the first murder arises over a conflict regarding religious practices, between two worshipers of God, presents another ironic twist in the story. Sin lurks within the community of faith, too, and no little conflict has developed over the centuries within that community over disagreements regarding worship and who is being true to God’s will in such matters. In the wake of such experiences, the “losers” should be especially watchful, for the temptation to retaliate may be especially powerful.
6. Cain, guilty of murder and standing outside the line of promise, becomes the recipient of a promise from God (see also Ishmael, Esau). Even more, rather than exacting an eye-for-an-eye retribution on Cain, God protects him from an avenger. This incident raises questions about the appropriateness of later eye-for-eye legislation (see Exod 21:23-24) and capital punishment (see 9:6).

7. The sevenfold use of “brother” in the story intensifies concern for that relationship. These two persons are not strangers; they grew up in the same household, had the same family environment, were exposed to the same family values over many years. Yet, even such deep commonalities do not prevent hatred and violence. If sin can have this kind of effect on those who are so close and who share so many values, it presents a deep and pervasive problem for all human beings (see 1 John 3:11-15; Matt 5:21-25 links worship and conflict between brothers and sisters). Cain’s act violates the family, an integral part of God’s created order. Even more, by taking a life, Cain arrogates to himself a godlike power over Abel’s life.

This story sets a key theme for the rest of the book of Genesis, with intrafamilial conflict moving from an exception to the norm. The stories of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph are filled with the legacy of the relationship between Cain and Abel, often involving primogeniture.

8. Once again, the story reflects the close relationship between humans and the land, an intimate link between moral order and cosmic order. Humans and the nonhuman world live in a symbiotic relationship. Although Cain’s behaviors are not specifically directed against the land, the shedding of human blood adversely affects the productivity of the soil (see Hos 4:1-3). Even human behaviors that do not come to the attention of other persons have such an effect; they will in any case come to the attention of God.

9. Advances in civilization are not made ambiguous by being incorporated into a narrative so centered on violence. These references, as well as continuing testimony to intimacy and new life (vv. 1, 17, 25), suggest a powerful rhythm within life that works for good. Although material progress “frequently outruns moral progress and that human ingenuity, so potentially beneficial, is often directed toward evil ends,”60 such a point moves beyond these verses. We must keep the positive accomplishments of Cain and his descendants alongside the negative word about Lamech. While the latter can have a negative impact on the former, it does not so contaminate the other that the products of human creativity become innately evil. The positive point needs to be made clearly: “The story of civilization . . . is ennobled by the fact that it is a human being, God’s creature, who leads the way along the path of progress, invention and discovery.”61 The redactor probably did not think that the pre-flood origin of the arts of civilization was a problem; knowledge was passed down through the family of Noah, finally to be inherited by Israel. In this, Israel acknowledges its debt to earlier creative efforts (Deut 6:10-11).

10. Those long-asked questions about who endangered Cain, where Cain got his wife, and who would have purchased all the houses he built are difficult. We may explain these
disjunctions by appealing to the original setting of the story; it originated at a time when the

world was populated, and the disjunctions were not smoothed over when it was
incorporated into its present context. Yet, it seems unlikely that the redactor would have
overlooked these elements. The redactor may have thought of Cain’s siblings (see 5:4),
but more likely these texts belong with those (e.g., 2:24) that collapse the distance
between the “then” of the story and the “now” of the redactor. They are evidence that the
story functioned, not as a straightforward account of ancient events, but as a mirror for
human reality in every age. Cain may not have been threatened by anyone, but he reflects
a concern that would have been voiced by later generations. Cain may not actually have
built a city, but urban existence was a reality with which all subsequent generations lived.

Genesis 5:1-32, Adam’s Family Tree

Link to:

COMMENTARY

This, the second of ten genealogies in Genesis, presents ten generations from Adam to
Noah, the hero of the flood (see 11:10-26). The genealogy is linear/vertical in form (see
Introduction). The author created a generally consistent pattern, except for the first and
last, with Enoch, the seventh entry, a special case. This list, commonly identified with the
Priestly (v. 29 is a J fragment) source, bridges creation and the flood. In the present
narrative it provides a link between major stories and accounts for every generation from
the creation. The immediately preceding verses (4:25-26, J) clarify that the Seth of chap.
5 is actually Adam’s third child.

Mesopotamian traditions also feature ten (or so) generations before the flood. In a similar
list, eight to ten kings live a total of 432,000 years in one version, 241,200 in another (the
kings in post-flood lists have much shorter reigns). Major differences from the biblical
lists include the names;

semi-divine kings vs. human beings (a motif of democratization comparable to the image
of God); shorter lifespans (777-969 years; approx. a ratio of five years to one week). The
biblical list participates in a common folklore about the ages of early humans. The ages
were probably understood literally (see below). The ancient texts do not agree about the
years involved; the years in the Hebrew text total 1,656; the Samaritan text, 1,307; the
Septuagint, 2,242.

Some of the names in the Cain genealogy in 4:17-24 are similar to those in Genesis 5. Certain parallels are based in sound, others in form: Cain-Kenan; Irad-Jered; Mehujael-
Mahalalel; Methushael-Methuselah; Lamech-Lamech; Enoch-Enoch-Enosh. Moreover, the last person in each list (Lamech, Noah) has three sons. Many scholars consider these lists as doublets (J and P), having a common origin but with different developments, or one being a reworking of the other or having differing forms because of differing functions (variations in the length of genealogies are common). Whatever the history, the present redaction regards them as two separate family lines.

After the murder perpetrated by Cain and the vengeful response of Lamech, Genesis 5 may represent a fresh start, building upon the reference to the worship of Yahweh at the end of chap. 4. The two narrative elements in the chapter are positive (vv. 22-24, 29), though the language regarding Enoch suggests he is something of an exception (so also Noah).

5:1-3. The opening sentence may refer to a larger book that included the other genealogies in Genesis. The “written account” of NIV may more accurately reflect the Hebrew rps (seper).

Verses 1-2 essentially repeat 1:26-28. The variations may only be stylistic, but the divine naming of male and female parallels the naming in 1:3-9, and gives male and female a decisive place within the created order (AdAm functions both generically and as a proper name). This delayed report may affirm humanity in the wake of the preceding stories. The absence of a specific blessing (see 1:28; cf. 9:1, 7) may also show that the creational command remains intact, as does image and likeness of God language. The words image and likeness in v. 3 are reversed from their order in 1:26. If the second word helps us to understand the phrase, the relationship between son and father embodies the notion of image (only “likeness” appears in v. 1 with reference to God).

5:4-32. Two elements stand out in an otherwise rhythmic genealogy, the notes about Enoch and Noah.

Enoch. Twice he is said to have walked with God (the phrase is used elsewhere only of Noah [6:9; see 17:1; 48:15]), which testifies to a close relationship with God in the midst of a “fallen” world. That God “took” this one who “walked with God” anticipates God’s saving of Noah (see “take” in 7:2), a special act of divine deliverance. “He was not” may refer to death (Job 7:8; Pss 39:13; 104:35; Ezek 28:19) or an uncertain disappearance (42:13, 32, 36). It could mean that he died prematurely or disappeared unexpectedly. “God took him” (no place is noted) could be a way of speaking of death (Jonah 4:3), but it has been linked with God’s “taking” of Elijah in 2 Kgs 2:1 (see Pss 49:15; 73:24), which may be how the postbiblical traditions of Enoch’s escaping death and receiving divine secrets arose (see Sir 44:16; 1–2 Enoch; Jubilees; Heb 11:5; Jude 14-15). His
living 365 years (see the year-long flood, 8:13-14) depends on the solar year, but explanations are only speculative. It may refer to a complete or fulfilled life as well.

Noah. The name is a word play on !jn (niham, “relief, comfort”), though it probably means “rest.” His father, Lamech, who anticipates Noah’s role in the following chapters, expresses confidence—or a wish—rather than prophecy (it may stand in contrast to the word of the other Lamech in 4:23-24). The nature of the relief remains ambiguous, but may include a dual reference to 8:21 and 9:20. The former refers to a promise that provides for a constant natural order within which life can develop; the latter offers a specific instance—namely, Noah’s development of viticulture and less onerous methods of farming (not the pleasure that wine-drinking brings). The “relief” would ameliorate the curse on the ground (3:17), but not remove it. From another angle, the author uses the Hebrew root for “toil”/“pain” that refers to Yahweh’s grief in 6:6; both human beings and God suffer the painful effects of human sin. Moreover, the root for “comfort”/“relief” repeats the vocabulary of God’s sorrow/repentance in 6:6-7. God’s grieving/repenting actions concerning the human situation are more decisive than anything.

Noah might do. At the same time, Noah, the one who “walks with” this God, becomes the vehicle in and through which God enables a new beginning for humankind.62 Noah, who is unusually old at the time he begins a family, is the first person to be born after the death of Adam. Noah’s genealogy brackets the flood story with its resumption in 9:18. Due to the location of his story, Noah is also the ancestor of all human beings.

REFLECTIONS

1. We may compare the structure of this genealogy with that of Shem in 11:10-26, which also climaxes in a key juncture within the larger story. These two genealogies balance each other, each bringing an era to a close, and with a key figure (Noah, Terah) having three sons. They serve both a literary and a chronological purpose in uniting key elements in the story (see Introduction). Scholars dispute the theological significance of this structure. Three developments may be noted: (1) The fulfillment of the divine blessing (1:28), which entails both human and divine elements. Divine in origin and empowering the creature to fulfill the command, it cannot be effected without human participation (the importance of which is clear in a negative way in 38:8-10). (2) The continuing creation. The order and stability that God the Creator initially brought to the world continues in the shaping of the human community. Even more than in chaps. 1–2, this creational activity involves human participation. Although not absent in this move from one generation to the next, the lack of God language gives the human a special place. (3) Some concern to express the unity of humankind may be present. Yet, because all but Noah’s family are lost in the flood, it would not be a point well made. The table of nations (10:1-32) seems more clearly to be concerned about this matter.

2. Readers often puzzle over the long lives of these patriarchs. While they might be idealizations of the world’s early history, the overall concern for chronology suggests that
they are meant to be taken literally. The decrease in lifespan as time goes along constitutes a notable feature of the ages of these and other ancestral figures: Adam to Noah (969-777); Noah to Abraham (600-200); Israel (100-200); Ps 10:10 (70 years). The author may use these statistics to chart the effects of sin upon human life (see the above discussion on “Fall”), though diminishing life spans are also characteristic of Mesopotamian lists. Most basically, these ages are consonant with other features of chaps. 1–11 that indicate that this age differs from later ages; indeed, it belongs to an irretrievable past. In fact, the ages of these individuals lies completely beyond our experience (if not our desires).

The repetitive references to the image/likeness of God are important in several ways (see 1:26). First, it indicates that the identification of the human in the image of God has not been effaced by the events of chaps. 3–4. Not only Adam and Eve, but all subsequent generations (also affirmed at 9:6) are to be so described. Second, the use of likeness/image language to speak of the relationship between Adam and Seth establishes a link between the creativity of God and that of humans. The dialogical character of the divine creation of the human in 1:26 here explicitly draws the human up into that creative enterprise.

Genesis 6:1-4, Sin Becomes Cosmic
Link to:

COMMENTARY

This brief segment is one of the most difficult in Genesis both to translate and interpret. Certain words are rare or unknown (“abide”/“contend with” and “for” in v. 3; Nephilim in v. 4); issues of coherence arise at many points. These verses may be a fragment of what was once a longer story, or scribes may have added to or subtracted from the text. The fact that the text presents ambiguity may be precisely the point, however: The mode of telling matches the nature of the message.

This fragment may reflect mythical roots, yet parallels in West Semitic cultures (unlike Greek) have been hard to come by, and very little help has been gained from such comparative work. The text has been traditionally assigned to J, yet links with Priestly material can be discerned.

Consistent with other sections in chaps. 1–11, this material reflects an era no longer accessible to Israel. The text does not mirror a typical human situation (though parallels to specific items may be noted; see “also afterwards” for the Nephilim), but speaks of a time long past when God decreed a specific length to human life.

6:1. The narrative follows naturally what has preceded it. The divine blessing of 1:28 on
humanity (!dah hA ) AdAm) to be fruitful and multiply moves ahead. The language of birth and the reference to daughters pervaded chap. 5. The link of human beings to “the face of the ground hmda [ ḏadAmâ]” continues the creational theme of chaps. 2–4. Yet, these themes become distorted in what follows. The blessing to be fruitful and multiply catches up those who are not part of the human realm. Moreover, the earthly character of creaturely existence is compromised with an apparent breakdown of the earth-heaven distinction.

6:2. The author introduces the “sons of God” (or “sons of the gods”) as a matter of course, as if the reader needs no explanation. But the modern reader does; indeed, much depends on their proper identification. There are three basic options: (1) The sons of Seth in chap. 5—the daughters are descendants of Cain; the godly sons are Sethites who sin by mixing with unbelievers. Or the daughters are referred to in chap. 5, while the “godly sons” are descendents of Cain (Eve’s son “with the help of the LORD,” 4:1). Or the “sons of God” are those who have “become like God” (3:22), assuming divine prerogatives. (2) They may be royal or semi-divine figures who accumulated women in their harems. Texts such as Psalms 2 and 82 have been related to this discussion; the links between semi-divine kings in the lists comparable to chap. 5 are also noted. (3) They are divine beings of the heavenly court (see 1:26). This widely held view, which seems most likely, may be grounded in the use of the phrase elsewhere in the OT (Job 1:6; Job 2:1; Job 38:7; Ps 29:1; as old as the LXX) and at Ugarit. These divine beings take the initiative and breach the boundary between heaven and earth by taking human wives. The strangeness of such events in and of themselves (e.g., actual marriages are in view) should not count against this interpretation.

The reader may observe other links with the preceding narrative. The sons of God “see” the daughters who are “fair, beautiful” (bwf tôb, “good”) and “take” them. These three words occur together in 3:6, describing Eve’s eating of the fruit from the tree of knowledge. This parallel must mean that the actions described are inappropriate. The “seeing” narrows the appreciation of women to their beauty or, simply, physical desire. Their “taking” of multiple wives seems arbitrary (“take” is ambiguous; it can mean proper or forced behavior; the parallel with 3:6 suggests the latter); it implies the misuse of women (the “seeing” and “taking” of Sarai by Pharaoh in 12:15 and of Bathsheba by David in 2 Sam 11:2-4 have been cited). At the same time, more is at issue here than the acts of the sons of God. Why should human beings, who did not initiate this matter, bear a divine judgment?

6:3. The placement and interpretation of this verse provide a major crux. Regarding placement, some have thought that God’s judgment should be a conclusion to the entire segment and that vv. 3 and 4 should be interchanged. The present placement, however, signals that the judgment relates most fundamentally to the problem, not the product.
The expression “my spirit shall not abide in mortals forever” presents another problem. The NRSV translation “abide,” following the LXX and Vulgate, fits the context best. The mortals are humans generally (including any offspring of these unions). Spirit (jwr rûah) signifies the breath of life as in 6:17; 7:15, 22 (a variant of 2:7), that divine life that enables life for both humans and animals.

“Forever” refers to 3:22 and the concern that God expresses regarding access to the tree of life. The divine-human link in this text has become another way in which immortality (or very long lives?) might be realized by human beings. Whether they have taken initiative in this matter may be finally irrelevant, for immortality would become a reality in any case (hence, the question of the assignation of fault does not pertain to the basic issue). God issues a decree that such a union will not result in human beings who live forever; indeed a specific limit is set. Without the animation of the divine spirit, the flesh will perish.

If we translate “for they are flesh” (as in the LXX), we understand why God thought it necessary to set this more limited lifespan. Immortality raises the issue of humans being able to live such a length of time with their fleshly nature (bodies wear out; see Isa 31:3 for flesh as weakness, not sinful nature). The divine decree becomes necessary, and has in mind what it would mean for a body of flesh to be animated by a spirit that lives forever. God, again, acts graciously.

6:4. Scholars dispute the identification and place of the Nephilim (literally it could be “fallen ones”; Num 13:33 suggests persons of gigantic stature). The first line may be an aside to the reader, giving a contemporary reference (“also afterward”) concerning the offspring of these unions. This interpretation seems more likely than that they were actually the offspring of this union; the latter are identified as warriors of renown. Hence this verse does not present an etiology of any persons known to Israel. But if the ancient reader wanted to know what these warriors were like, the Nephilim would be a good analogy.

REFLECTIONS

1. Readers have usually thought these verses illustrate the increasingly ungodly state of affairs before the flood. Although words for “sin,” “evil,” or “judgment” are not present, they are implied, as was the case in chap. 3.

This downward development occurs at three levels: (1) Human sin has drawn the entire cosmic order into its orbit. Chapter 3 showed that human sin has an effect on the natural order; here those effects move even into heavenly places and entrap divine beings. In effect,
the separation between divine and human worlds has broken down; the orders of creation have become confused. Evil has become cosmic in its scope. The flood must have a comparable scope. (2) The text illustrates the “becoming like God” theme only indirectly, for the initiative in the text comes from the divine realm. Likeness to God entails the possibilities for immortality (though still limited, for they are flesh). In this regard, the text relates to 3:22. Whereas that divine action had cut off humankind from the tree of life as a means to immortality, this divine decree cuts off another way in which that end might have been accomplished. The number 120 may also relate to the long life spans of chap. 5. (3) The resulting violence constitutes another level. The reference to heroes and warriors in v. 4 may relate to vv. 11-13. The mix of divine and human resulted in new forms of human life with intensified capacities for violence. The actions of these Nephilim-like figures thus signify another distorting effect of sin on the life of the world.

2. This text became the source of much speculation in postbiblical reflection (and it may have informed such texts as Job 4:18-19 and Isa 14:12-20). Indeed, it became the focus of interpreters more than did Genesis 3 (see 1–2 Enoch; Jubilees 5; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6). This text pushed speculation in the direction of dualism, wherein sin and evil are realities for both divine and human realms. Stories associated with a revolt in heaven followed by the casting out of these beings from the heavenly realm led to conclusions regarding the demonic sphere (which did not solve the problem of the origin of evil; it was only pushed back one step). Regarding the fate of the divine beings involved in this episode, however, the text remains remarkably silent. We may assume that they, too, were destroyed in the cosmic flood; indeed they may have precipitated its cosmic character. However, Gen 11:7 suggests that the heavenly council was again in proper working order after the flood.

Link to:

COMMENTARY

Literary analysts consider this narrative an admixture of differing versions of a single story (J and P). Other literary readings have discerned unity in the story, including elaborate chiastic structures.63 While such schemas are often forced, unified readings of this composite text remain an important task.

That Israel would have preserved several versions of the flood story is not surprising since numerous versions circulated in the ancient Near East. The most widely known today occurs as part of the Gilgamesh Epic. An older, but less complete, version may be found in the Atrahasis Epic. The 3rd-century BCE history of Babylon by Berossus contains a retelling of the story. A Sumerian version of the flood also exists. Similarities
in the basic creation-flood structure between Atrahasis and the biblical story are particularly striking (creation; early proliferation and disruption of humankind, including long-lived antediluvians; the gods sending a flood to stop human disruption; the saving of a hero). This structure, as well as commonalities in theme and vocabulary, indicate that these stories are in some way interdependent, though questions of direct dependence remain unresolved.64

The existence of numerous flood stories has stimulated efforts to discern the basis of the story. The above-noted stories are set in the Tigris-Euphrates River valley; alluvial deposits show that it was periodically flooded in ancient times. No such deposits have been found in the land of Canaan, and archaeological and geological remains provide no evidence of a worldwide flood. These factors suggest that the Genesis account should be related to a major flood in the Mesopotamian valley, which in time was interpreted as a flood that covered the then known world (one severe flood has been dated around 3000 BCE). Stories from other cultures should be tracked back to their own local flood traditions. No credence should be given to the occasional rumors regarding the discovery of Noah’s ark.65

Some interpreters think the flood story is enclosed by the genealogical references in 6:9 and 10:1. Other interpreters, however, argue that the story begins at 6:5. Certainly the repetitions of 6:5 in 8:21 are linked formally and thematically, centering in God’s relationship to a sin-filled world. Many readers view God’s remembrance of Noah and the animals in 8:1 as the pivotal center of the story. The rising of the waters leads up to 8:1, and their subsidence leads to a newly ordered world.

The story’s characteristics include a repetition of key scenes, words, and phrases that focus attention on important aspects of the story; little direct speech (no speaking between 7:4 and 8:15) and no dialogue; no words from Noah, and he assumes little initiative, simply doing what he is told—so his portrayal is rather flat; no description of Noah’s family members; a minimum of description of the disaster itself, with little attention given to the plight of the victims or the scene of death or Noah’s family’s reaction to what must have been a fearful and heart-rending time (how different from the way in which the media would have handled it today!); no communication with or reaction from those most affected negatively by these events—only the one to be saved is told what is coming; the images of God focus less on judgment (no anger language) than on sorrow, pain, disappointment, regret, and mercy.

On the other hand, the author devotes repeated (four times in 6:18–7:15!) attention to the boarding of the ark, to lists of people and animals and birds that are saved, and to the chronology of the event (though not for the construction of the ark). Attention centers on salvation rather than on judgment, on what God does to preserve the creation.

6:5-8, Prologue to the Flood. These verses (assigned to J) are central to an interpretation
of the flood story.66 Together with 6:11-13, they provide the deity’s rationale for the flood. God’s seeing (v. 5; see 6:12) reflects an inquiry into the human situation (see 11:5; 18:21), which issues in a general indictment of humankind (not a specific sinful act). In contrast to “all” the “good” that God “saw” in 1:31, here God sees that “every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually” (v. 5; see 8:21 for a comparable assessment at the end of the flood). “Wickedness” refers to both sinful acts and their consequences. The indictment encompasses not simply actions, but the inner recesses of the human heart. “Inclination” (rxy yezer) denotes the conceiving of possibilities for thought, word, and deed. The words only, every, and continually specify the breadth and depth of the sinful human condition (see Jer 17:9-10 for a similar appraisal). These assessments signify that God does not act from sudden and arbitrary impulses.

Having made this evaluation, the narrator describes the inner-divine reaction stunningly. The basic character of the human heart is set alongside the response of the divine heart. God appears, not as an angry and vengeful judge, but as a grieving and pained parent, distressed at what has happened. God “regrets” having proceeded with the creation in the first place, given these tragic developments (repeated in vv. 6-7; the NIV’s “grieved” seems too weak a translation of 'jn [niham]; the force of the verb has to do with genuine change; see 1 Sam 15:11, 35). We may discern divine consternation and disappointment, since God’s vision for what the world might have been has been dashed by a narrow and self-centered human vision.67

Even more, and the NIV says it best, God’s “heart was filled with pain” (used of human grief and pain, 45:5, as well as divine, Ps 78:40; Isa 63:10; Eph 4:30). God experiences the pain characteristic of man and woman in 3:16-17. These developments strike deeply into the divine heart and create tensions regarding the shape the future should take. How can God’s deep suffering be reconciled to the forthcoming judgment (see Hos 11:8-9)? God does not stand in an indifferent or remote relationship to what has happened, but personally enters into its brokenness and works on it from within. The future of the creation that becomes a possibility in and through Noah and the ark is rooted in this divine pain and sorrow, leading first to the divine choice of Noah (6:8) and finally to the promises in 8:21–9:17.

God, whose heart has been broken, announces a judgment (v. 7), which is nonetheless thorough going and uncompromising. The verb (“blot out, wipe away”) may carry the sense of erasing away, as written letters (Num 5:23); it is used positively for washing away sins (Ps 51:2, 9). Hence the image of the flood would involve cleansing. This action seems to leave no room for qualification or exception (as in 7:4, 23, also followed by a note on Noah). God’s showing favor to Noah (v. 8), however, moderates the judgmental decision (see Moses’ argument on the relationship between finding favor in God’s sight and judgment in Exod 33:12-17; @j [hen] is a play on Noah). God’s action does not depend on Noah’s character (though Noah’s potential in
God’s eyes cannot be discounted). God’s gracious choice of Noah results from the divine agony over what to do about the creation. Yet, having been chosen, Noah’s subsequent faithfulness (v. 9) is not just a blip on the cosmic screen, somehow irrelevant to God (see 7:1). Verse 9 is not presented as Noah’s response to the divine choice, but as a consequence of God’s prior action.

The relationship between vv. 5-8 and vv. 11-13 is comparable to that between 8:21-22 and 9:8-17, with a divine soliloquy followed by direct divine speech (cf. Exod 2:23-25 with 3:7-10).

6:9-10, Genealogy of Noah. These verses begin in a way typical of the P genealogies in the book of Genesis; they pick up on 5:32, but with the new information (anticipated in 5:29) that Noah’s faithful relationship with God provides a channel through which God can start afresh. The negative evaluations of creation (vv. 5, 11-12) enclose the positive reference to Noah. Even in the midst of such a tragedy, one individual faithfully walks with God. But, most fundamentally, God’s choice of Noah enables a glimmer of hope in the midst of all that makes for decay and deterioration.

The descriptions of Noah say essentially the same thing from different points of view. He is a righteous man (qyd x zaddîq). God matches this judgment by the narrator (7:1). The point is not that Noah measures up to certain moral standards. Rather, he stands in a right relationship with God and has done it justice in various dimensions of his life (see 38:26). He acts blamelessly (!ymt tAmîm) as compared to his contemporaries (see 1 Kgs 9:4; Ezek 14:14-20). This term, typical in ritual contexts for an unblemished animal, does not mean that Noah is sinless; rather, he is a person of high integrity (see Ps 15:2-5). He walks with God, suggesting an unusually close relationship (Enoch, 5:24; see 17:1; 48:15; Mic 6:8). These characteristics are exemplified by Noah’s response to God’s commands in the narrative that follows (6:22; 7:5, 9, 16; 8:18).

6:11-22, Preparations. Scholars often view vv. 11-13 to be a P version of the divine rationale for sending the flood, a vision of the world from God’s viewpoint (see 6:5 for God’s seeing). These verses belong with 6:5-7; the latter more clearly specify the depths of human sin, the former the cosmic implications. The indictment followed by the announcement of judgment appears prophetic in form, but only Noah hears the word.

The author focuses on what has happened to the earth, a word repeated six times. God deems the earth to be corrupt (vv. 11a, 12a) because it is filled with violence. Corruption (tjv sAhat) involves ruin, decadence, or decay, the effect of violence; it stands over against the “good” God saw in chap. 1. The earth (not just the creatures) has not continued as it was created to be (on defiling or polluting of the earth, see 4:10-12; Num 35:33-34; Isa 24:5-7; Jer 3:1-3). Violence (smj hAmAs) includes lawlessness or injustice, a willful flaunting of the moral order, manifested in deeds that violate the lives of others, perhaps especially murder (in view of 9:5-6; see 49:5; Ezek 12:19-20).

Some interpreters understand the phrase “all flesh” to refer to both humans and animals, as in 6:17, 19; 9:11, 15-17 (9:2, 5 is at times appealed to). The NIV, however, translates
“flesh” as “people” in vv. 12-13 (“life” or “[living] creatures” elsewhere). Here, the place of animals is not explicit; yet it means that v. 13 (unlike v. 17) would not refer directly to animals. Hence, the inclusion of the animals in the promise (9:8-17) does not appear symmetrical with the pre-flood scene. In either case, at least some animals suffer innocently in the corruption of the earth and in the destruction. Because the moral order does not have a tight causal weave, and given the interconnectedness of life, the innocent often suffer with the guilty (see 18:25).

According to the NIV and the NRSV, the earth along with the creatures will be destroyed (v. 13b). However, this seems problematic (cf. NAB, “destroy them and all life on earth”), because v. 13a refers only to “all flesh”; people and animals are destroyed “from the earth” (7:23), the waters swell and recede from the earth (7:24; 8:3), and the earth is not re-created. The violence does corrupt the earth, and so judgment must be comparably comprehensive, but the effect on the earth functions more as a cleansing than a destruction (see p. 394).

God informs Noah of the “end of all flesh” (i.e., doom, see Amos 8:2; Lam 4:18). The verb destroy derives from the same root as “corrupt” (sht, “ruin/ruined,” would capture the point well), which signals the functioning of the moral order (what goes around comes around). God does not need to introduce judgment into the situation (God does not act to trigger the destructive elements). The seeds of destruction are contained within the very nature of the situation. Unlike some biblical figures (e.g., Moses), Noah does not interact with God’s announcement. But he must decide whether to obey God’s command, trusting God enough to build the ark when nary a cloud is in the sky. God the architect tersely lays before Noah the plans for the ark. The dimensions (450 x 75 x 45 feet, a cubit is about 18 inches; the boat in the Gilgamesh Epic was a perfect cube) and other features suggest the image of a floating house rather than a boat, with no rudder, sail, or crew. The word for “ark” (hbt tebâ ) occurs elsewhere only for Moses’ basket of rushes (Exod 2:3-5), where Moses becomes a new Noah.68 Noah faced a daunting task in constructing this enormous boat (five times longer than the Mayflower! ) and getting all the animals and necessary food on board in a short time—and the narrator tells the story in a matter-of-fact way, unlike many extra-biblical versions of the story. The significant issue for the narrator is that Noah obeyed the divine directive (v. 22).

In v. 17 God specifies the means for the destruction of all living creatures (those with the “breath of life” are human beings and animals) by means of a “flood of waters” (lwbm mabbûl, probably the waters above the firmament [ 1:7], used elsewhere only in Ps 29:10). Death will overwhelm everyone everywhere, except the occupants of the ark. The covenant (v. 18) assumes a right relationship, as do all of God’s covenants in the OT. The covenant probably refers to God’s commitment to Noah and his family at this moment of danger and anticipates 9:8-17 in a general way. Noah can move into this horrendous
experience surrounded by a promise from God that ensures a future relationship with him and, by implication, the entire creation.

God commands Noah to bring onto the ark his family of eight persons, a pair (or pairs) of “every living thing, of all flesh,” and food for all (see 1:29-30). Noah does all that God has commanded him; in view of 7:5, this compliance refers to vv. 14-16 and the completion of the ark, regarding which the author provides no details; vv. 17-21 provide some information about what God intends to do and what will be expected of Noah when the ark is completed.

7:1-10, The Embarkation. These verses stem mostly from J (except vv. 6, 9). God’s recognition of Noah’s unique righteousness (v. 1) derives from Noah’s trust in God and obedience in building the ark (see Heb 11:7). The righteous Noah of 6:9 has done justice to the relationship with God in which he stands. If he had not responded positively to the command, presumably he would have perished like the rest (see the assessment of Abraham in 22:12; cf. 38:26). God’s confidence in Noah is seen to be well placed.

Verses 2-4, wherein God actually gives the command to board the ark, introduce problems of coherence with 6:17-20. While 6:19-20 spoke of pairs of animals and birds, here God directs Noah to take seven pairs of clean animals and birds (on clean birds, see 8:20) and a pair of unclean animals (in view of 9:3, clean and unclean refer to sacrifice rather than diet). Also, whereas 6:17 spoke of a “flood of waters” (see 7:11, 24) as the cause of the flood, 7:4 (see v. 12) speaks of forty days and nights of rain. Noah, once again, does all that God commands him (7:5).

Source criticism has explained this variety in terms of a shift from P to J materials; a redactor retained both versions. Yet, the redactor may not have thought this to be a problem; 6:19-20 speaks of pairs of animals generally, while 7:2-3 specifies the number and kind of pairs (needed for the sacrifice, 8:20). Verse 5 may be paired with v. 9b, which encloses the act of obedience to God’s command. Verse 10 indicates that God does what God promised (v. 4).

The author provides a precise chronology, but contemporary readers have had difficulty in sorting it out, probably due to our lack of information about ancient calendars. Some details suggest a symbolic level of meaning. According to v. 4 the rain would come in seven days and last forty days; God applies a temporal limit to the flood from the beginning. Hence, the “flood” (vv. 6-7) does in fact come in seven days (v. 10) and lasts forty days (vv. 12, 17). The forty-day mark of v. 17 concludes the entry of water, the mountain-covering results of which are described in vv. 17-20. The 150-day mark of v. 24 marks the end of the time the flood had such an effect; in 8:3, these 150 days also mark the time the waters had subsided enough for the ark to rest on the mountains. These
periods equal the five thirty-day months from the second month of 7:11 to the seventh month of 8:4. This sequence suggests that the forty days are included within the 150 days. The earth was dried up in the 601st year, the twenty-seventh day of the second month (8:14), totaling some 365-370 days (perhaps a solar year). The New Year’s day of 8:13 marks the key point in the abatement of the flood (see Exod 40:2). Several scholars have noted the chiasm of seven waiting days (twice, 7:4, 10), forty days of rain (7:12, 17), 150 days of flood prevailing (7:24; 8:3), forty days of waiting (8:6) to seven days (twice, 8:10, 12).  

7:11-24, The Flood. The editor created, in this section, an admixture of J (vv. 12, 16b-17, 22-23) and P, with the renewed reference to the entry into the ark and Noah’s obedience somewhat intrusive (vv. 13-15). Verses 6-9 are recapitulated in vv. 10-16 in more precise detail. The writer makes clear that all those specified had indeed gotten on board and were delivered from the flood. Yahweh shut the door of the ark (unparalleled in the Mesopotamian versions), signifying divine care (v. 16).

Right on God’s announced schedule the flood begins, with water pouring in from below and above. The bursting forth (or splitting open) of the deep (!wht tuhôm, v. 11; cf. Ps 78:15; Isa 51:10) suggests a breakdown of the division between waters above and below (1:6-7). The windows of the heavens, however, seem simply to be the source of rain (Mal 3:10; but see Isa 24:18). The presence of this event within a time frame remains important, for it keeps the destruction within created temporal limits.

The swelling of the waters (vv. 17, 24) encloses reference to death for all living creatures; the earth itself receives no mention, but there is repeated mention of the animals in the destruction (drowning language does not appear). The water rose above the highest mountains, and all living creatures died (language from 2:7 and 6:17 is used in v. 22). The writer describes the flood in quite natural terms; only with the subsiding of the waters does God’s explicit activity now become apparent.

8:1-12, God Remembers Noah and the Animals. In 8:1-5 (essentially P), v. 1 constitutes the turning point in the story: God remembers (see 9:15: Exod 2:24; Lev 26:42-45) Noah and the animals, both wild and domestic. (God’s remembering may be compared to that in Ps 25:7). While this divine act is of no little import, the promise of God’s covenant with Noah (6:18) and the placing of a temporal limit on the waters (7:4, 12, 17) means that God’s remembering would occur.

Verses 1-2 describe divine activity prior to the end of the 150 days (reference to which brackets these verses; the NIV partially recognizes this action of the deity by putting v. 2 in the pluperfect). God made a wind (jwr rûah) to blow over the earth, and it began to dry things up; indeed v. 2 reverses the deeds of 7:11. This divine activity recalls 1:2; it suggests that the creation had begun to fail, and that God now begins the task of restoration. The rûah has a re-creative effect, bringing the cosmic “plumbing” back into proper repair. Unlike the frightened gods of the Mesopotamian stories, Israel’s God remains in charge of the situation.
Five months after the flood began, the ark came to rest on a mountain in an area called Ararat (2 Kgs 19:37; Jer 51:37), most likely in extreme northeastern Turkey, near the sources of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The waters continue to abate for some months thereafter (v. 5 speaks of seventy-three more days until the tops of the mountains were seen; this chronology implies that the ark was grounded seventy-three days before the mountain on which it was grounded actually could be seen, though the two sources do not seem coherent here).

In vv. 6-12 (J), after forty more days, Noah sends out a succession of four birds (one raven, and a dove three times) to discern the condition of the earth (a comparable scene appears in an extra-biblical account and corresponds to a practice of ancient mariners). Note the use of practical wisdom rather than divine direction to discern the nature of the situation, as well as the salvific use of animals. The raven’s going to and fro suggests it made various trips out from the ark, finally stopping when the waters dried up. Noah could probably determine whether the dove had found land by examining its feet when it returned. The olive branch brought back by the dove has long been deemed a symbol of peace (see Pss 52:8; 128:3 for its symbolic value of strength, beauty, and new life).

8:13-22, Disembarkation and Promise. In vv. 13-19 (essentially P), the author provides notice about varying stages of drying, from the appearance of the dry land (on New Year’s Day, v. 13, an important moment for the beginning of the new creation) to a completely dry earth (v. 14); the verb stems from the same root as “dry land” in 1:9, hence it parallels the first creation.

God personally gives the directive for everyone to leave the ark (see 7:1, 16). The birds and animals are released for the purpose of multiplying on the earth (see 1:22, where birds but not land animals are blessed). Upon their release they find an earth accommodating to the purposes God intended for them.

In vv. 20-22 (J) Noah responds by building an altar and offering burnt offerings of every clean animal and bird (given the number of animals, this is an offering of consequence!). In the Babylonian epic the gods “gather like flies around the sacrifice,” having been without food for many days. Here, God’s smelling the odor of the sacrifice provides a lively metaphor for God’s positive reception of the sacrifice (cf. Lev 26:31 with Amos 5:21-22) Noah remained unaware of this response. The offering in gratitude serves as a means for God to act on behalf of the worshiper, and hence has atoning value for Noah and his family. To claim, however, that it has perduring, universal significance, shifting God’s future relation to all humankind and the world, isolates the sacrifice from other features of God’s relationship to Noah.70

God initially responds with an internal commitment to the future of the creation (vv. 21-22), conveyed as an unconditional promise to Noah in 9:8-17 (formally comparable to 6:7 and 6:13). God’s response expresses faithfulness not only to Noah but also to the larger...
creation. According to 6:18, God’s commitment to Noah remains firm and involves more than his personal future. God’s recognition of Noah’s righteousness (7:1) and God’s remembering of Noah and the animals (8:1) also reveal a committed relationship. Noah’s sacrifice is thus not simply an occasion for or the cause of God’s response; it symbolizes a vital relationship. The totality of Noah’s relationship with God (not just the sacrifice) mediates God’s new relationship with the creation.

Verse 21 has occasioned much discussion. The phrase “never again curse the ground [or hold it in contempt]” (llq qAlal ) could refer to no more floods, to no additional curses on the ground (rra )Arar, 3:17), to the abandonment of the existing curse, or, more generally, to the end of the reign of the curse. The last seems likely; curse will no longer be the decisive divine relationship to the earth. God enters into the unfolding effects of the curse (of which the flood was a climactic instance), not allowing it to control the future of humankind or the creation. In effect, God places an eternal limit on the functioning of the moral order. Positively, the divine blessing and promise enter anew upon the scene and begin to break down the effects of the curse.

God’s internal reason for giving the promise of no more floods appears highly unusual: “For the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth” (v. 21). A comparable statement occurs in 6:5, which serves as the reason for the flood; it now becomes the reason for not sending a flood. The differences between 6:5 and 8:21 are minimal (omission of “every”; replacement of “continually” with “from his youth”). The flood has not changed the basic human character. No new people are in view in 8:21, just fewer of them!

God chooses to take another course of action. The deity does not resign to the presence of sin (God sets only a certain type of judgment off limits), but offers a new way of relating to a wicked world. In view of this, God changes the ways and means of working toward divine goals for the creation (see p. 395).

God promises that the rhythm of the natural order—disrupted by the flood—will continue “as long as the earth endures” (v. 22)—literally, “as long as all the days of the earth.” At first glance, one wonders what kind of promise this is, if another flood could simply be one way in which

the earth no longer endures! But this phrase does not qualify the promise. It does not have an “end of the world” in view (though 2 Pet 3:6-7 suggests one could think of “the fire next time”); it speaks only of the life of the earth in an indefinite future. The phrase alludes to the “permanence” of the earth.71 The promises focus on matters ecological, involving agricultural life, climate, seasons, and the daily rhythm. The first implies the continuing existence of human work in seeding and harvesting. All elements are necessary for continued life in the world, providing a basic rhythm as life reaches forward to the future. Come what may, the cosmic order will remain steady and regular.
REFLECTIONS

1. The situation that led to the flood is described clearly enough. The wickedness of God’s creatures had become so deep and broad (by the tenth generation) that the creation was reeling in negative response. God had to do something. Scholars have suggested overlapping interpretations for the purpose of the flood.

(a) God intended to purge the world of its corruption. Water may thus be understood in both a literal and a metaphorical way, as flood and as a cleansing agent, i.e., the language of blotting out or wiping away, wiping the slate of the world clean of its wickedness and beginning anew. This interpretation has some merit, but 8:21 reminds the reader that the flood did not cleanse human beings of sin. If God’s purpose was to cleanse, it was in some sense a failure.

(b) God wanted to undo creation (“uncreation”) and to begin again (“recreation”). Water functions literally and metaphorically, as flood and as instrument of destruction. Wenham’s language conveys this interpretation: The flood was “the day when the old creation died”; it “destroyed the old world, God’s original creation, and out of it was born a new world.” This could be seen in the return of a watery chaos (wht tuhôm) and the collapse of the division of the waters (7:11). Then, in a recreative act, God reverses the movement toward chaos, evident in the use of the jwr (rûah ) and the return of the waters (8:1-2), the emergence of dry land (8:13-14), and the blessings of 8:17 and 9:1, 7. (See p. 356, Reflections on chaos.)

This interpretation also presents some problems. The journey back from chaos works differently from the journey depicted in chap. 1. The old world was not destroyed; major continuities with the original creation remain (vegetation [the olive leaf]; light; firmament; luminaries; the ark occupants). God sets limits to the flood from the start, from the saving of a remnant of human beings and animals, to the covenant with Noah (6:18), to placing a temporal limit to the onrush of the waters (7:4). Hence, from a point early in the account, God did not intend to undo the creation, or for that matter to recreate an undone world according to some design. There is a beginning again, but the pre-flood creation remains.

(c) Another approach appeals to mythological or typological elements. Water often occurs as an archetypal symbol of chaos: “The potency of water as a symbol for the threat to all ordered life . . . lurks at the edges of controlled, meaningful existence.” Water appears in various texts (e.g., lament psalms) as an image for difficulty and suffering. The story reflects this-worldly reality of every age. For Westermann the story is the product of “a series of identical or similar events which have been fashioned into a type. The flood is the archetype of human catastrophe.” The flood story illustrates how God relates to the world in judgment and grace, from the prophetic indictments and announcements of judgment and salvation to the apocalyptic images of the end of the world.
While flood language can indeed be appropriated to depict such moments (see Isaiah 24–27; Matt 24:37-44), this approach to the story is deeply inadequate. The promises that chart God’s new relationship to the world indicate that the flood was a not-to-be-repeated event. As such, the flood should never be used as a type or illustration of divine judgment. The flood has a unique character, frozen in place by the divine promise never to do this again. Hence, the flood functions for Israel as an illustration of the certainty of God’s promises (Isa 54:9-10). The flood typifies the inviolability of God’s promises.

The biblical authors did not consider the flood as simply one event among others. It was an epoch-making event that deeply affected the future relationship between God and the world (see below). Such a perspective may explain why the flood story is so long, when compared with other narratives in Genesis 1–11.

(d) Another approach to the story involves its relationship to other flood stories in that world. However, we must do more than probe similarities and dissimilarities, and speculate regarding issues of dependence and interdependence. One often finds a tendency to show the “obvious” superiority of the biblical account to the other stories, or to reduce everything to Israelite polemic against other religions. While the task of comparison remains important, the hegemonic agenda does not prove helpful.

A more useful approach recognizes that the Israelites drew on understandings generated by other peoples and cultures. This angle of vision acknowledges that God the Creator was at work among other peoples before Israel appeared, and appreciates that significant insights, even theological insights, have been borrowed and developed by Israel. Israel inherits a way of thinking about beginnings—including the very structure of the account—that enables the community of faith to think about the creation in innovative ways.

From another perspective, we must recognize that God’s saving act occurs in the world outside Israel. God as Creator acts in saving ways on behalf of creational goals. Such actions are not confined to Israel and need not be mediated by the community of faith.

(e) The flood story focuses on God as well as God’s decisions and commitments regarding the creation. “The beginning and goal of the event lie with God.”75 The images of God developed in the story are striking: a God who expresses sorrow and regret; a God who judges, but doesn’t want to, and then not in arbitrary or annihilative ways; a God who goes beyond justice and determines to save some creatures, including every animal and bird; a God who commits to the future of a less than perfect world; a God open to change and doing things in new ways; a God who promises never to do this again. The story reveals and resolves a fundamental tension within God, emphasizing finally, not a
God who decides to destroy, but a God who wills to save, who is committed to change based on experience with the world, and who promises to stand by the creation.

The ascription of human feelings to God (see 6:5-7 in particular) reveals something about God. The grieving divine response at Israel’s sin (Ps 78:40; Isa 63:10) harks back to the morning of the world and relates to all creatures. God, from creation on, continues to be open to and affected by the world. “God’s judgment is not a detached decision . . . like flicking a switch or sending an impersonal command through a subordinate. God is caught up in the matter . . . the judgment is a very personal decision, with all the mixed sorrow and anger that go into the making of decisions that affect the people whom one loves. Grief is always what the Godward side of judgment looks like.”76 God experiences such sorrow as God, but real continuities with human sorrow exist.

Even more fundamental to the story is “the change wrought in God which makes possible a new beginning for creation. . . . The flood has effected no change in humankind. But it has effected an irreversible change in God. . . . It is now clear that such a commitment [to the creation] on God’s part is costly. The God-world relation is not simply that of strong God and needy world. Now it is a tortured relation between a grieved God and a resistant world. And of the two, the real changes are in God.”77 What God does “recharacterizes” the divine relationship to the world. “God decides to put up with this state of evil.”78 This divine commitment signals the end of any simple sin-consequence schemas; this story does not exactly fit that way of construing other narratives in chaps. 1–11.

But the issue involves something other than a patient tolerance of human sin. For God to promise never to do something again, and to be faithful to that promise, entails self-limitation regarding the exercise of divine freedom and power. God thereby accepts limited options, in this case, the way in which God relates to evil in the world—no more flood-like responses. But God does not simply resign to evil (see below). Therefore, God must find a new way of engaging evil. Genesis 6:5-7 suggests that God takes the route of suffering. Deciding to endure a wicked world, while continuing to open up the divine heart to that world, means that God will continue to grieve. God thus decides to take suffering into God’s own self and bear it there for the sake of the future of the world.79

God’s regretful response assumes that humans have successfully resisted God’s will for the creation. To continue to interact with this creation involves God’s decision to continue to live with such resisting creatures (not your typical CEO!). In addition, God’s regret assumes that God did not know for sure that all this would happen. As is evident throughout Genesis and the OT, God does not know the future in some absolute way (see commentary on 22:12). The text provides no support for a position that claims that God knew, let alone planned, that the creation would take this course.

God decides to go with the world, come what may in the way of human wickedness. God
makes this promise, not simply in spite of human failure, but because human beings are sinful (8:21). The way into the future cannot depend on human loyalty; sinfulness so defines humanity that, if human beings are to live, they must be undergirded by the divine promise. Hence, because of human sinfulness, God promises to stay with the creation (see 34:9 for an identical understanding of God’s future with Israel in the wake of the golden calf debacle).80

We find an admixture of realism and promise here. On the one hand, human beings remain sinful creatures through and through. The flood cuts them off from any Edenic paradise; access to that world cannot be bridged or developed by gradual improvement. For the sake of creation, God must formulate laws to restrain negative human tendencies and behavior. On the other hand, human beings remain in the image of God (9:6); they are so highly valued that commands must be put in place to conserve their life, and they retain fundamental responsibility for the larger created order. But humans do not possess sufficient resources for the task; only God can assure creation’s future. To this end, God ameliorates the workings of divine judgment and promises an orderly cosmos for the continuation of human and nonhuman life. Humans may, by virtue of their own behaviors, put themselves out of business, but not because God has so determined it or because the created order has failed.

2. There are significant ecological dimensions in the text. Human behavior has had a deeply adverse impact on the created order. The growth of thorns and thistles in the wake of human sin (3:18) has here grown to cosmic proportions. A close relationship exists between moral order and cosmic order, a point needing little argument in the modern world. Positively, it is striking that God puts such stock in the saving of the animals; indeed, God’s remembrance of the animals belongs to the same initiative as God’s remembering Noah. The lives of animals and humans are so interconnected that our future on this planet is linked to one another’s well-being. Although human sin has had significant negative consequences for the earth, if humans assume appropriate responsibility we may anticipate significant potential for good.

3. The theme of God delivering through dangerous water is in a number of biblical texts: e.g., Exodus 14–15 (and the other texts dependent on this tradition, e.g., Isa 43:2); Jonah; various lament psalms; Jesus stilling the storm and walking on the water (Mark 4:35-41); baptism (1 Pet 3:18-22). Flood water imagery also appears in later divine judgments (Isa 8:7-8). Nonetheless, God’s promise remains sure: never again will there be the like of Noah’s flood.

GENESIS 9:1 – 11:26, A NEW WORLD ORDER
Genesis 9:1-17, God’s Covenant with Noah

Link to:
COMMENTARY

These speeches of God to Noah are conventionally assigned to the Priestly writer, but must now be read in view of 8:21-22 and other non-Priestly texts. Recalling key elements from chap. 1 in the light of the experience with a devastated creation, God lays out the dynamics of a renewed relationship to the post-flood world. Although Noah is in some sense a new Adam, God must take into account that the inclination of his heart is evil (8:21). The world is no new Eden. Generally, these texts seek to assure Noah and his family (and readers) that God has not withdrawn from the creation; God still rules and the basic shape of the divine relationship to the world still holds, with its blessings, commands, and promises.

God chooses to safeguard the creation, making provisions from the human (vv. 1-7) and the divine sides (vv. 8-17). Verses 1-7, with their recognition of murder and human-nonhuman conflict, assume that the pre-flood, but post-Eden, state of affairs will continue in post-flood times. God’s continuing valuing of and care for the creation, regarding both animals and humans (vv. 1-7) and then more universally with respect to the future of the entire created order (vv. 8-17), provides the primary link between these two sections. The God who blesses (v. 1) and the God who promises (v. 11) come together in this text, and lay the foundations for the future of the post-flood world.

9:1-7. This segment is enclosed by formulations from chap. 1: to be fruitful, to multiply, and to fill the earth; v. 7 even speaks of “swarming” (used for sea creatures, 1:20; cf. 8:17 with 1:22). As in 1:28, God blesses Noah and his sons before offering commands. This blessing language stresses that, in the midst of death and destruction, God wills life; that will remains firmly in place even with the “inclination of the human heart” (8:21) and the negative effects of continuing violence, injustice, and disorder.

Verse 2 assumes the charge to have dominion, though now complicated by the “fear and dread” of the violence of which human beings are capable (military language, Deut 11:25), and developed in the wake of sin’s effect on human domination (v. 5 also knows about violence against humans by animals). Human dominion over that world has often been more a matter of tyranny than benevolence. That all animals are “given/delivered” into human hands (also military language, Deut 20:13) entails power over their life, though not a license for exploitation nor a diminution in the task of dominion. This verse recognizes that the realities
of fear make relationships to the animal world much more difficult and complex, with
new levels of responsibility. The prophets envision a return to the deity’s earlier plan,
according to which humans would relate to the animals (see Hos 2:17-18; Isa 11:6-9).

Human diet constitutes another issue carried over from chap. 1. Earlier, God grants green
plants to humans for food (v. 29); here God expands that to include “every moving thing
that lives.” A vegetarian diet is supplemented with meat, probably a concession to the
need for food in a famine-ridden world. Yet restrictions remain (the formulation of vv. 3-
4 is similar to 2:16-17). No distinction between clean and unclean occurs (see 8:20), but
the flesh of a living animal or the meat of a slaughtered animal may not be eaten if the
blood remains in it, since blood equals life (see Lev 17:11; external evidence for the
ancestics would be the pulse). Humans must drain animal blood before eating meat. This
directive, without parallel in the ancient Near East, recurs in the OT (see Lev 17:10-14;
Deut 12:15-27) and has authority in the NT (Acts 15:20; 21:25). It was not uncommon
for ancients to drink blood for the renewal of vitality it was thought to bring. Israel,
however, believes that life belongs to God and should be returned to its source. This
proscription regarding blood—and the attention needed to fulfill it—stands as a sharp
reminder that killing animals ought not to be taken lightly, for God is the source of their
life. As such, it guards against brutality, carelessness, and needless killing. Concern for
the life of animals immediately leads into the concern for human life.

The lifeblood of human beings should not be shed, much less eaten (v. 5). Using personal
language, God declares that murderers will be directly accountable to God; indeed, the
writer states three times that God will require a reckoning. This includes even the animals
(for a case, see Exod 21:28-29). Although the text does not specify an executor in v. 5,
yet “by a human” in v. 6 assumes, in a matter-of-fact way, that human beings will
administer the sanctions. The chiastic formulation of v. 6 provides a shorthand
expression, probably proverbial, of the repercussions that fall upon a murderer (v. 6): If a
human life is taken, the life of the one taking it shall be required (see Matt 26:52). The
chiasm formally expresses the point; in such cases, justice will involve the principle of
measure for measure. No persons shall be allowed to pay their way out of such a situation
(see Num 35:31). Capital punishment, though referred to here, remains limited compared
to many other cultures (e.g., never in property cases). This text does not advocate or
authorize or justify capital punishment; rather, it recognizes the way in which human
beings would participate in the moral order as executors of the divine judgment (later
laws institute a legal system; see Rom 13:4). This saying expresses God’s point of view
regarding the high value of human life.

The writer links the rationale given for this command to the fact that human beings have
been made in the image of God (see 1:26), an understanding that still pertains in a post-
flood world. In the killing of a human, the created order is threatened; the status and role
of humans within God’s creation is violated. At the same time, humans are not absolutely
inviolable; they can forfeit their right to life if they take a life. The divine image rationale
may relate to both halves of v. 6a —“for” may refer both to the victim and to the human
executor on God’s behalf, providing a deeper link with 1:26.
9:8-17. God moves to promises, a personal witness to humans regarding what they can expect from God. The covenant God establishes fulfills the promise God made in 6:18. Originally a doublet of 8:21-22, the latter verses now serve as divine reflection that leads to this public statement of promise (cf. 6:7 with 6:13).

Similar to vv. 1-7, these verses are enclosed by reference to the covenant being established (v. 8) and, in a final peroration, to having been established (v. 17) with all flesh. The many repetitions of key words and phrases emphasize the promissory character of the covenant and the inclusiveness of the recipients throughout all generations, assuring the listeners (and readers) of a hopeful future. The promises may be compared to those given Israel after the fall of Jerusalem (see esp. Isa 54:9-10, which describes this covenant in terms of a divine oath). God stands as the subject of the verbs throughout; God establishes/makes the covenant, sets the bow in the clouds, and remembers the covenant.

We may observe a basic structure: vv. 8-10, the recipients of the covenant; v. 11, the content of the covenant; vv. 12-17, the sign of the covenant, in chiastic form; vv. 12-13, 17, the sign; vv. 14-15a, 16, God’s remembering when the bow is in the clouds; v. 15b is the essence of the promise.

God establishes this covenant, not only with Noah, his sons, and all their descendants, but with “every living creature”—that is, “all flesh”—and with the earth as well (v. 13). The involvement of the nonhuman in the promise parallels their presence in the expectations of vv. 1-7 (see also 6:11-13). We hear a word of comfort and reassurance in the wake of the horrendous experience of the flood (and readers can plug in their own disasters).

Covenant functions as an equivalent to promise; God is obligated, unilaterally and unconditionally. God initiates and establishes the covenant, and remembering it becomes exclusively a divine responsibility. The covenant will be as good as God is. God establishes it in goodness and love and upholds it in eternal faithfulness. It will never need to be renewed; it stands forever, regardless of what people do. Humans can just rest in the arms of this promise. And the promise offers this (comparable to 8:21-22): Never again will God send a flood to destroy the earth. There may well be judgments yet to come, but not one that will annihilate everything (see Isa 54:6-10).

God did not create the rainbow for this moment; it had existed but was now filled with new significance for the future. Although elements of the natural order could function as virtual signs (see Jer 31:35-36; 33:19-26), the bow is different since it reminds God (see Exod 12:13), not human beings (see 17:9-14). When God sees the rainbow, God remembers the covenant. This does not mean that God forgets in between rainbows. Yet, at times Israel believed that God had in fact forgotten them (see Ps 13:1; Lam 5:20). To
attest God’s remembering assures those who think that God appears to have forgotten. God’s remembering entails more than mental activity; it involves action with specific reference to a prior commitment (see 8:1; Exod 2:24; 6:5; Lev 26:42). As a sign for God it becomes a secondary sign for people, one in which they can take comfort and hope.

In the ancient Near East and Israel (in poetic texts; see Pss 7:12-13; 18:14; 144:6; Lam 2:4; 3:12; Hab 3:9-11) the (rain)bow was a divine weapon, and lightning bolts were arrows that exacted judgment. Hence, possible interpretations of the bow in this text arise: (a) Associating the rainbow with promise rather than judgment changes the meaning of the symbol, becoming a sign of peace rather than war; God will not use the bow for this judgmental purpose again. This view seems difficult since the broken bow becomes a symbol of peace (Ps 46:9); (b) Associating the rainbow with both promise and judgment keeps the normal meaning of the symbol intact, but focuses it on the means by which God keeps the promise—namely, God uses the bow to protect creation from such disasters.81 This interpretation also presents problems because the buildup of clouds in vv. 14 and 16 implies that the divine judgment gathers momentum (see Jer 4:13; Ezek 38:16; Joel 2:2) and the appearance of the bow occasions a shift in God’s direction. No bow appears unless there are clouds; the bow thus suggests restraint in the midst of deserved judgment. It thus seems best to retain it as a symbol of peace and divine good will toward the creation. In either case, the bow serves as an important sign of God’s ongoing, deep commitment to the life of the creation, and in such a way that God is limited regarding its possible futures (see below).

REFLECTIONS

1. Since the commands in vv. 1-7 are formulated for a pre-Israel world, they present a universal dimension. In fact, God must only be formalizing an already existing “natural law,” for such allowed the author to speak of responsibility and accountability in the earlier chapters. For example, Cain was held accountable for his murder of Abel, as were the pre-flood generations for their violence. Numerous other instances occur in Genesis (e.g., 20:1-10; 26:5, 10) and in the rest of the OT (e.g., the oracles against the nations, Amos 1–2). The NT seems cognizant of the status of these laws in such texts as Acts 15:20; 21:25 (see p. 396).82

2. In the wake of the troubles caused by human beings, God continues to place confidence in them by giving them hope (vv. 1-7). They are neither reduced to automatons nor considered untrustworthy in any respect, but are directly addressed in light of responsibilities they have within the created order. Whatever else one might say about the effect of the fall on human beings, it does not mean that God has ceased to trust them or refuses to work in and through them.
3. Since God calls the murderer to account, the deity serves as the final arbiter concerning the taking of human life. Although humans have been made the executors of this divine reckoning, they should examine the situation in these terms: Do we understand that such a penalty in this case is the will of God? Are we willing to carry it out in the name of God?

4. Although God promises never again to punish the earth with a flood, that affirmation does not invalidate what human beings might do with nuclear power at their disposal, or by despoiling the environment. This promise also does not speak to issues regarding the “wearing out” of the physical universe over billions of years, or the “Big Crunch.” It has been suggested that the text speaks only to a destruction of the earth by water. A recent song has the line, “God gave Noah the rainbow sign—no more water—the fire next time” (see 2 Pet 3:17). But such a perspective would violate the text, which speaks clearly not simply of the means of destruction, but of the end: Earth’s destruction (v. 11) or the destruction of all flesh (v. 15).

5. The covenant with Noah involves all people. God, active in this way with all creation quite apart from Israel’s life and mission, upholds this covenant independent of the community of faith. All people experience its effects, even though they may not have heard Genesis 9. Israel occupies a privileged position because it knows the promise, but is not to keep that knowledge to itself.

This universal covenant provides the context within which other covenants become possible. Since God has covered the earth with promises, other and more particular promises can be made. The creational promise to Noah makes possible, provides grounding for, the promise to Abraham. God’s promissory relationship with the world generates more particular promises in order to enable these universal promises. Nonetheless, all covenants are directed to the same end—namely, the good creation intended by God. There are correspondences between this covenant and the one with Abraham (chap. 17). There, too, God “establishes” an “everlasting” covenant. However, the sign of Abraham’s covenant—circumcision—becomes a sign for Abraham to keep, whereas the sign of the rainbow serves to remind God.

6. The covenant has significant ecological implications because God has established it with “all flesh,” with birds and animals and the earth itself, even though they are now alienated from human beings. What does it mean for our ecological considerations that God has made promises to nonhumans? God cares for their life and seeks to enhance it in various ways. Human beings should follow the divine lead. For another, humans, with our knowledge of the promise, have a responsibility to the nonhuman recipients of the promise to tend to the earth and all of its inhabitants. Hosea 2:18 envisions a future in which all the recipients of this covenant will no longer be estranged and can experience God’s salvation together.
7. Von Rad speaks correctly here of divine forbearance, calling attention to Rom 3:25.84
God’s power in response to evil in the world restrains itself in a permanent fashion (see
8:21-22). God’s use of power in dealing with evil is eternally self-limited. No simple
retributive system applies. God will not respond with total destruction, no matter the
human response. God’s internal musings (8:21) make clear that God makes this move
with eyes wide open, regarding human possibilities for evil; God remains a realist. But
God cares so much for creation and its potential that God determines to take a new
direction. As noted above, God changes over the course of the flood, not human beings,
and this for the sake of the creation.

Genesis 9:18-29, Curse and Blessing in Noah’s Family

Link to:

<Commentary>

On the far side of the flood story, the texts begin to reflect known historical realities.
Even more, stories of individuals within a family begin to extend into relationships
among larger communities. Although especially evident in chap. 10, such a move occurs
within this text (assigned to J): intrafamilial conflicts within Noah’s family (vv. 20-24)
lead to communal difficulties among his descendants (vv. 25-27). Noah’s sons may be
understood in both individual and eponymous terms, thus preparing the way for the table
of nations. Both Noah and Adam remain “typical” characters. Moreover, both their
families produce sharp repercussions for their descendants. Even more, the relationships
anticipated among the descendants of Noah’s sons apply to various historical situations.
The narrative thus serves complex purposes, including typological, ethnological, and
etiological issues.

This brief text consists of an unusual admixture of literary types, from genealogy to story
to curse and blessing. This multiform text reflects a complex tradition history, which no
redactor has smoothed over. Whether a fuller form of this story ever existed remains
uncertain. The text presents numerous difficulties, often so intractable that little scholarly
consensus has been achieved. What is the nature of Ham’s indecent act? Why is his son
Canaan cursed? Why is Canaan to become a slave to his brothers? Why does Noah refer
to what his “youngest son” has done, when Ham seems to be the second son (see 7:13;
9:18)? Why are Shem and Japheth aligned?

The redactor may have worked with two different traditions regarding the identity of
Noah’s sons: (1) Shem, Japheth, and Canaan; (2) Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Two ways of
conceiving the resulting amalgamation are thus: The first has been overlaid by the
insertion of “Ham, the father of” (vv. 18, 22); or the second has been overlaid with
material about Canaan, based on Israel’s later experience in the land. The latter seems
more likely, but uncertainty abounds. No known parallels to this story exist in other ancient Near Eastern literature.

The story is enclosed by brief genealogical notices. Verses 18-19 resume earlier references to the sons of Noah and announce the spreading out of their families (detailed in chaps. 10–11). Verses 28-29 give chronological notes about Noah’s life and death, completing the genealogy of chap. 5. The references to grape-bearing vines and Canaan as a mature grandson make clear that the story takes place many years after the flood. Also, these verses present the first Genesis story in which God does not appear directly.

The story involves the themes of blessing and curse.

1. Blessing pertains to both nonhumans and humans in this text. God’s post-flood blessing begins to take effect amid the world of the curse in all its aspects, hence ameliorating the effects of the curse.

Noah is the first to plant a vineyard and practice winemaking, discoveries ascribed to the gods elsewhere in the ancient Near East. Noah’s skill at farming and crop development provides some relief from being totally at the mercy of what the ground brings forth on its own, so intimated in the words of his father, Lamech (5:29). As such, he stands in the tradition of the family of Cain (4:21-22), founders of other cultural blessings. He also functions as a new Adam, whose original calling was to till the ground and keep it (2:15).

This focus on vineyards and wine may seem a small matter for modern people, but these were important economic realities for Israel, celebrated in the feast of Booths (Deut 16:13-16). Vines, the grape harvest, and wine symbolize God’s blessings of life and fertility (see Pss 80:8-16; 104:15; Isa 5:1-7; 27:2-6; Hos 2:15; 9:10). Blessings can be abused, however; that which makes the heart glad can also promote drunkenness (see the warnings in Prov 20:1; 23:31-35; 31:6-7; Isa 5:11). What is good within God’s creation can be made perverse by inappropriate human behavior.

At another level, the blessing on Shem (v. 26) first hints at God’s blessing of Israel. Shem begins the line that will lead to Abraham, in and through whom this blessing will reach out to all the earth (see 12:1-3).

2. Sin and the Curse. The flood did not rid the world of sin (so 8:21). In this text, sin manifests itself in the effects of drunkenness, disrespect of parents, and familial conflict.

The narrator offers no explicit judgment about Noah’s drunkenness; yet, it opens Noah to victimization and provides the occasion for all the suffering and conflict that follow. He has drunk himself into an unconscious state and lies naked in his tent (see Lam 4:21; Hab 2:15). The theme of nakedness (chaps. 2–3) involves issues of shame and exposure, an
issue of no little consequence in Israel, in both religious (Exod 20:26) and social (2 Sam 6:20; 10:4-5) life. The prophets use this same theme to portray Israel’s apostasy (Ezek 16:36) and the resulting divine judgment, in which Israel’s shameful behavior will be exposed for all to see (Isa 47:3; Ezek 16:37-39).

What Noah’s youngest son “had done” has prompted numerous conjectures. Some readers hypothesize about an inappropriate sexual act, from sodomy to incest. Some even appeal to Lev 18:7-8, which condemns “uncovering the nakedness of one’s father,” a reference to sexual activity with one’s mother. Yet, the OT does not normally shrink from “telling it like it is” (see chaps. 18–19). Here the text makes clear that Noah uncovers himself. Moreover, Ham’s seeing his father naked constitutes the problem, as confirmed by the detailed report of how his two brothers make sure they do not (v. 23; a chiasm of v. 22). Yet, the problem involves more than seeing (which may have been inadvertent); Ham errs in what he does with what he has seen. Rather than keep quiet or seek to remedy the situation, Ham tells tales to a wider public. The matter entails not simply a breach of filial piety, but the public disgrace of his father. Parent-child relationships were considered to be of the highest importance in Israel (see Deut 21:18-21, which prescribes capital punishment for sons who rebel).

When Noah awakens from his stupor, he learns what has been done, probably because it is now public knowledge, and speaks his first and only words. The reference to his “youngest son” may mean that earlier references to Shem, Ham, and Japheth (5:32; 6:10; 7:13) do not occur in chronological order. Noah’s blessing and cursing words stand in the tradition of Isaac (27:27-29, 39-40) and Jacob (49:1-27), though one cannot help wondering whether he is overreacting. The curse on Canaan appears most prominent; indeed, his enslavement also becomes part of the blessing of Shem and Japheth. Yet, for Canaan to become a slave of his brothers in an individual sense seems difficult. It almost certainly bears an eponymous force at this point, condemning the wickedness of the Canaanites in advance (see 15:16; Deut 9:4-5). In the blessings of Shem and Japheth (the NIV more literally translates that God is being blessed/praised, as in 24:27, but for unstated reasons), Noah calls for God to act (unlike the curse). The blessings request a future divine action and are not understood to be inevitably effective (see 25:23; chap. 27).

Noah’s cursing of Canaan is most puzzling: He does not curse Ham, but Ham’s son, Noah’s grandson. Perhaps both father and son were responsible in an originally longer text; this telescoping would be a way of involving both. Perhaps the author alludes to the effects of the sins of the parents on the children (see Exod 20:5). More probably, those reading the text in terms of ethnic units as much as individuals would not have made a clear distinction between Canaanites and Hamites (see 10:6). An original reference to Ham was narrowed to one Hamite group, the Canaanites, when they came into conflict with Israel. Not changing the details keeps the Hamite link intact.

Although chap. 10 identifies many peoples in the lineage of Noah’s sons, the author focuses on a narrower range, which is most prominent here: Shem represents the Israelis (but this is unique in the OT); Canaan the Canaanites; Japheth the sea-faring
peoples, such as the Philistines; Ham the Egyptians, probably. The first three are the most prominent groups occupying Palestine in the early years of Israel’s life in the land; their relationships may be foreshadowed in these verses. The Israelites and the Philistines entered Canaan from east and west, respectively, in this period, resulting in the subjugation (i.e., enslavement?) of the Canaanites. The blessing regarding Japheth may represent a qualification of the fulfillment of the promise. Japhet’s dwelling in the tents of Shem may mean that Israel does not have the land to itself, but shares it with others, a situation prevailing at various times (as with the Philistines). Ham was the progenitor of nations in the Egyptian orbit (10:6; see Pss 78:51; 105:23-27);

<Page 404 Ends><Page 405 Begins>

Canaan was controlled by (was the son of) Egypt from 1550 to 1200 BCE. The various nations in chap. 14 may represent another level of the fulfillment of vv. 25-27, since all three branches of Noah’s genealogy are represented in that conflict.

REFLECTIONS

1. The often-cited parallels between this narrative and the Eden story, especially as interpreted through 5:29, make it typical. Noah, a new Adam, takes up the creational task once again in “planting” and tilling the “ground”; his skill leads to a taming of what the ground produces and hence ameliorates the curse (3:17; 5:29). Yet, Noah as the new Adam (and one child) also fails as miserably as the old Adam. Similar themes appear in both stories: nakedness after eating fruit, and intrafamilial conflict, including human subservience and its affect. The curse on the serpent and the ground parallels the curse on Canaan, both of which affect life negatively. Yet, the act of Shem and Japheth in covering the naked one mirrors earlier action of the deity (3:21).

These parallels strongly suggest that, in the post-flood movement to the world of nations, “good and evil” patterns in life persist. God’s work of blessing influences the worlds of human and nonhuman, family and nation; but there are also deep human failures due to the “evil inclination of the human heart” (8:21). This mix of goodness and evil will accompany every human endeavor, whether familial or sociopolitical, and every relationship, whether personal or communal, down through the ages to our own time.

2. It seems incredible that this story could have been used to justify the enslavement of Africans. Suffice it to say that, inasmuch as Canaan among all the sons of Ham, is not the father of a Negroid people (see 10:15-19, where all the peoples listed are Semitic or Indo-European), any attempt to justify the slavery of African peoples is a gross misuse of this text. Regarding slavery in general, however, neither the OT nor the NT condemns this inhumane institution. Various OT laws seek to regulate (never commend) this practice (Exod 21:1-11). And an increasing concern for issues of humaneness may be discerned in later laws (see Deut 15:12-18; Lev 25:39-46). The “enslavement” of Canaanites envisaged in this text probably reflects their later subjugation rather than any practice of slavery.
This text mentions enslavement in the wake of sinful behavior; such a human practice is thus clearly set at odds with God’s creational intentions. As with the sentence in 3:14-19, humans should, appropriately, work to overcome this effect of sin.

3. Noah’s word (no word from God occurs here) about the future of his sons should not be interpreted in fatalistic terms. What happens over the course of history affects what in fact will happen in the aftermath of such a word (see 25:23).

4. The chief point of this text may involve relationships between children and their parents, a negative illustration of the commandment, “Honor your father and your mother.” Israelites considered the family of extreme importance in the created order; any deterioration in the quality of family life could only disrupt the creational intentions of God. Such a perspective would be in line with chaps. 3–4, which speak of other familial relationships that have been distorted in the wake of human sin. At the same time, the author has in view broader relationships among peoples and nations, which are profoundly affected by what happens within families. Dysfunctional families affect our communal life together.

Genesis 10:1-32, The Table of Nations

COMMENTARY

This, the fourth tôledōt, introduces the reader to the world of nations, the history of the world “after the flood.” Noah’s three sons provide the outline, each point of which closes with statements about land, language, family, and nation (vv. 5, 20, 21). Opening and closing summary verses bracket the chapter (vv. 1, 32). The author provides Shem with a double introduction because of his importance for the Hebrews (Eber), significance also attested by the extension of his genealogy to six generations, while those of his brothers continue for only three. Other elements are embedded in the genealogy (cf., v. 19), usually associated with later Israelite history (i.e., Babylonians/Assyrians; Philistines; Canaanites). Scholars think the chapter consists of interwoven strands of P and J. The beginning verse establishes a connection with the end of the Adam genealogy in 5:32.
Many names in this list function eponymously, whereby the origin of a city/people/nation is explained by derivation from an individual progenitor. The names stand for peoples or nations, represented as “sons” of the group ancestor; smaller groups are represented as “grandsons” (cf., fatherland, mother country). The reader may discern this strategy most clearly in the use of the plural ending (-îm; vv. 13-14) and the use of a definite article and a suffix that specifies ethnic identification (vv. 16-18). This same feature also occurs in the genealogies of Abraham (25:1-4), Ishmael (25:12-16), and Esau (chap. 36).

The horizon of the list extends from Crete and Libya in the west to Iran in the east, from Arabia and Ethiopia in the south to Asia Minor and Armenia in the north. However, there are many problems in identifying peoples and places. The peoples seem to be listed on the basis of various factors: geographical, sociocultural, political, and commercial relationships (literary factors may also be at work; i.e., the similar names of v. 7). Issues of language, color, and race do not appear significant; e.g., the Canaanites are not listed with Shem, but the Elamites (whose language was non-Semitic) are. We do not know whether the narrator thought these peoples were actually genealogically related. Scholars dispute the historical situation that this list reflects. The most likely candidates are the end of the second millennium or a time after 600 BCE.86 On the significance of this chapter’s location, see commentary on 11:1-9.

10:2-5. Japheth represents the peoples in Asia Minor (and even farther north) and Greece, to the north and west of Palestine; it includes seven “sons” and “grandsons.” Many are maritime peoples. The movement of the “coastland peoples” may reflect population shifts in the Aegean and Mediterranean islands around 1200 BCE.

10:6-20. Ham serves as progenitor of the peoples (thirty in all) within the Egyptian political and commercial orbit, including sections of Africa, Arabia, and Mesopotamia. The inclusion of the latter (who are Semitic) may be attributed to similar-sounding names, Cush in Africa and the Kassites, who ruled in the Mesopotamian region during 1600 to 1200 BCE. Canaan may be included here because it came under Egyptian control in 1500–1200 BCE.

Verses 8-12, associated with Mesopotamia, include prose fragments about a warrior named Nimrod, who established a kingdom in Shinar (Babylonia) and Assyria (see Mic 5:5). The results of scholarly efforts to identify him with a god or a king are uncertain; legends of the heroic exploits of various figures may have resulted in a composite figure. The specific and repeated reference to Yahweh (v. 9) is unusual, but probably indicates that Nimrod’s activity should be interpreted in a positive light, as are references to the deity in chap. 5 (a negative construal would see v. 9 as anticipating 11:1-9, with links to Cain as builder and to the warriors of 6:4).

The peoples mentioned in vv. 15-19 include a number who occupied Canaan, whose boundaries may be specified because of later history (though they correspond to no other boundary list); some are mentioned in the promises to the ancestors (see 15:19-21; Heth = Hittites; Jebusites; Amorites; Girgashites; Hivites).
10:21-31. The double introduction to Shem’s genealogy, with the premature introduction of Eber (v. 21), signals its importance for what follows. Shem stands as the ancestor of peoples in Syria/Assyria/Iran and environs as well as part of the Arabian peninsula (twenty-six are listed in two groups of thirteen). His genealogy encloses the story of the city of Babel. This is a branched or segmentary genealogy, with all the descendants of Shem listed; 11:10-26 presents his genealogy in linear form only through his third son, Arpachshad.

The author places Eber, who is the progenitor of the Hebrews (see 11:16) as well as other tribal groups, among the descendants of Shem. The genealogy of Eber’s son Peleg continues in

11:18-26 (the division of the earth in v. 25 remains unexplained, though it has been linked to the scattering in 11:1-9). Eber’s other son, Joktan, had thirteen sons, also related to the Hebrews; they may be linked with various Arabian groups near Yemen and had important commercial links to Israel (e.g., Seba, v. 10).

REFLECTIONS

1. These figures are understood in political, rather than mythological, terms; they come into being by virtue of human activity, not divine initiative. Such political structures are part of the ordering work of God the Creator, which promotes good and checks evil in the life of the world. Yet, they are not structured into the created order itself, but participate in all the foibles and flaws of human leadership, hence “they can be changed and are subject to criticism.”87

2. For the first time in these chapters Israel comes into view, though with no special virtues assigned to its ancestors; indeed, the author provides no reference to God’s relationship with them. The repeated reference to “families” (vv. 5, 20, 31-32) links up with 12:3b: through the family of Abraham all the families of the earth shall be blessed. At the same time, the chapter testifies to God’s work of blessing already active in the lives of these peoples (v. 9); hence, the blessing brought through Abraham continues an earlier reality.

The isolation of the family of Shem places no negative judgment on the families of Ham and Japheth (on Canaan, see commentary on 9:20-27). The writer focuses on the commonalities of the family of Shem (hence of Israel) with all other persons, not on their differences. Shem shares his humanity “before the LORD” with all others, who are given a place in the life of God’s creation independent of any relationship to Israel.

3. The fact that seventy peoples are mentioned (excluding Nimrod) is probably important, but its explanation remains uncertain (see 46:27; Exod 1:5; 24:9). The number may signify that the entirety of the known world has been included (even if some were
omitted, v. 5) and that all peoples share ultimate unity in spite of the differences of language, race, and color. That the geographical areas appear to overlap and interlock to some degree may testify to a genuinely international community, an integration of peoples across traditional boundaries. In spite of significant differences, we belong to one world. The table thus becomes a natural extension of the creation account. This chapter constitutes a theological witness to a common humanity shared by all.

4. The repeated phrase “before the LORD” (v. 9) probably connotes the help of Yahweh (see TNK, “by the grace of the LORD”). The narrator believed that God the Creator was involved in the lives and activities of such kings and peoples. This would not mean that Nimrod had explicit knowledge of Yahweh, but that the deity associated with his life would later be identified with Israel’s God (Isa 10:5; 45:1; Acts 17:26-27 may be dependent on this chap.).

5. The multiplication of peoples across the face of the earth constitutes a fulfillment of the divine blessing and the divine command to “fill the earth” (1:28; renewed in 9:1, 7).

Genesis 11:1-9, The City of Babel
Link to:

COMMENTARY

The reader may find difficulty in fathoming the import of this final narrative of chaps 1–11. The first problem involves its relationship with chap. 10. The linguistic division of peoples has already appeared in 10:5, 20, 31, as has the spreading abroad (drp pArad, 10:5, 32) or scattering ($wp pûz; $pn nApaz, 9:19; 10:18; cf. 11:4, 8-9) of the nations; moreover, Babel has already been named (10:10). Source critics provide a “solution” by assigning the sections to P and J. In the text’s present form, however, interpreters often view 11:1-9 as a supplement to 10:1-32 (and 9:18-19), perhaps especially the segment concerning Nimrod and Babel (10:8-12).

The two sections do not stand in chronological order; rather, the second reaches back and complements the first from another perspective. In 10:1-32 the author has associated the realities of pluralism with the natural growth of the human community after the flood. This positive word may have seemed important to state first (structural considerations may also have dictated placement). Genesis 11:1-9, however, gives these developments a negative cast in terms of human failure and divine judgment. The writer depicts the same reality from different points of view (11:1-9 does not cover all that happens in 10:1-32) by juxtaposing texts rather than interweaving them.

This same literary tactic also occurs elsewhere in chaps. 1–11 (see Overview). Genesis 2:4–4:16
relates to chap. 1 in this way (cf. also 6:1-8 with 4:17–5:32; 9:20-29 with 9:18-19; 12:1-9 with 11:10-32 breaks the pattern). In the admixture of story and genealogy, the editor places continued creational blessing in the ongoing generations alongside continuing evidence of breakdown in various relationships. These images do not occur simply as pictures in white and black; genealogies contain elements of disequilibrium (see 10:8-12) and stories exhibit acts of human goodness and divine graciousness. As we will see, Gen 11:1-9 returns to the concerns of creation in chaps. 1–2, providing an inclusio for chaps. 1–11.

No other story like this has been found in the ancient Near East, but some parallels in detail exist, such as the origin of languages, matters of building construction, and the function of towers in Mesopotamian culture. Traditional links between creation and temple building in Mesopotamia may be reflected in the structure of chaps. 1–11, though Gen 11:1-9 does not refer explicitly to a temple. In the flood story preserved by Berossus, the survivors migrate to Babylon, as in the biblical account. The journey of Abraham’s family from Ur (11:31) could be understood as a part of the migration from Babel (11:9).

The author clearly intends the text to be a typical story of humankind (“whole earth”), not a reflection on a specific event. Hence, we may read the text from a variety of contexts. From an exilic perspective, the city could represent Jerusalem and the exile, a theme prominent in prophetic materials from that era (Ezek 11:16-17; 12:15; 20:34, 41; 34:5-6, 12). Less probably, the text might be viewed as a critique of royal building programs in Israel or as a negative comment on the history of the Babylonians, a judgment on the prideful stance of such nations in the world. Yet, the text offers no sign of this building project as an imperial enterprise; in fact, the discourse and motivation are remarkably democratic, reinforcing the view that the problem here is generally human, not that of any particular institution or nation.

The writer has structured this narrative symmetrically, wherein the situation of vv. 1-4 is reversed in vv. 6-9.88 The direct speech of the people’s plans in vv. 3-4 parallels that of God’s plans in vv. 6-7 (note esp. the consultative “come, let us”). The divine decision to conduct a judicial inquiry (v. 5) sits between these speeches; its central position constitutes the turning point. The bracketing verses (vv. 1-2, 8-9; note the reversal “language” and “whole [all the] earth”) describe the human situation before and after the discourses of vv. 3-7, from the human (vv. 1-2) and the divine perspective (vv. 8-9). The fact that the divine and the humans do not stand in dialogue with one another constitutes one of the most ominous elements in this text (in contrast to the divine-human conversation that begins once again with Abraham). The careful structure suggests that this story should not be read as an amalgam of originally distinct narratives.

11:1-4. The story describes the “whole earth” from a communal perspective (no individuals are mentioned), which is consistent with the emphasis on families, soon to be noted (12:3). All members of this community, relatively few in number, speak the same language and have a common vocabulary. They migrate to (13:11; or in, 2:8; or from,
4:16) the east and settle in the land of Shinar (Babylonia; see 10:10). Verses 8-9 specify that this “whole earth” community moves from this one place (now called Babel), and various peoples who speak different languages (see 10:5, 20, 31) emerge across the “whole earth.” Hence, the narrative describes how peoples of common origin had come to speak various languages (despite the historical unlikelihood).

The building of a city with a tower (vv. 3-5, in v. 8 only the city is mentioned, an instance of synecdoche, though the import of the tower is thereby diminished) reflects knowledge of Mesopotamian construction methods. In the absence of natural stone, people made bricks of kiln-baked clay; burning gave them greater durability. The text offers no reason to suppose that the building efforts as such are pernicious; we might in fact think of human creativity and imagination in developing such materials and projects. The author focuses on their motivations, not that they build or what they build. The precise nature of their failure remains elusive, however, resulting in various scholarly formulations.

The effort to secure a place to call home seems natural enough, not even new (see 4:17), and the builders raise no explicit theological issues. Even the tower may not be an issue, as either a fortified city tower (see Deut 1:28; 9:1; Judg 9:46-47) or a temple tower (ziggurat), a stepped, mountain-shaped structure. In Babylonian culture, the latter provided for communication between earthly and heavenly realms through priestly intermediaries. The base of the tower was on earth and “its top in the heavens”—a popular description of ziggurats.89 The ziggurat represents an indirect relationship between heaven and earth; in 28:10-22, a writer implicitly faults the ziggurat for the distance it creates between God and the world. As such, it seems insufficient to carry theories about a storming of heaven or transgressing the limits of creatureliness or usurping the place of God. There may be some gibes at Babylonian religious practice, but this seems too specific to constitute a “whole earth” problem. Besides, Babylon appears at the end of the story; thus it does not stand at the center of attention.

The objective of “making a name (!v sem) for ourselves” is more problematic. This phrase may recall the renown that accrued to kings associated with major building projects in Mesopotamia and Israel or other heroic efforts (see 6:4). It may signal an autonomous attempt to secure the future by their own efforts, particularly in view of the use of sem in 12:2, where God is the subject of any accrued renown (note also that the genealogy of Shem encloses the account). The name they actually receive—though not a divine judgment—becomes Babel (“confusion”), ironically testifying to the futility of their efforts. The project may also intimate a search for the kind of immortality implicit in a famous name (but not in the sense of 3:22, which implies a literal immortality). Yet, David does not come under judgment for such efforts in 2 Sam 8:13 (see 18:18); the desire for fame, even self-generated, does not seem reprehensible enough in and of itself to occasion the magnitude of God’s response.

The key is in the motivation, “otherwise we shall be scattered abroad upon the face of the
whole earth.” This central human failure inheres in the straightforward moral-order talk (the punishment fits the crime); it corresponds precisely to God’s judgment (vv. 8-9). Most basically, humans fear what the future might bring, evincing deep anxiety and insecurity about what lies ahead. We do not discover fear of other human beings, but fear of not being able to keep their community intact in the face of a perceived peril of dispersion into a threatening world. Only because of this motivation do their objectives of building a city/tower and making a name for themselves become problematic. The building projects constitute a bid to secure their own future as a unified community, isolated from the rest of the world.

Hence, their action constitutes a challenge to the divine command to fill the earth (1:28, renewed in 9:1; already seen by Josephus. Antiquities I.iv.1), but not simply in a spatial sense. Their resistance to being scattered (this word occurs positively in 10:18; cf. 9:19; 10:5, 32) occasions a divine concern for the very created order of things, for only by spreading abroad can human beings fulfill their charge to be caretakers of the earth. According to 1:28 and 2:5 (cf. 2:15), the proper development of the creation depends on human activity. For the builders to concentrate their efforts narrowly on the future of the (only) human community places the future of the rest of creation in jeopardy. An isolationist view of their place in the world, centered on self-preservation, puts the rest of the creation at risk. The building project thus understeps rather than oversteps human limits, for it prevents scattering and taking up the creational command that put the creation at risk.

11:5-9. In v. 5 God “comes down” to conduct a judicial inquiry (see 18:21; their project was not so meager that God, ironically, had to descend to see it). God’s descent (see Exod 3:8) demonstrates God’s deep engagement on behalf of the creation. Heaven is that place within the created world where God’s presence remains uncontested. The relation between this descent and that of v. 7 represents the difference between inquiry and action. As in 18:21, the inquiry appears genuine, preliminary to a final decision (the NIV’s “were building” recognizes that the project was incomplete, v. 8).

Verse 6 constitutes a summary of the results of the inquiry; v. 7 calls on the council to assist in taking the necessary actions. Verse 7 indicates that in v. 6 God speaks to the divine council (see 1:26; 2:18; 3:22), with whom God consults about the matter (Abraham assumes the role of the divine dialogically between God and the council. While Yahweh carries out the sentence (vv. 8-9; the text does not report the actual act of confusing, suggesting that the scattering is central), v. 7 indicates that this punishment stems from the divine council.

God’s response focuses, not on their present project, but on other possibilities of united human endeavor (v. 6). The unity of peoples with isolationist concerns for self-preservation could promote any number of projects that would place the creation in jeopardy. Their sin concentrates their energies on a creation-threatening task; even the
finest creative efforts can subvert God’s creational intentions. Although the text does not impugn cities, it does recognize that sin and its potential for disaster accompanies human progress of whatever sort.

In response, God judges, but in the interests of the future of the creation, “the face of all the earth” (vv. 8-9). God’s judgment, though creating difficulties, has a fundamentally gracious purpose. The garbling of languages and consequent scattering prevents any comparable projects that could be carried out by a self-serving, self-preserving united front; humans might engage in feats that could be even more destructive of themselves and God’s creation (Job 42:2 uses similar language of God). God’s gracious action places limits on human possibilities for the sake of creation (see 3:22; 6:3).

God thus counters their efforts to remain an isolated community by acting in such a way that they have no choice but to obey the command. God does this by making their languages so diffuse that they can no longer communicate, having to leave off what they are doing, move apart from one another, and establish separate linguistic communities. The confusing that leads to their scattering (confusion is the only means cited by which God does this) thus becomes a means to another end: the filling of and caring for the earth in fulfillment of the creational command. God thereby promotes diversity at the expense of any form of unity that seeks to preserve itself in isolation from the rest of the creation.

The divine action of scattering corresponds exactly to what the people sought to prevent (v. 4). The verb bAlal (“confuse”; vv. 7, 9, see footnotes) plays on the word Babel (in English it would approximate “babble”). The very name they sought to make for themselves becomes a name for confusion, making them famous for their failure. (The literal meaning of Babel, “gate of god” [see 28:17] is given an ironic, if imaginative, etymological link.) Verse 9 functions similarly to 2:24 (“therefore”) by the way the narrator steps outside of the story and summarizes what has happened.

**Reflections**

1. The story has a universal (“whole earth”) perspective, speaking of what is true of humankind generally; yet the function of that universalism in a context where historically identifiable peoples are very much in view, and itself speaks of Babel, makes it somewhat different from the other primeval narratives. This universalistic/specific combination probably shows that 11:1-9 serves as an illustration of the typical developments in 10:1-32; this darker side of developments among the peoples of the world could be multiplied indefinitely. In other words, what is described here characterizes the peoples mentioned in the previous chapter.

2. One tension in the text involves an ambivalent view of unity and diversity. On the one hand, the spreading abroad correlates with God’s creational intentions of filling the earth. On the other hand, such scattering constitutes God’s judgment. One should distinguish between divine judgment and punishment in any conventional sense. God evaluates the situation negatively and moves to correct it.
Brueggemann notes that human unity is a complex reality in this text. Ordinarily, we regard unity in the human community as desirable and in tune with God’s purposes for the creation. But here, because the unity desired and promoted stands over against the divine will to spread abroad throughout the world, a unity that seeks self-preservation at all costs, God must resist it and act to advance the divine will for scattering. Those who seek to save their life will lose it. The right kind of unity occurs only when the community encompasses the concerns of the entire world and encourages difference and diversity to that end. Proper unity manifests itself in an ability to live together without conflict, oppression, and having common objectives in tune with God’s purposes for the world. At the same time, scattering should not result in fragmentation or divided loyalty to God. The story of the chosen one, Jacob, also conceives of a false unity that focuses on self-preservation; he also receives the call to “spread abroad” (pAraz, 28:14) throughout the world so that all the families of the earth can be blessed.

Diversity inheres in God’s intention for the world, as is evident from the marvelously pluriform character of God’s creation in the first place or the blessing evident in the table of nations. In tune with those creational intentions, God makes a decisive move here on behalf of diversity and difference.

3. We find a contemporary parallel in the often-isolated way in which the church relates to the world. In the interests of unity and preserving its own future, the members often stay close to home and don’t risk venturing forth (see Jonah). The command of Matt 28:18-20 calls for the church to scatter across the face of the earth. If the church refuses this call, God may well enter into judgment against the church and find some way of getting us beyond our own church cliques out into the world on behalf of the creation. The unity of the church is not to be found by focusing on unity, building churches and programs that present a unified front before the temptations of the world. We receive true unity finally as a gift, found in those things that are not tangible or centered on one’s own self-interests. Unity will be forged most successfully in getting beyond one’s own kind on behalf of the word in the world.

4. At Pentecost (Acts 2), each of the peoples present heard the gospel in their native tongue. The gift of the Spirit results in a linguistic cacophony, but all receive the gospel. This gift of a new hearing transcends language barriers, but at the same time maintains the differences that languages reflect. The testimony of Acts 2 does not then overturn the multiplicity of languages, but enables people who speak various languages to hear and understand the one gospel for all the earth. The people are then scattered over the face of the earth (Acts 8:1-4) to proclaim the gospel rather than their own concerns (Acts 2:11).

Speaking different languages probably presents more blessing than bane, more gift than problem. Linguistic diversity enriches people’s understanding of the world around them and is expressed in the world’s literature. Speaking and hearing, broadly conceived,
become a more complex reality in everyday life, and include not simply hearing other languages, but truly hearing others in their various life situations. Difficulties in communication can often lead to difficulties in relationships, but this usually involves the failings of people who seek to communicate than the reality of differences in language as such.

Genesis 11:10-26, From Shem to Abraham
Link to:

COMMENTARY

This is the fifth of the ten genealogies in Genesis. We find a line of nine (or ten) generations, matching the line before the flood (5:1-32), except in one basic respect: The ages of the figures have been scaled down considerably, with a consequent younger child-begetting age (after Seth’s 600 years, the next three live 433-464 years, the last six 148-239 years; as with chap. 5 the versions differ regarding ages).

In linear form, the genealogy moves from Shem, one of three sons of Noah, to Terah, who also has three sons, one of whom is Abraham. A branched genealogy of Shem precedes the story of the city of Babel (10:21-31), the basic elements

REFLECTIONS

1. In a fashion similar to other genealogies, this one brings an orderly, stabilizing rhythm into the scattering images of 11:8-9. The fact that the name Shem has a form identical to the word for “name” (in 11:4 and 12:2) may suggest even more—namely, that this family line will be a vehicle in and through which God will magnify the human name.

2. The author does not present Abraham’s family line in isolation but sets it in the midst of all the family units of the known world and, in so doing, keeps the chosen line embedded in the life of the world. These are deep roots, which Israel ought not to forget or set aside. God as Creator has been active all the way with this line leading to Abraham (note that Abraham’s family is already on the way to Canaan when God’s call comes in 12:1-3). God chooses Abraham, not to escape the world out of which he was hewn, but to return to it. All the contacts that Israel’s ancestors have with this world in chaps. 12–50 are certainly intended to say something about the nature and scope of this task.
GENESIS 11:27–25:18
THE STORY OF ABRAHAM

OVERVIEW

Postulating a sharp division between chaps. 1–11 and 12–50, between “primeval ‘history’” and “patriarchal history,” has long been a staple of Genesis study. While the exact dividing point has been disputed (from 11:10 to 11:27 to 12:1), there certainly are good reasons for such a division as the narrator’s eye now focuses on the progenitors of Israel. The text, which has had the world as a stage, narrows down to a small town in Mesopotamia, to a single family, to the mind and heart of a single individual—Abraham. At the same time, the world stage remains very much in view. Abraham is both deeply rooted in that earlier history and continues to be in contact with the peoples of that larger world. The narrator ties these two parts of Genesis together in ways that are rich and deep. Too sharp a distinction between these two “histories” will not serve the interpreter well (see Introduction).

We might claim that God chooses to begin with chap. 1 all over again, except that this time around Abraham steps onto a world stage out of tune with God’s creational intentions. The downward spiral that began in Eden plunged the world into a cosmic catastrophe, and the post-flood world seems once again on the way into a negative future. Not much of a future seems to be in store for the family of Terah, with early death, infertility, and interrupted journeys (11:27-32).

Yet, the continuities are positive as well. God did not abandon the creation to the consequences of its own sins within that “primeval” time. The genealogies testify that life, however troubled, continues. Even more, God’s covenant with Noah has given the post-flood world a sign, in the shape of a rainbow, wherein God’s promise ensures its future. This shift to Abraham does not mean a new world or a new divine objective for the world. God’s goal of reclaiming the world so that it reflects its original divine intention remains in place. However, we now have a clearer view about the divine strategy for moving toward this objective. God devises a means by which the creation will be reclaimed through Abraham’s family.

We do not know why God chose Abraham rather than another person or family. But we do know that God chose him so that the human and nonhuman creation might be reclaimed and live harmoniously with the original divine intention. God’s choice of Abraham constitutes an initially exclusive move for the sake of a maximally inclusive end. Election serves mission.

The Abraham cycle appears episodic in character, often with little discernible coherence.
While it is less episodic than chaps. 1–11, the reader does not encounter as sustained a narrative as that of Jacob and especially Joseph. This development coincides with the characterization of the chief personalities, with Abraham least well developed (but more than Noah); Jacob and especially Joseph are more fully portrayed. Moreover, the God who directly engages the life of Abraham is depicted in more unobtrusive ways in the remainder of Genesis, especially in the story of Joseph.

Classical source criticism has identified J, E, and P materials scattered throughout the Abraham cycle (with some texts undesignated, chap. 14). With the recent demise of the Elohist, scholars have discerned J (or JE) and P as the primary sources. Whatever the identity and perspective of these sources at one level or another, they have now been decisively reshaped by theological viewpoints that encompass the entire cycle. We may identify three basic perspectives:

1. A Theology of Creation. We have already identified some of the links between chaps. 1–11 and 12–50 (see Introduction). The call of Abraham does not narrow God’s channel of activity down to a history of salvation. These texts speak to creational issues such as life and death, birth and marriage and burial, family and community, economic and political realities, human conflicts and ambiguities and joys, and divine blessings that reach into every sphere of life. These are matters characteristic of the human community as a whole, matters in and through which God works to carry forth the larger divine designs for the world, and often in ways independent of the chosen community.

More specific modes of God’s activity in the world are handled well theologically only in the context of this all-pervading presence and activity of God in the created order. Without this perspective as a given, the idea of a God who works in more focused ways can be perceived only as an interruption of the created order of things, or as radically discontinuous from life in creation generally. These broader creational understandings provide the necessary context for understanding more specific and concrete ways of divine presence in the community of faith.

2. Promise. While God’s promises to Abraham are decisive for the future of this community (and through it, the world), they continue the promising and saving activity in which God has been active earlier, i.e., especially in the unconditional word of promise to Noah and all flesh and the salvation of a family from the ravages of the flood. These divine actions signal a new divine commitment concerning the future of the world. This divine promissory relationship with the entire world grounds and generates the more particular promises to Abraham. In order for God to oversee the promise to the world, God must make particular promises. These promises now specify how God will relate to the larger world, which now rests secure from destruction, enfolded within the divine promise. Indeed, the God who acts with Abraham is so familiar to the narrator (and implicitly, to Abraham) that God does not even have to be (re)introduced (12:1).
Promises stand at the beginning of the narrative (12:1-3), at the climax (22:16-18), and are repeated at key junctures throughout (12:7; 13:14-17; 15:1-7, 18-21; 17:1-21; 18:10-14, 18; 24:7). They even give decisive shape to the Hagar- Ishmael texts (16:10-12; 21:13, 18). In their present form and arrangement—the rationale for which is not always discernible—these theologically charged texts reflect the perspective of the final redactor, who thereby gives one internal hermeneutic for the interpretation of the whole (the other is faithfulness).

Interpreters regularly consider the promise of a son to be the oldest; the promises of nation, name, many descendants, and land are extensions that depend on new times and places. In other words, the traditio-historical process enhances the promissory element. This process of development extends the promises beyond Abraham’s own lifetime (within which only the promise of a son was fulfilled) to an open future. For every new generation the promises continue to function as promises independently of specific fulfillments, though with sufficient experience of fulfillment to ground the community’s hopes (e.g., land).

David Clines speaks about the partial fulfillment of the promises to Israel’s ancestors.94 This insight helps, but such an analysis places too much emphasis on fulfillment and gives insufficient attention to the way in which the promise functions as promise. A passage such as 12:1-3, for example, does not really announce a plot for the story of Abraham. These verses attest to the generative event, a profoundly creative moment in his life in which God speaks command and promise, and it propels a faithful Abraham and his family into a future, which takes shape most fundamentally by living with promises. What shape the future takes will depend on many things, but Abraham can be assured that, amid all that makes for trouble in his life and the world, it holds promise for goodness and well-being. And that makes a profound difference for all life.

Son. This promise, though presupposed in the promise of descendants, comes specifically only in chap. 15 and provides the focus for chaps. 16–21. Even then we do not immediately know which son it will be (Ishmael, then Isaac), and the resolution does not appear until near the end of Abraham’s journey (chap. 22). Initially it appears that Ishmael will be the son, then Isaac comes into focus; but even Isaac does not appear as a fulfillment until God tests Abraham’s fidelity.

Land. We may discern this theme in the opening chapters (12:7; 13:14-17; 15:7, 18-21; 17:8).

God does not make this promise to a landless individual, at least initially. Abraham starts from a homeland (see chaps. 24, 29–31), becomes a sojourner and resident alien, and looks toward a new land for the future. Yet, though he knows the identity and size of the land and procures a down payment (chap. 23), he lives and dies only with the promise. But, again, living with the promise as promise profoundly shapes his life and thought; the
promise constantly generates new possibilities for living short of fulfillment. Moreover, although God promised to give the land “forever,” faithfulness is not an option for participation in the fulfillment. The promise of land functions much like this in Hebrews; those who, like Abraham, journey in faith do not finally need an enduring city (11:8-16; 13:14).

Nation, Name, Kings, Descendants. The promises of nation, name, and kings probably find an initial fulfillment in the Davidic empire. At the same time, Christians claim this language, recognizing that “Jesus the Messiah” may be linked through David to Abraham (Matt 1:1). Moreover, the language of descendants is much broader than the descendants of the “son”; it includes the descendants of Ishmael and Abraham’s children by Keturah.

Even more, “descendants” has taken on a much broader spiritual meaning than the text probably knows. The legacy of Abraham includes not only both testaments, but also the Koran. Abraham became the father of the religious heritages embodied in Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. The various religious appropriations of the story of Abraham must be cognizant of not only their similarities and differences in interpreting this story, but also the possibilities that this commonality may hold for continuing conversation with one another. Christians also should recognize among themselves that the NT does not draw on the story of Abraham in a univocal way, as comparisons of Paul, James, and Hebrews show.

Blessing. The specific language of blessing appears nearly one hundred times in chaps. 12–50 and undergirds a key theme in the fulcrum text of 12:1-3 (see Reflections there). Blessing becomes a catchall word, encompassing all the promises noted heretofore, as well as a host of creational blessings (e.g., life and fertility). At the same time, simply to collapse the promises into blessing would fail to recognize the prior role of promise. The specific divine promises enable blessing to be brought into the sphere of redemption. Blessing is basically a creational category; all of God’s creatures, to one degree or another, experience blessing apart from their knowledge of God (it rains on the just and the unjust alike). The promises bring a particular focus to God’s activity in and through a chosen people, ultimately for the purpose of redemption.

The mediation of the blessing to those outside of the chosen family becomes a centerpiece in the chapters that follow. To that end, these texts relate Abraham with virtually every people in Israel’s sociohistorical context, from Egypt (12:10-20) to numerous Near Eastern nations, including the king of Jerusalem (chap. 14); Hagar and Ishmael (16; 21); Sodom and Gomorrah (18–19); Lot, and sons Moab and Ammon (19:30-38); Abimelech and the Philistines (20:1-18; 21:22-34). The biblical authors are interested in the way Abraham relates to these peoples and how he does or does not function as a mediator of God’s special blessing to them. The relationship between Abraham and Lot may have the special purpose of relating Abraham to land issues and to the larger world scene.

3. Faithfulness. Abraham’s faithfulness also functions centrally in these stories, a centrality made especially evident in the story of Isaac (26:3-5, 24). Key texts provide the
center for this concern: 15:1-6; 12:1-9; 22:1-19; they appear at the beginning and end of the cycle, and in the key covenant section. The shape of the future is determined, not simply by the one who speaks the promise, but by the way the recipient responds to it. Abraham does not act as the passive recipient of a drama shaped solely by the divine will and word. What Abraham does and says has an effect on what happens in the future beyond the promise. Nonetheless, Abraham can neither preserve nor annul the promise, since God will be faithful to promises made.

None of the ancestral figures (Abraham, Sarah, Rebekah) is perfect, but familial strife proves more inimical to God’s intentions than isolated actions of individuals. The text presents the story of a family, with all the flaws and foibles characteristic of such institutions. The fact that this conflicted family still mediates God’s promise and blessing to the world constitutes one of the marvels in God’s way of relating to the world.

The general way God states promises (e.g., nation, blessing, descendants) highlights the human role. God leaves room for human freedom in response, so that the track from promise to fulfillment cannot be precisely determined in advance. Hence, when God promises descendants, but is not specific regarding Sarah, especially in view of her barrenness, the reader must struggle with the other possibilities. To suggest, for example, that if Abraham and Sarah had simply settled back in their married life, God would have seen that a son was born in due time remains (a) pure speculation; (b) insufficient regard for the narrative where Ishmael appears as a fulfillment; (c) a denial of a genuine and active role God has given to the human (e.g., God takes Abraham’s counsel into account regarding Sodom and Gomorrah). What human beings do makes a difference to God, and hindsight may not reveal the value their actions actually had. In considering matters of this sort, the God portrayed in these texts does not have absolute foreknowledge of the future (see 22:12). Once again (1:26-28), God uses human beings as instruments in and through whom to carry out the divine creational intentions. God gives them responsibilities within this intention, choosing to trust humans with a significant role, while continuing to see to the promises in an attentively personal way.

The NT picks up on the Abrahamic narrative at the points of promise and faithfulness, from Romans 4 to Galatians 3–4 to Hebrews 11 (see 11:27–12:9; 15:6 esp.). Paul grounds some of his basic understandings of faith on narratives that are pre-Mosaic and pre-Sinaitic, giving Abraham a profound relationship with the faith of which he speaks.

Structure. Scholars have made numerous efforts to discover the structure of the Abrahamic narratives.96 While a certain chiastic ordering may be discerned, we must use care not to overdraw the parallels or neglect overlapping structures. Most efforts have had difficulty incorporating 22:20–25:18 into any finely tuned chiasm. Generally, we may observe a doubling of key stories over the course of the narrative:

1. As with other major sections, genealogies enclose the story of Abraham, those of his
ancestors (11:10-32) and of his descendants (25:1-18), although 22:20-24 is a complicating factor.

4. Chapters focusing on covenant (15; 17). Most analyses find the center of the text in these covenants.
5. Stories focusing on Hagar and Ishmael (16; 21:8-21).
7. Stories relating to Abimelech (20; 21:22-34).
9. Stories pertaining to land (13; 23).

These doublings give to the narrative an ongoing mirroring effect, inviting another look at Abraham and the development of God’s purposes in and through him from different perspectives along the course of his journey.

More generally, the Abrahamic story may be structured by the parallels regularly drawn with the history of Israel. That is to say, the overall structure of Israel’s history provides a grid into which the various Abrahamic stories are fit (see Introduction and each episode).

GENESIS 11:27–12:9, THE CALL OF ABRAM
Link to:

COMMENTARY

Genesis 11:27, beginning with the genealogy of Abraham’s father and enclosing the story with genealogies (cf. 25:1-18), provides the likely starting point for the story of Abraham. The story of Jacob (25:19) and the story of Joseph and his brothers (37:2) also begin this way. This segment is an admixture of P and J materials.

11:27-32. These genealogical, geographical, and travel notes introduce 12:1-9 and anchor Abram in the story of the nations (Genesis 1–11). Starting the story at 12:1 would give the impression that the call of Abram marks a highly disjunctive event in his life, a bolt out of the blue. But 11:27-32 makes it clear that his family had already begun a journey to Canaan from their home in “Ur of the Chaldeans” (probably the ancient center about 70 miles south of modern Baghdad; Chaldea was a less ancient name of Babylonia from neo-Babylonian times [see Jer 50:1, 8]). Such movement links the call of Abram to the Tower of Babel story and may also relate to the exiles in Babylon. Terah and his family had gotten stalled along the way, settling in Haran (in southeastern Turkey, on a tributary of the Euphrates). God’s call thus spurs Abram to complete the journey once begun (in which God had been involved, 15:7), only now leaving all but his immediate family (which included Lot, who was under Abram’s care because his father had died)
behind in Haran. These details indicate that efforts to portray Abram’s move as especially agonizing may be overdrawn; moving on was a way of life with this family (though verbal links with 22:1 suggest it was not altogether easy).

Other important elements that specifically link up with chaps. 12–50 include the infertility of Sarai (see commentary on 29:31–30:24), which becomes a central theme for the story, and Lot, whose enigmatic place in this family the author explores at key points (chaps. 13–14; 18–19). More generally, links with the family in Haran continue through the story of Abraham (22:20-24; 24) and Jacob (27:43–28:7; 29–31), as both Isaac and Jacob return to marry members of their family (Rebekah; Rachel).

Interpreters dispute whether Abram’s call at age seventy-five (12:4) occurred before or after Terah’s death (11:32). The NIV pluperfect in 12:1 (“had said”) apparently derives from the interpretation of Acts 7:2-4 that Abram received his call in Ur rather than Haran (perhaps based on the general observations of divine leading in 15:7; Neh 9:7). But Terah takes the initiative in 11:31, and Abram leaves from Haran in 12:4-5 (if Abram is Terah’s firstborn, 11:26, then Terah lived for sixty more years, which may not be the case).

At the end of this short passage, the author reports Terah’s death, his uncompleted journey to Canaan, the death of one of his sons, the barrenness of the wife of another, and an orphaned grandson (Lot). The word of God (vv. 1-3) enters into a point of great uncertainty for the future of this family.

12:1-4a. Interpreters universally consider vv. 1-3 to provide the key for the rest of Genesis, indeed the Pentateuch. They constitute a fulcrum text, thoroughly theological in focus, especially written to link chaps. 1–11 (“all the families of the earth”) with the ancestral narratives, and to project forward to the later history of Israel (“a great nation”). Although Abram will never see this future, his response will shape it (see 26:4-5, 24). The promises focus on nationhood, renown, and blessing for Abram’s family and others through them. The promises are somewhat general, yet the emphasis on greatness entails a level of particularity that can be discerned by others. The promises are brought into play in the following narrative again and again in various formulations, with the implied themes of descendants and land made more specific; further imperatives also play a role (17:1; see 22:1).

The command/promise structure of these verses seems most like 26:2-6a; it is similar to others (e.g., 46:1-5a) but surprisingly lacks a divine self-identification. The narrator assumes that Abram knows the one who speaks these words. Verses 1-3 serve as the narrator’s summary of the “call” (cf. Isa 51:2), laying out a theological agenda in general terms, rather than an actual report thereof. The passage may be outlined as follows:

(1) An imperative. God appears suddenly and without introduction, calling Abram to leave (in order of increasing level of intimacy) his country, his clan, and his home (as in
24:4), and journey to a land God will reveal to him (22:1-2), which must happen quickly given their travel plans (v. 5, as in 22:3-4). Verse 4a reports Abram’s positive response to the divine directive.

(2) A series of four cohortative verbs that express emphatically the intention of the speaker, each of which provides gracious divine promises to Abraham, but whose full realization lies beyond his own lifetime (see Overview). God will (note the recurrent “I”) make Abraham a great nation; bless him; make his name great; and bless those who bless him (and curse anyone who abuses him). God, in essence, promises a new community with a new name (unlike 11:4, given by God). The author, here, recognizes that Abram embodies later Israel (in the subsequent narratives, Abraham’s life will mirror that of later Israel). How these promises are related to Sarai’s infertility (11:30) sets up a key issue, though the promises at this point do not necessarily involve Sarai in the fulfillment. Lot possibly came to mind for Abram (this is pure speculation), but so much is open-ended in what God says that the point seems to be the absence of calculation on Abram’s part and a simple trust that God will find a way (Abram’s first concern is expressed in 15:2).

The reader might conceive all the promises to encompass the promise of blessing, so that the promises of nation and name are more precise forms of that blessing. Yet, placing the “I will bless you” in second position implies that the promise of “a great nation” (ywog gôy; as a political entity it has later Israel in view) creates a key to what follows; fulfillment of the other promises will follow on the heels of that fulfillment. It is as a nation that Israel will be blessed and given a great name or renown. One may discern royal connotations in these materials (2 Sam 7:9; Ps 72:17). This promise of future blessing, however, does not involve moving from night to day at some future date; the divine promise will already begin its work within Abram’s own life and continue on in the lives of his descendants (see Overview).
The promise of “blessing those who bless you” brings Abraham into relationship with those outside the chosen community. Those who treat Israel in life-sustaining ways will receive a response of blessing from God.

The intervening imperative could express either result or intention “so that [and] you will be a blessing,” or retain its imperative sense (“[you are to] be a blessing”). In either case, it (a) indicates that God’s fulfillment of the three previous promises will enable Israel’s life to take the shape of blessing in the world; and (b) stands as preliminary to v. 3, which specifies that other peoples will experience blessing through their relationship with this family, who are to play an active role on behalf of this divine intention.

(3) The statement “the one who curses you I will curse” makes two shifts, to the singular (the one who, NRSV) and to an imperfect verb. This phrase does not offer another free-standing promise, but a note on the previous promise—namely, should any persons treat Israel with contempt they will reap the consequences of their deed (see Deut 5:9-10; 7:9-
to put it positively, part of Israel’s blessing means that they will be protected from those who mistreat them. The first word for “curse” (llq qAlal) has reference to any form of mistreatment; the second (rra)Arar) is the opposite of blessing, reaping the consequences of such behaviors.

Verse 3b, which presents translation difficulties, shifts to the perfect tense, and “families” serves as the subject of the verb. The NRSV has changed to the passive voice (so the NIV throughout) from the reflexive RSV (see footnote), as in the other texts where the Niphal form of the verb occurs (18:18; 28:14). With the Hithpael form, the NRSV shifts to the middle voice (the response of the other is more in play), “gain blessing for themselves” through Abram’s offspring (22:18; 26:4). The RSV (NRSV footnote) translation makes Israel’s role more passive; Abraham’s blessing will become so commonplace that people will bless themselves by invoking his name (see 48:20). Yet, even here the blessing received by Abram extends to all the families of the earth.

This final phrase presents the objective of all the previous clauses—God’s choice of Abraham will lead to blessings for all the families of the earth (see 10:32; note the corporate focus). God’s choice of Abram serves as an initially exclusive move for the sake of a maximally inclusive end. Election serves mission (in the broadest sense of the term).

12:4b-9. These verses report Abram’s silent, but actively positive, response to God’s call and review his travels to and through the land he has been shown, during which he is accompanied by God, builds altars, and worships God. Thereby God’s promise does not float above the life experience of the recipient; the author emphasizes Abram’s faithful and worshipful response at the onset of the story. Indeed, Abraham’s fidelity shapes God’s promised future (see 22:16-18; 26:4-5, 24).

Sarai and Lot accompany Abram, along with slaves and possessions (all his wealth does not come from Egypt; v. 16). When Abram reaches Canaan, God appears to him to inform him that this is the land promised to his descendants. Abraham then moves through the land, from north to south, anticipating God’s request in 13:17 and perhaps the eventual Israelite settlement—from Shechem to near Bethel, toward the Negeb in the south (eventually Hebron, 13:18). The reference to Canaanites (i.e., all pre-Israelite inhabitants; see 15:19-21) reflects the perspective of a later period, long after Moses. The basically positive view of Canaanites in Genesis probably reflects v. 3b more than later problems. At this point the future seems open-ended.

Abram’s journey functions paradigmatically for the one made by Jacob/Israel in chap. 35, including attention to trees and altars. Worship is obviously an integral part of his life and gives a shape to what will come. This journey seems not to be associated with the founding of sanctuaries, but with building altars at known sacred sites (without personnel or buildings), marked by trees (commonly associated with oracles; Moreh is probably a well-known site, 35:4; Josh 24:26) or stones. The later association of these natural markers with idolatry (Deut 12:2; 16:21) does not characterize this early period. Abraham’s altar building belongs to a personal and familial act of worship, probably with
sacrificial acts (see 8:20; 22:13), here a vehicle for expressing gratitude to God for the promise (each is built “to the LORD,” 13:18).

“Invoking the name of Yahweh” (4:26; 13:4; 26:25) refers to worship generally. These forms of early worship allow for movement, and are not tied down to priests or sanctuaries. The altar also functions as a continuing marker, perhaps a kind of public sign of God’s promise of land.

Verse 7 speaks of a divine appearance to Abraham (in human form, see 16:7; cf. 17:1; 18:1; 26:2, 24; 35:9) in which the deity promises this land to Abraham’s descendants (the corporate view of later Israel, evident in vv. 1-3, remains). God continues to give promises; as life moves along, new times and places elicit new promises. Although land is implied in the promise of nationhood (and descendants!) and in God’s directive, this promise now refers to the land of Canaan. What God would show Abram is now given.

REFLECTIONS

1. Verses 1-3 link chaps. 1–11 with Israel’s ancestral story. This is most evident in the relationship Abram is to have to “all the families of the earth” (cf. 10:32). This family does not come onto the world scene out of the blue; it has deep familial connections to all the nations of the world. This family thereby enables God’s cosmic purposes and activity. The author does not even introduce the God who speaks to Abram in 12:1; we assume that this is the God who created the world and who has been engaged in the life of all peoples in the previous chapters. The call of Abram may be understood as God’s response to the dilemma created by the sin and evil that had become so pervasive among all the families of the earth.

2. Blessing becomes a key theme in the narratives that follow, used eighty-eight times in Genesis, with many indirect references (see Overview). It shapes the life of this family in varying ways as well as the lives of the many outsiders they encounter. Blessing stands as a gift of God (mediated through a human or nonhuman agent) that issues in goodness and well-being in life. It involves every sphere of existence, from spiritual to more tangible expressions. Blessing manifests itself most evidently in fertility and the multiplication of life, from herds and flocks, to field and forest, to new human life; it embraces material well-being, peace, and general success in life’s ventures (see the list in Deut 28:3-15).

Blessing belongs fundamentally to the sphere of creation. The creation narratives make clear that blessing inheres as an integral part of God’s purposes for the world, human and nonhuman, both before (1:22, 28; 2:3) and after (5:2; 9:1) the entrance of sin. The emphasis on blessing in the ancestral narratives (signaled by the fivefold reference in these verses) shows that God’s original intentions for the world are being mediated in and through this family. Yet, the “families of the earth” are not totally dependent on their relationship to the chosen for blessing; the blessings of God the creator (e.g., sun and rain) continue to flow to all independently of their relationship to Abraham’s family. The
genealogies of chaps. 1–11 testify amply to the presence and power of blessing within even a fallen creation. The difference remains this: Blessings will be intensified or made more abundant (30:27-30) by this contact, made even more correspondent to God’s intentions for the creation.

3. While blessing appears central in Genesis, it is inadequate and incomplete without promise. Promise is the most basic category with which this and the following narratives work. The blessing that God promises to Abram has deep levels of continuity with the blessing he has experienced in his life to this point. But his new promise is something more, something beyond what the creation in and of itself can provide. Within creation, blessing is powerful, life-enabling, and life-sustaining, but finally insufficient for the fullest possible life. The promises bring blessing into the sphere of redemption.

God speaks to Abram, but very little has been said about him; he has spoken no words and has barely acted. By calling him, God brings Abram into the new day provided by promise. The divine word of command and promise newly constitutes Abram (though, as we have seen, not a creatio ex nihilo). God’s new commitment to the relationship with Abram that promising entails makes for a new identity for the one who now responds in trust and obedience. Abram now takes into his life the character of the promises made; he is now one whose future looks like this. The future is not yet, but because God has been faithful to earlier promises, Abram’s very being takes on the character of that future, though not apart from his own faithful response to the word of God, which created his faith in the first place. More generally, the promise stands at the beginning of Israel’s ancestral story. We may understand not only the stories that follow, but also the entire history of Israel, as constituted and shaped by God’s promises.

Even more, promise as promise serves as a key here. What counts about God’s promises finally is their continuing status as promise, which can then be appropriated by the community of faith in later generations as still applicable to them and their future (see Overview).

4. Abram’s trust in the promise and his move from Haran to Canaan will certainly mean a new level of meaning and life for him. But the God who commands and promises will also change forever as well. Having made promises, and being faithful to those promises, means that God is now committed to a future with the one who has faithfully responded. The text describes not only human faithfulness, but also divine faithfulness to promises made to a specific family. God will never be the same again. By his word, God has created a new family, indeed a new world for both Abraham and God, which gives to each a revised job description, though the goal of a reclaimed creation remains the same.

5. This text has many children in both the OT and the NT. It works itself out in the kingship of David and the associated promises (2 Sam 7:9; Pss 47:9; 72:17). The prophets address the theme of blessing on the nations (see Isa 19:24-25; Jer 4:2), which in
turn arises in the NT and grounds the inclusion of Gentiles in the community of faith (see Acts 3:25; Gal 3:8).

On another point, Heb 11:8-16 celebrates Abraham and Sarah’s journey of faith, but also recognizes its unfinished character. Their pilgrimage becomes one of faith and hope in the promises, but they do not live to see their fulfillment (a theme also present in Acts 7:2-5). As such, the pilgrimage of Abram and Sarai becomes a metaphor for the Christian life, a journey that reaches out toward a promised future, but comes up short of final fulfillment within one’s own lifetime. Not that there are no signs of that future along the way; indeed, God provides blessings for the journey in an amazing range of sizes and colors. But persons of faith will realize that hope never becomes obsolete, for “here we have no lasting city” (Heb 13:14); the “better country” (Heb 11:16) will remain stretched out before us until our dying day.

GENESIS 12:10–20, ABRAM AND SARAI IN EGYPT
Link to:

COMMENTARY

This is a thrice-told tale. In 20:1-18 Abraham will again seek to pass Sarah off as his sister; Isaac does the same with respect to Rebekah (26:1-11). Many interpreters view this as a single story retold in somewhat disparate ways and set into the narrative at different points by later redactors (chaps. 12 and 26 are J; chap. 20 is E). Genesis 12 may be the more original, with chaps. 20 and 26 being reworkings in view of issues in different locales. Stories of this sort were common in the ancient world, however, and these may reflect such a convention.99 These stories now serve three distinctive, but not unrelated, functions within the narrative.

In addition, the Exodus story provides a structure for the narrative (see p. 429). The text is bracketed by Abram’s descent to and return from Egypt (12:10; 13:1) and by the only speaking in the narrative, between Abram and Sarai (vv. 11-13) and between Abram and Pharaoh (vv. 18-19). Historically, journeys from Canaan to Egypt at a time of famine (usually occasioned by drought) are known from Egyptian sources.

The next two chapters follow naturally this narrative by showing an interest in problems with the land that Abram has been promised.

12:10-16. The promise of the land has just been made to Abram (12:7), and he has been moving about its various territories (cf. the journeys of Jacob in chap. 35). His worship has expressed his gratitude to God (12:8). But now this land of promise cannot support him; the repetition (chiastic) of famine language in 12:10 stresses its severity. He must move out of the land in order to survive.
The narrator has yet to put a word in Abram’s mouth. His first words, spoken to Sarai, are
difficult to understand (vv. 11-13). The issue is not that Abram lies; in 20:12, we are
informed—probably correctly—that Sarai was his half-sister (forms of sister marriage in
the Near East are not applicable). Abram does, however, ask (not demand) that Sarai
speak less than the full truth, to conceal

the nature of their relationship, because the Egyptians might kill him to procure such a
beautiful woman (the redaction puts her age at sixty-five!). This presupposes a situation
where adultery is forbidden, but a murder might be arranged (cf. David and Bathsheba).

Abram’s premonitions about Egypt are on target in some respects. Both the populace and
the officials of the unnamed pharaoh do make the anticipated judgment about Sarai’s
beauty. They praise Sarai so much that she is taken into Pharaoh’s house to become his
“wife” (v. 19; cf. 16:3; 2 Sam 11:27, with possible parallels with David); the lack of any
marker to distinguish the uses of “wife” in v. 19 means they have the same force. These
references, as well as the time that passes (v. 16), make it likely that the marriage is
consummated (to deny this seems a case of special pleading). Because of Sarai (“for her
sake”), Pharaoh treats Abram well (anticipated in v. 13, but with a different scenario).
Prosperity comes to Abram at the expense of Sarai; indeed, Pharaoh makes Abram a
wealthy man (cf. 24:35; 16:1 implies that one slave was Hagar). His life is preserved
from famine and Pharaoh, but it has cost him the loss of Sarai, and it has cost Sarai her
honor and dignity.

Abram fails to anticipate the Egyptian situation in other respects: (a) Pharaoh himself
enters the picture. There is no hint in this scenario that any other than Egyptians generally
are in view (confirmed by the broad reference in v. 14). The problem appears cultural,
certainly out in the open, and not a peculiarly royal issue. To suggest that Abram intends
to entrap Pharaoh goes beyond the text. (b) An Egyptian takes her for a wife. Abram does
not even suggest this as a possibility. If it had been any Egyptian but Pharaoh, he may
have thought he could negotiate as Sarai’s “brother” (cf. 24:55) and been able to forestall
her marriage. (c) Abram expects the worst from the outsider. From the way Pharaoh
responds when the ruse becomes known, it seems unlikely he would have mistreated or
killed Abram, if he had told the truth from the beginning. Pharaoh’s response (vv. 18-20)
seems genuine, even if offered under some duress. (d) Abram underestimates the
consequences of his actions. Note the disastrous effects of Sarai’s presence on Pharaoh
and his household. If Sarai should be taken, one must doubt that Abram thought the
moral order would function in some mechanical way and would deliver Sarai back
quickly (v. 16 assumes no little time) or would gain him considerable wealth.

12:17-20. Pharaoh’s action is relationally inappropriate, even though he participates
unknowingly, so that it brings divine judgment in its wake (objective guilt). While we do
not know the identity of the “serious” plague, diseases are probably in mind (see 2 Chr
26:20; Ps 73:5, 14). The phrase “because of Sarai” (v. 17) points in two directions, God’s
working within the moral order and the saving of Sarai. God’s action constitutes the turning point in the story, in spite of Abram’s duplicity. A comparison with the plague stories (Exod 11:1) brings out a notable contrast. While plagues are visited upon the Egyptians in both cases, the reasons differ. In Exodus, the conduct of the Egyptians elicits them. Here the behavior of God’s own chosen one leads to Pharaoh’s action, which engenders the plagues. Abram brings a curse rather than a blessing upon the nations (12:3). In his very first contact with outsiders, Abram fails in his response to the call of God. Even more, Pharaoh cuts the Egyptians off from this source of blessing.

Nonetheless, Abram does not reap the full negative effects of his behavior; this happens because of Sarai (v. 16) and Pharaoh (v. 20). No mechanically conceived moral order at work here! Human activity can cut into the act-consequence spiral and ameliorate its effects. We do not know how Pharaoh establishes the link between his actions toward Sarai and the plagues; yet, the immediate juxtaposition of the plagues and his interrogation shows that it involves his own insight (note the stress on “wife”).

Pharaoh asks Abram exactly the same question that God asked Eve in the garden (3:13; similarly of Cain, 4:10). His “sending away” (jlv sAlah) Abram and his family is similar to God’s banishing Adam and Eve from the garden (3:23). Not unlike them, Abram (in this only recorded meeting with Pharaoh) may have experienced shame and dread at being peppered by the (nonjudicial) questions of an angry emperor, but the narrator makes a different point. Just as Sarai had no response in vv. 11-13, so also Abram offers no response in this, the only other dialogue. Abram is reduced to silence too! They are sent away abruptly and ignominiously, escorted to the border; yet, Pharaoh exhibits a remarkably generous spirit. While the plagues no doubt prompt this treatment of Abram, Pharaoh also acts in a way more liberally than he has to. Pharaoh not only lets Abram off the hook, but also lets him keep all the possessions he had accumulated because of the ruse (v. 20). Ironically, Pharaoh proves to be more of a behavioral model in this instance than Abram, alleviating the negative consequences that might well have befallen Abram. God’s purposes are also served by Pharaoh.

REFLECTIONS

1. Many readers sympathize with Abram’s equivocation; after all, he not only comes to Egypt with hat in hand, but he understands his life to be in danger as well. Faced with such a dilemma and preparing for the worst, he puts life ahead of honor, life for himself at the potential expense of Sarai’s honor. That this entails the potential loss of the promised future seems unlikely, given her barrenness and her not yet being associated with the promise. At this point the promise need not be fulfilled through Sarai; his death, on the other hand, would be decisive.

Other readers have pronounced his actions cowardly and lacking in integrity (see chap. 20). At what price does he seek to assure his personal safety? A repeated focus on self
fills his speech. He puts Sarai at the disposal of his personal concerns. In fact, as his sister, she seems even more likely to be taken; he may lose her altogether (see below).

The truth probably rides the cusp between these two views. Abram had few options, none of them perfect. He chooses to enter into a situation fraught with danger and ambiguity and devises a careful strategy, albeit imperfect, self-serving, and dishonoring of Sarai.

2. The parallels with Exodus are striking: (a) Abram goes down to Egypt because of famine (see 42:1-5; 43:1, 15; 47:4, 13). To “sojourn” (rwg gûr) is also used in 20:10 and 47:4. In 26:1-3 God tells Isaac not to go down to Egypt and sojourn there. Is it not yet the appropriate time? (b) Egypt is both life-threatening and life-enhancing. (c) Use of a ruse (Exod 5:1-3). (d) Sarai like Moses is taken into Pharaoh’s house. (e) Conflict with Pharaoh. (f) Plagues on Egypt (%gn nAga; cf. Exod 11:1). (g) Enrichment/despoiling in Egypt. (h) “Take and go” (jql lAqah; ^lh hAlak; 12:19 and Exod 12:32). (i) Let Abram/Israel go (sAlah).

Abram’s story prefigures the experience of Israel. Abram functions as the father of Israel in more than a genealogical way; Israel’s story plays out Abram’s story. Yet, the author portrays the Egyptians more positively here; indeed, throughout Genesis, the Egyptians appear in a positive light (see chaps. 39–50), which seems remarkable, given what is to come in Exodus. The Egyptians are not the embodiment of evil; they are not destined to a certain way of being. Other futures are available to them. Given the number of links with the Exodus story, the chosen family itself may in some respects be responsible for what the Egyptians become. In some sense Abram (and others) is to blame for the Egyptian oppression.

The chosen ones are not inevitably the bringers of blessing to others. They can so comport themselves in daily life that others will suffer, rather than be blessed. How the people of God respond to others has great potential for both good and ill. In addition, just because a given people are not believers ought not occasion suspicion or a lack of basic human trust. Benevolent behavior by those who are unchosen testifies to the continuing work of God the Creator in the lives of all people. Those who are instruments of God’s redemptive activity ought to recognize these wide-ranging positive effects of God’s creative work, and seek to join hands with such persons in working toward God’s goals of a reclaimed creation. The most basic root of these problematic ways of relating to others, according to this text, lies in a deeply rooted centering on self.

3. We do not know why the narrator gives Sarai no voice. It could reflect the patriarchy of the time. Yet, the powerful voice given women in Genesis (e.g., Rebekah) intimates that Sarai’s silence may be intentional (see 20:5). Either it is a characteristic of her relationship to Abram or she chooses to suffer silently, tacitly agreeing to risk her honor and her life for Abram’s sake. In view of later initiatives she takes (16:2), the latter is
more likely. It is striking that Abram has no response when Sarai is “taken” (cf. his reaction to Lot in 14:14).

Even though she remains silenced, the story unfolds around Sarai; as such, the author gives her a position of no little power and influence. It is because of her that Abram feels threatened, that things may go well with him and that his life may be spared (v. 13), that Pharaoh is “good” to him (v. 16), and that God afflicts Pharaoh (v. 17). The story refers to her thirteen times, moving from being Abram’s wife to his sister to “the woman” to Pharaoh’s wife and back to Abram’s wife. This focus on the silent, but nonetheless powerful, role of Sarai should be allowed to have its full interpretive import. She is no minor figure and should be given a prominent role in any retelling of the story.

4. While Abram can depend on the promise of land (12:7), he cannot depend on the land itself. God offers a creational gift that almost immediately fails the recipient—no land of milk and honey for Abram. Does God promise Abram a fractured gift? The very gift has a certain precarious character. In this case, the land does not sustain—at least consistently—the human population so dependent on its riches. The fruitfulness of the land seems precarious; the gifts of God can become something other than what they were created to be.

5. The author intends such talk of famine to recall aspects of the creation story (1:11-12, 29-30; 3:17-18). The land (מִרְעָא )erez) was created to bring forth every green thing; it did so, and God saw that it was good. The land was to supply all living creatures with food. Genesis 1 claims that God does not intend famine for the creation. Genesis 3, however, claims that the creation has become at odds with that intention. More specifically, Gen 3:17-18 speaks of an inescapable link between sin and the fruitfulness of the land; human sin has negative creational effects. Ever since, the land has not produced as God originally intended; human beings may indeed suffer famine. Such was the creational situation within which God’s promise to Abram occurs. God promises a land, but it falls short of paradise.

Abram committed no sin that led to this famine; this is the way things are in the land when God makes the promise. While the land is full of creational potential, presently it falls short of its promise and contributes to human suffering. So God’s gift to Abram can fail, having been spoiled through what human beings have done (see Lev 26:18-20; Deut 11:13-17). The land needs healing, as it often does during Israel’s history. In eschatological vision, when God’s promises are fulfilled on a cosmic scale, famine will be no more (Isa 65:21; Amos 9:13-14).

6. Abram no sooner receives the promise than he has to leave it behind. Promises often work this way. The promises are real and reliable, because God has made them. But one cannot settle into what has been promised, forever secure in its reality. Promises do not result in certainty; certainty exists only in myth. Promises can only be trusted, believed in; the journey toward the fulfillment of the promise involves faith, not sight (Hebrews 11). This text describes the first of a number of such journeys into alien and dangerous territory for Israel, away from the land of promise. Israel’s way of being in the land often
appears this way; it will not be otherwise for many another sojourning community of faith.

7. Some have suggested that the absence of reference to God by Abram should be important in evaluating his actions; he should have appealed to or shown confidence in divine help as he faced this dilemma. This direction of thought does not prove helpful. Characters in Genesis often make decisions and pursue actions without specific reference to God, and without being judged for it. In fact, Abram’s actions here meet with no little success and wealth (v. 16).

Humanly devised strategies are not in and of themselves out of order; in fact, “the narrator presents his character in a world where natural crises arise with no relation to the divine, and where the person of faith makes independent decisions in response to them.”100 It ought not to be thought that Abram’s actions entail taking the divine promises into his own hands; that would be a docetic way of viewing God’s way of working in the world. Moreover, the alternative could be viewed as tempting God to provide miracles (Exod 17:1-7) or an unreal divine protection plan of some sort. The narrative speaks not one word of Abram’s faith in God or lack thereof; it centers on the way he handles a problem in daily life, with all of its complexities and ambiguities.

8. Given the correspondence between act and consequence, one might expect the plagues as an appropriate response (see Exod 11:1; 1 Kgs 15:5; Isa 53:4). Both act and consequence occur within the sphere of creation; an unnatural relationship leads to disease. The consequence inherently follows the deed. Yet the text does not present a deistic process; God midwifes the consequences. A contemporary restatement of such divine action should call on the fuller language of the nature of the divine involvement evident in other biblical texts: “[You] have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity” (Isa 64:7; cf. Rom 1:24-32); “I am going to bring disaster on this people,/ the fruit of their schemes” (Jer 6:19; cf. 21:14). God delivers Pharaoh into the hands of his own iniquity, the fruit of which is disease.

One might well wonder about the fairness of this effect, given both Abram’s success and Pharaoh’s unwitting activity. Abram has occasioned this problem, as Pharaoh discerns (v. 18). He blames Abram, not Abram’s God! He puts the blame right where it belongs (and only Pharaoh does so). But the workings of the moral order do not discriminate between those who commit sins knowingly or unknowingly. This has been true generally throughout human history. People do experience great disasters in life “through no fault of their own.” They also experience great benefits.

GENESIS 13:1-18, ABRAM AND LOT
Link to:
Bracketed by an itinerary (vv. 1-4, 18), this text (mostly J) includes a quarrel narrative (vv. 5-13) and an oracle of promise (vv. 14-17). Verse 1 serves as a hinge verse. This report of Abram and his family leaving Egypt and settling in the land again mirrors later events. What Abram does, his descendants will do; he anticipates Israel’s history in his own life. This takes its most concrete form in the promises of land and posterity in vv. 14-17. Jacob’s journey from Bethel to Hebron in chap. 35 replicates Abram’s and links both patriarchs to these important centers in later Israel and Judah.

The author has included some ethnological features in the story inasmuch as Lot is the progenitor of the Moabites and the Ammonites (19:37-38), peoples often at odds with Israel (Deut 2:9-19; 23:3-4). Lot’s “separation” anticipates that of Ishmael and other sons of Abraham (25:1-18)

and Esau (36:6-8), and continues that evident more generally in the table of nations (10:32). This story works as an integral part of the larger story of Lot continued in chaps. 14 and 18–19, though it probably never existed apart from an Abramic context.

13:1-4. Verses 1-4 are ordered in terms of Israel’s early history. Abram’s going up (hl[ (Alâ) from Egypt presents language used of Israel (Exod 13:18); note also the belongings, in detail (12:35-38). In both cases, Egypt has willingly enabled this prosperity (12:36). Abram’s journeying in “stages” toward the promised land (and the tents) mirrors the exodus and wanderings (17:1; Num 10:12). Lot’s being “with him” with “flocks and herds” recalls Exod 12:38. When Lot compares the Jordan valley to “the land of Egypt,” the wilderness murmurings come to mind (Exod 16:3; see below), as does the strife (hbyrm murîbâ, used only for the murmurings; Exod 17:7). Israel encounters the descendants of Lot along the way (Deut 2:9-19). The references to Bethel and Ai (v. 3) and to Canaanites (v. 7; cf. 12:6), as well as the theme of strife, call to mind the early narratives in Joshua, albeit initially without violence (cf. chap. 14; cf. also vv. 14-15 and the language for the land in Deut 3:27). The repeated language concerning Abram’s “beginnings” (vv. 3-4) in the land links this family to this land from the start. Neither Lot nor Sarai should be evaluated negatively in view of their absence in v. 4 (or in 12:7-8).

13:5-13. Strife arises between the families of Abram and Lot (vv. 7-8 speak of strife between groups, only potentially between the individuals) because “their possessions were so great that they could not live together” (v. 6; note the repetition). Other groups no doubt intensified such tension (v. 7; cf. 26:12-22), reference to which helps explain why the land is already too small for Abram’s family.

Abram takes the initiative to settle the intrafamilial squabble. The explicit motivations are twofold: (1) They are brothers (kinsmen) and hence should not be quarreling (see Ps
133:1); (2) an interest in peace: “Let there be no strife between you and me” (v. 8). The herdsmen extend the family unit. Abram’s enlightened self-interest maybe a third reason. This separation would probably lead to greater prosperity, as all would have recognized. Abram makes the first move, given his seniority; it entails no evaluation of Lot (in view of 12:7, the story does not imply that Lot was Abram’s heir).

Abram’s resolution creates family separation (the verb occurs in vv. 9, 11, 14), with each group occupying different territories. Historically, quarreling among nomads over pastures and wells for their cattle was commonplace in that era (see chaps. 21; 26), and it was common for families to separate (see 10:5, 32). Hence, one ought not think of either Lot or Abram as especially quarrelsome, as if different temperaments would have enabled them to live together. The text does not blame either person, or even regard separation as unfortunate; it works as a responsible way of responding to crowded conditions. The criterion for evaluation should be whether the act helps to achieve peace and well-being.

Abram allows Lot to choose between two lands (given Abram’s settlement in Hebron and v. 11, the axis seems to be east-west, though some think it to be north-south). This ploy appears magnanimous, but is it? Too many unresolved questions remain. Did Abram have a sense for the choice Lot might make? He may not have wanted the land that Lot was apt to choose. Or was he tired of strife and willing to take anything for the sake of peace? Did Abram know what the implications of Lot’s choice might be? Does he know about Sodom, and if so, does he set up Lot to fail (v. 13)? That Lot thinks through his reasons rather than talking them through relieves Abram of some responsibility for the choice, but his motivations remain ambiguous.

Some think that Abram puts the promise in jeopardy: If Lot had chosen the other portion of land, the promise would have failed. This seems problematic for at least three reasons: (1) Given what became of Lot, his decision could hardly be “right.” (2) On the basis of 12:7, Abram does not know what “this land” includes. (3) The promised land does not become co-extensive with either of these options. Verse 9 (“the whole land”) and vv. 14-15 (what Abram sees includes what Lot saw, more than the “Canaan” of v. 12) show that the choices of both Lot and Abram were included within the land promised at this point, though Lot journeys to the eastern edge.

Lot’s silence appears striking. Yet, v. 10 reports his thoughts regarding the choice Abram has put before him. What are the crucial factors in his decision? Some say that Lot was drawn by the beauty of the land and his own greed. But this explanation works too simplistically. What Lot sees occasions his choice, but so also does other knowledge he has regarding the garden of the Lord (see 2:8; Isa 51:3) and the land of Egypt.

If it were like the Garden of Eden, why would that be a bad choice? There can be no going back to Eden; but even more, v. 13 makes clear that Sodom is no Eden. Lot does not perceive accurately the reality of things. His “seeing” provides too limited a
perspective (see 3:5). Regarding Egypt, the links to Exodus point the way. The issue focuses on Egypt as a garden, from which Lot has recently returned (13:1; cf. Deut 11:10). In view of Israel’s wandering in the wilderness begging to return to Egyptian flesh pots, Egypt represents a desire for a pre-redemption state of affairs. Likeness to Egypt connects with the later language of “outcry” about Sodom (18:21; 19:13; cf. Exod 3:7-9); note also Abram’s identification of a problem in Egypt (12:11-13), of which Lot would have been aware. The narrator’s comments about Sodom (vv. 10, 13) say something about Lot’s choice, rather than simply anticipating a later aspect of the story. Lot’s ethical-theological perspective creates the problem. While this perspective does not determine how Lot will respond within his new locale, his behavior in chap. 19 suggests he begins to take on the character of his new environment. The reference to “eastward” may link up with Abraham’s sons by Keturah (25:6) rather than with Adam, Eve, and Cain (3:24; 4:16).

13:14-18. Verses 14-15, 17 consist of a repeated promise of land, enclosing a promise of posterity (v. 16). The dust image relates to the land in which Abraham lives; it provides a traditional image for an unimaginably large number (a new emphasis from 12:1-3; see 15:5; 28:14). The promise to Abram comes as a direct, unconditional proclamation. It extends the promise that appears in 12:7, with a new word about perpetuity. Three factors contribute to its reiteration: (1) It signals another key transition in Abram’s journey. The promise stands just as clearly after Abram’s Egyptian sojourn as before. This anticipates what the situation will be after the next Egyptian sojourn. Generally, the promises are repeated so often and in such variety over the course of chaps. 12–50 in order to assure readers from later generations, perhaps especially exiles, that God’s promises still stand, no matter the experience.

(2) Lot’s decision makes necessary greater precision regarding the extent of the promised land. The promise includes Lot’s land (hence his departure?)! The decision by Lot may be a division within the promised land; in some sense the family of Abram remains intact within this land. The promise does not express a divine approval of Abram’s treatment of Lot; his conduct toward Lot remains much too ambiguous.

(3) The author uses legal language for the transfer of property. Abram lifts up his eyes, looks around, and walks through the land. These actions are probably a legal way of concretely laying claim to something (cf. Lot in vv. 10-12; Josh 1:3; 24:3). They also highlight the fact that heavenly visions are related to earthly realities—i.e., an actual piece of real estate. God thereby transfers the land to Abram; it is actually given to him. The text does not describe simply a promise of what will belong to Abram’s descendants, but a gift now in place (the NRSV has future tense in v. 17; the NIV is closer to the mark with its “I am giving”). This may explain Abram’s inclusion in the promise at this point; only his descendants were in view in 12:7.

Abram follows through on God’s instructions in a somewhat oblique way as the narrator reports his journey to Hebron (cf. Jacob in chap. 35; Deut 11:24). Abram “moves his tent” (as did Lot, vv. 12, 18) and settles near a stand of trees, where he (unlike Lot) builds an altar—his third!—in the open air, not at a sanctuary. Mamre, near Hebron, is not
mentioned outside of Genesis. The text attests to the importance of this area with Abraham’s later purchase of land for a burial place (chap. 23).

Lot begins life in the land from essentially the same point as Abram, recipient of the blessings of God in great bounty. What will the two individuals now make of the blessings they have received?

REFLECTIONS

1. This text harks back to Genesis 1–11. The language of “beginning” and the declaration “Abram called on the name of the LORD” (v. 4; cf. 12:8; 4:26) recall creational texts. Note also the strife between “brothers” (cf. vv. 8, 11 with 4:8-11) and the explicit reference to the “well watered . . . garden of the LORD” (v. 10; cf. 2:6). Abram’s well-being and wealth and his settlement in the promised land constitute a claim that basic creational intentions are being realized (see Exod 3:8).

The author uses the word evil ([r ra(, cf. 2:9) for the first time since the flood (v. 13; cf. 6:5; 8:21), and the root afj (hattA , “sin[ner]”) for the first time since 4:7. The Sodomites are the first historical people described in this negative way and to experience the destruction (tjv sht ) of the divine judgment as a result (v. 10; cf. 6:12-17; 9:11, 15). The author points to continuity with the primeval period. The language of sin/evil/destruction occurs only in these texts in the Abraham cycle. Whatever lack of trust in God that Abram or his family exhibit in these chapters, the writer never uses the language of sin and evil to describe it (see 20:9).

This positive/negative reference back to chaps. 1–11 indicates that the ancestral stories have been placed within a creational matrix and are to be interpreted through the lens provided by the opening chapters of Genesis. This means not only that God’s creational activity manifests itself in the life of this family, but also that the forces that make for evil and sin hover near and threaten its future (see 4:7). Israel lives in a world in which the forces of evil are very much a reality; Lot’s being drawn into that orbit of life serves as a reminder of negative possibilities for the people of God and the importance of the choices they make. At the same time, these texts look forward to a reclamation of what God has created through Abram’s family.

2. The reference to Sodom and Gomorrah (v. 10) also emphasizes the drastic change in the ecology of the area within Abram’s lifetime (see chap. 19). Zoar also anticipates this change (see 19:22-23, 30). In some sense the Sodom story, begun here, continues the history of the interweaving of human choices and cosmic effects sketched in Genesis 3–8. Lot’s beautiful land will become an ecological disaster, which the author relates implicitly to the wickedness of Sodom (v. 13). Verse 10 (which assumes readers know the Sodom story) does not imply that Lot moves into a situation already doomed before his arrival, but suggests a link between his decision and the future of the area. What
characterized humankind as a whole has intruded into the very heart of the family chosen by God to reclaim that creation. It should remind the community of faith that the choices its members make with respect to the land and economic issues have a potential ecological impact on God’s blessings of the land.

3. The blessings God showers on people create problems as well as possibilities. The families of Lot and Abram have been blessed with many possessions, but the blessing provides the occasion for strife and separation. A situation of material well-being does not necessarily mean that life will go well; it raises its own set of problems. What people do with their blessings will determine whether they remain blessings or become curses. The text gives a strong premonition of what will happen to Lot’s choice. At the same time, the promise to Abram includes Lot’s land (vv. 14-15); thus he does not stand outside the reach of God’s special blessing (see 14:14). Even more, Abram’s land is also potentially within reach of a Sodom and Gomorrah experience. Israel will later be visited with judgments that are described in such terms (see chap. 19).

4. Westermann suggests that this text stands over against later Israelite ways of using war as a way of settling disputes; Abram shows a different way, achieving peace without violence. “The narrative of Abraham, who brought a dispute to peaceful solution by personal renunciation, still spoke across the era of Israel’s wars; it was a pointer to another way of solving a conflict. The promise of a king of peace had a predecessor.”103 If this theological background can be assumed, then one might extend it to include an implicit critique of the Joshua parallels noted above. In any case, chap. 14 makes clear that Abraham was not a pacifist.

5. “Forever” language occurs for the first time with the land (see 17:8; 48:4), linked to a countless posterity. This language does not carry the sense of eternity, however, but indefiniteness into the future. This motif should be tied to such issues as who are the heirs of the Abrahamic promises, especially in view of Romans 4. While the gift of land remains always in place, disloyal recipients can remove themselves from the sphere of fulfillment (see 22:15-19; 26:5).

GENESIS 14:1-24, ABRAM AND MELCHIZEDEK
Link to:

COMMENTARY

This chapter stands among the most difficult in the book of Genesis, evident not least in the unusual number of its unique or rare words and phrases. Scholars have not been able
to identify all of these persons and places. To the extent that they are known, and may be set in the second millennium BCE, they are not simply to be taken at face value, but have some typological significance. Moreover, the portrayal of Abram as a military leader stands in some tension with the rest of the cycle (see 23:6). The historical basis of the story remains difficult to discern.104 The chapter derives from several traditions, but the component parts are usually not associated with the pentateuchal sources (occasionally J, as part of a Lot-Abram tradition). The silence regarding Abram in vv. 1-11 has often led to their separation from vv. 12-24, set entirely within the land of Canaan. Within the latter, vv. 18-20 interrupt reference to the king of Sodom and are associated commonly with Davidic/Zion traditions. While probably originally unrelated, the three segments in the chapter have been verbally and thematically integrated into a broader story by an editor.105

Regarding form, vv. 12-24 may stem from an old hero story about Abram, similar to liberation stories from the period of the judges. Verses 18-20 may have been added as a midrash to link David and Jerusalem with Abram. Verses 1-11 are a report of a military campaign, though with few details; it may have been non-Israelite in origin, perhaps Babylonian. The dating (vv. 4-5) and other stylistic features accord with royal inscriptions from the ancient Near East. Dialogue comes into play only in the aftermath of the entire affair (vv. 21-24).

An editor has integrated this chapter into Abram’s story for several reasons: (1) It belongs to a larger pattern wherein Abram mirrors the early history of Israel in his own life, especially the conquest of the land (see below). (2) It serves as an integral part of the larger story of Lot and Abram. (3) The kings’ responses prepare us for the response of God in chap. 15. (4) It gives Israel a role in the world of nations, which attests to God as creator. While the chapter may well exalt Abram “as a great and powerful prince who encounters victoriously the united kings of the great kingdoms of the east,”106 it also says something about Israel. God’s call to Abram (12:1-3) has a purpose that spans the globe. This chapter and the table of nations (10:1-32) have many links; together they enclose chaps. 11–13, placing Israel’s beginnings through Abraham within a universal context.

This redaction involves Israel’s self-understanding, not least within a probable exilic provenance, when the Abrahamic tradition receives renewed attention (Isa 41:8; 51:2). While one concern may be to “awaken a glorious past which opened broader horizons to those currently humiliated,”107 the focus should be placed on mission rather than on national self-aggrandizement.

14:1-16. Verse 1 presents names and places that are otherwise unattested (Shinar is Babylon, see 10:10; 11:2). Also, we know of no such international coalition, apparently from the Mesopotamian region. Whatever the historical basis, this coalition could be viewed as a gathering of forces that endangers Israel’s future in the land.

The names of the five kings of the Pentapolis in the region of the Dead Sea (v. 2) remain unidentified. The five cities occur together only here (four appear in 10:19 and Deut
in the report of events (vv. 10-11) only Sodom and Gomorrah appear (as in chap. 19). Scholars have been unable to locate the valley of Siddim, but it must be near the Dead Sea. The author depicts Abram as a Hebrew (v. 13), probably to distinguish his people from the others mentioned.

The eastern kings (v. 1) go to war against the Pentapolis (vv. 2-3), which had rebelled after twelve years of subjugation (v. 4). On their way to putting down that rebellion (described in vv. 8-12), they conquer six peoples in the area (vv. 5-7), who may also be participating in a general rebellion against the eastern kings. The first three are original inhabitants of the land, described in legendary terms as giants (Deut 2:10-12, 20); the next three are well-known. The land of two of these six peoples had been promised to Abram (15:18-20). The reference to Kadesh recalls a stopping place of the Israelites in the Negeb (Num 20:1), in which area the Amalekites were also subdued by the Israelites (Exod 17:8-16; Num 13:29). The reference to the Amorites seems unusual in that it refers to a city near the Dead Sea (see 2 Chr 20:2) rather than a region (Num 21:13; Deut 1:27, 44). Abram is allied with some Amorites (14:13)!

The reference to the “four kings against five” (v. 9) suggests something of the power of the four; this reference highlights Abram’s later victory against those four kings (vv. 14-16). The plight of the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, mentioned in vv. 10-11, may anticipate chaps. 18–19, as does the reference to the geology of the valley of Siddim. Also, the fleeing to the hills anticipates what happens to Lot (19:17-20, 30).

In conquering the Pentapolis, the eastern kings capture people and possessions, including Lot, and leave the area. When Abram hears this report, he takes his trained men, joins forces with other “allies,” pursues the kings to the vicinity of Damascus, and brings back all that had been captured, including Lot. In effect, Abram thereby assumes control over the promised land.

Verse 14 provides the reason for Abram’s entrance into this perilous situation: He acts on behalf of Lot, who remains very much a part of the family in spite of chap. 13. The story here moves from the world of nations to a single individual. Lot’s fate moves Abram to act against the armies of four major nations!

The reference to the wickedness of Sodom (13:13) hangs over this story. Just as Abram would later intercede for these cities for the sake of the righteous in them (18:22-33), so also here he risks his life in ways that will benefit them. Abram centers his efforts on Lot’s freedom, but in the process he liberates “great sinners.” The move from Sodom and Gomorrah to just Sodom in 14:10-17 (as in 13:10, 13) shows that Lot’s domicile is clearly in view.

In this military exploit Abram forms a coalition with non-Hebrews (vv. 13, 24). Living in community means cooperating with other families. These allies join Abram’s trained
group of 318, “born in his house” (14:14). The latter are dedicated and trained persons who serve the family of Abram. In view of this text (see also 15:2; 17:12-13, 23, 27; 24:2), Abram’s household appears large, perhaps several thousand with women and children, although historically Abram’s retinue was probably somewhat smaller.

14:17-24. When Abram returns from battle, the king of Sodom meets him (vv. 17, 21-24), soon joined by the king of Salem (vv. 18-20) in the King’s Valley, of uncertain location but probably near Jerusalem. They respond in different ways to the liberation. Their appearance together, although probably not original, invites comparison. Yet, the king of Sodom has reaped too much negative comment from commentators; inasmuch as he appears with Melchizedek, the reader ought not adjudge his response in an isolated way.

The king of Salem, Melchizedek (vv. 18-20), also serves as a priest of God Most High (El Elyon). He brings Abram food and drink, blesses him in the name of God Most High, the Creator, and blesses Abram’s God for delivering Abram. These verses give a theological interpretation of the previous events.

Melchizedek is a mysterious figure, mentioned elsewhere only in Ps 110:4 (a royal psalm) and Hebrews 5–7, where the author interprets him in messianic terms. His name, similar to the Canaanite king Adonizedek (Josh 10:1), probably means “my king is salvation [righteousness].” His priest/king status may mean that the Canaanite kingship was understood as a sacral/political office, an understanding not foreign among Israel’s kings (see Ps 110:4).

These verses may be traced to Davidic-Solomonic apologists, when relationships with the pre-Israelite leaders of Jerusalem (i.e., Salem; see Ps 76:2) were important. They sought to anchor new forms of royal/temple practice in Abrahamic times in order to legitimize them, perhaps in view of questions raised about “new” practices associated with the Davidic regime.

The priestly name Zadok (2 Sam 8:17; 15:24-35) also derives from this root; he was a pre-Israelite Jerusalem priest associated with David. His descendants, the Zadokite priestly line, were linked with the Davidic dynasty through the centuries. Abram’s encounter with Melchizedek may have been understood as legitimizing the Zadokite priesthood.

In view of these links, ancient readers may have viewed Melchizedek as a precursor of both the royal and the priestly lines in the Davidic empire. Melchizedek is a priest of El Elyon, God Most High. Elyon is probably an epithet rather than a name (it is usually translated “Most High,” see the NRSV footnote). El occurs as the general word for “deity” throughout the ancient Near East (Elyon was also used outside of Israel). The two words occur together elsewhere only in Ps 78:35, but Elyon appears in parallel with El
Melchizedek’s bringing of bread and wine, intended to refresh Abram after his battles, also had a religious import because Melchizedek was a priest. The meal cannot be separated from the blessing by Melchizedek that follows. It is (a) a blessing on Abram by God the Creator. Melchizedek thus exercises a truly mediatorial function. An outsider blesses Abram (cf. Balaam, Num 24:1); he does not do the blessing. (b) It blesses God in direct address; this is an act of praise and thanksgiving for their deliverance from a common enemy. In both cases, the blessing increases power and renown; it bestows strength on Abram from God and fosters an increase of God’s renown in the world. Praise is always a word to God and a word about God; it witnesses to God and thereby increases the divine renown in the world (see Exod 18:10, also spoken by a nonchosen one in the wake of an experience of salvation). The text sets both dimensions of blessing in Israel’s later worship during the time of Abram.

The tithe Abram gives to Melchizedek refers to the spoils; Abram leaves the other 90 percent with the king of Sodom, except for what the young men take (v. 24). Abram thereby gratefully acknowledges what Melchizedek has proclaimed to him on behalf of God and implicitly recognizes the legitimacy of Melchizedek’s priesthood of the same God whom Abram worships. The OT mentions the tithe elsewhere only in connection with regular worship practices; hence we may infer that it functions here as part of the larger ritual of meal and blessings.\(^{108}\) In this typical exchange, the priest gives the blessing and the worshiper responds. Tithing serves as an act of worship, not a military-political settlement. This account may legitimize later worship practices by rooting them in the story of Abram (cf. Jacob’s vow of a tithe in 28:22).

Verse 17 introduces the king of Sodom, but then he drops into the background after Melchizedek’s arrival. The two kings have different agendas. The king of Sodom represents the cities liberated by Abram. With worship completed, he generously indicates that Abram should keep the recaptured goods, but the persons (such as Lot) are to be returned. The king focuses on the disposition of the booty (v. 21), a major portion of which was Lot’s (vv. 11-12, 16). The problem of who should keep the spoils of war troubled Israel at various times (see Joshua 7), though here it is a matter of getting their own goods back.

The issue here is not simply whether Abram will take the spoils, but whether he will take Lot’s goods and use them (and that of others) for gaining hegemony in Lot’s land, a matter that had just been settled (13:6-12). In some sense, this discussion recapitulates chap. 13: Abram refuses an explicit opportunity to invest himself in Lot’s land. Abram would thereby have become rich at Lot’s expense and complicated his relation to Lot’s land (e.g., he would have been obligated to the king of Sodom; cf. Gideon, who refuses to accept the offer of kingship for himself, Judg 8:22-23). Abram’s refusal also gives his later intercession on behalf of Sodom a higher level of credibility. Abram refuses to go back on his agreement with Lot. His refusal depends on an oath, sworn to God Most
High, the Creator, that he would not take anything, not even a thread or a shoestring (the smallest items). Abram did let his allies take their share, however.

This text, then, does not simply focus on Abram’s choosing not to enrich himself, but centers on an issue of justice—his own agreement with Lot. The author presented Abram’s behavior as a model for later Israelite leaders (see 1 Kings 21).

REFLECTIONS

1. As with chaps. 12–13, this chapter also mirrors a subsequent period of Israel’s history: the land settlement, the judges, and the Davidic empire.

The six peoples listed in 14:5-7 (from the region around the Pentapolis of 14:2, 8) are among those encountered by Israel on its journey to Canaan. For the four kings (14:1, 9)—representing the world powers known from that era—to have conquered these peoples means gaining control of routes and lands that are integral to Israel’s later movement into the promised land. Abram, in conquering the kings, not only frees the peoples there, but clears that region of powerful outside forces. More basically, Abram, as military leader, embodies later Israel. In effect, Abram takes over the promised land by conquest!

We have noted the formal similarity of this story with those of the judges. In this way Abram becomes a savior figure for Israel. Continuities with the Gideon story are especially strong. The 300 men of Gideon (Judg 7:7) face a situation not unlike that encountered by Abram’s 318 men, and they effect comparable liberation. Moreover, the link between Abram and Melchizedek anticipates later relationships between David and the Jebusites of Jerusalem (Psalm 110; 2 Sam 5:6-10); compare also David’s campaign against the Amalekites (1 Samuel 30). The covenant in chap. 15 occurs now with good reason. Abram’s own history also parallels that of David.

2. In Abram’s military action against the four kings, a solitary individual comes into view: Lot. For Abram, the individual does not get lost amid all the movements of kings and armies. His actions could be ascribed to human foolishness, but Abram’s concern for his nephew reaches beyond simple common sense or a careful calculation of possible gains and losses. Moreover, when it comes to the disposition of the booty, Abram remains true to his agreement with Lot and returns his goods.

Moreover, Abram does not pursue a strategy of rescuing only Lot from among those captured. He acts in such a way as to liberate all captives from Sodom and Gomorrah, apart from an assessment of whether they deserved it, or whether their behaviors up to this point would justify the risk. This action links up with Abram’s intercession on behalf of these cities in chap. 18.
3. The author describes Abram’s group almost entirely in the language of the family. The story pits family against nation. When combined with the focus on Lot, family interests take priority over those of nations and kings. For the sake of the family, it may be necessary to challenge efforts made by national forces. Peace and war are matters that affect nations because they deeply affect families. It is for the sake of the family that Abram finally makes his decisions regarding war and peace.

This text presents issues of war and peace not as matters for chosen people only; all who oppose the subjugation of others (e.g., v. 24) become involved, whether they are people of God or not. God the Creator has an impact on the lives of “outsiders” so that they work toward the peace and well-being of communities not their own. The “goodness” of the creation as stated by God in Genesis 1 manifests itself in the lives of communities outside those who have been specifically called and chosen.

4. Although v. 20 attests that God is effectively engaged in this conflict, the text offers no reference to divine intervention (or speaking). The report of the battle recalls only Abram’s abilities as a military strategist and leader. Hence, the battle involves multiple (divine and human) agencies. Nonetheless, Melchizedek ascribes the victory to God. In fact, the battle is not simply a victory, but a rout. The reader receives the image of kings and armies tumbling all over themselves to get away (the same language describes the victories of these kings in vv. 5, 7)—no doubt designed to impress the reader with the boldness and cleverness of Abram in defeating a much larger force and rescuing the kidnapped persons and their possessions. Abram, as a Gideon-like figure, comes through in larger-than-life proportions. Although Abram’s talents and skills are not to be played down, God makes the victory possible.

5. El Elyon probably carries the sense of “God of gods.” While Melchizedek’s God language is not new to Abram—indeed he claims it as his own in the oath he swore prior to his encounter with Melchizedek (v. 22)—he also claims that Yahweh is the name of El Elyon. Each worships the same God; even more, Melchizedek confesses their God as both creator (v. 19) and redeemer (v. 20). But Abram knows that the name of this God of gods is Yahweh.

This narrative confesses God the Creator, maker of heaven and earth (hnq qAnâ; see Exod 15:16; Deut 32:6; Ps 139:13), as the liberator. Earlier confessional language for the Creator, evident in both Abram’s earlier oath (v. 22) and Melchizedek’s blessing (v. 19), appears in doxological service for this moment of salvation. The God confessed as creator of heaven and earth (not simply of human beings) becomes central to the faith of principals from this early period, including both Abram and Melchizedek; the narrator does not introduce a later theological development. The fact that both men worship God with this language also indicates that ancient Israelites presumed some commonality in
faith to exist between the progenitors of the later Israelites and Canaanites. This shared belief, too, witnesses to the work of God the Creator in both communities; even more, it is witness to the knowledge of God the Creator, indeed a Creator who liberates, outside of the chosen family.

6. The theme of blessing relates to its use elsewhere in Genesis. In 12:1-3, God promises blessing to Abram; Melchizedek helps to fulfill that promise, mediating the divine blessing to him. Although Abram earlier experienced God’s blessing in his life, Melchizedek explicitly does what God has promised to do. Moreover, he thus recognizes Abram as the blessed one of God, even though Melchizedek stands outside that family. Consistent with 12:1-3, Abram has been a blessing to Melchizedek (and others) in and through what he has done in ridding the country of its predators. The text presents a triangular repetition of blessing, from God to Abram to Melchizedek (representing the nonchosen), and then back again from Melchizedek to Abram to God. Significant religious links are thus made between Israel and at least some elements of the Canaanite populace.

7. Why would Abram make the disposition of the booty a matter of oath to God (v. 22)? We have suggested that Lot’s presence explains much here, though in the context of other factors. Some look to Abram’s generosity of spirit, or a recognition that Sodom’s goods were not his to do with as he would, for Sodom was not the defeated one; it would be improper for the liberator to enrich himself at the expense of the liberated. Is there a concern here for the enrichment of the “church” at the expense of its liberated members? The Sodomites had just experienced deliverance; to take away from that experience by keeping all their goods would be to intrude on the salvific experience itself. It might even appear to make the liberation conditional upon receiving the gift! How religious leaders handle the issue of “giving” may obscure the graciousness of the saving experience.

8. Hebrews 5–7 depends more heavily on Ps 110:4 than on Genesis 14. Basically the argument runs like this: Abram (hence his descendant Aaron, father of the Levitical priesthood) acknowledged the primacy of Melchizedek and his priesthood through the giving of a tithe. Hence, Jesus Christ, who belongs to the priestly order of Melchizedek, reaches back beyond Aaron’s priesthood in typological (not historical) fashion. This establishes ancient, pre-Abrahamic, pre-Israelite priesthood roots for the Christly priesthood, thereby declaring its preeminence, and so Hebrews uses Melchizedek not unlike David and Solomon did.

GENESIS 15:1–21, THE COVENANT WITH ABRAM

<Page 443 Ends><Page 444 Begins>
From a source-critical perspective, vv. 1-6 have at times been considered the beginning of the E source, with much of vv. 7-21 assigned to J. In recent years, scholars have advanced many differing proposals regarding the history of this material, but no consensus has emerged. An ancient author may have woven a narrative around three originally independent God speeches. Links with the Davidic tradition seem particularly prominent, and suggest one stage for the material. The final redaction presents perceptible unity, centering on promise, possibly with an exilic provenance (cf. Lev 26:44-45).

This chapter differs from the usual ancestral story, being more like 18:16-33 or chaps. 1–3; therefore, it could be called a theological narrative. The reader may discern movement within the chapter in the dialogue between God and Abram (the first recorded in the Abraham story), centering on key questions Abram raises regarding offspring and land. The two narrative segments (vv. 1-6, 7-21) have similar structures: divine promise (vv. 1, 7), Abram’s questioning (vv. 2–3, 8), and God’s response with reassuring words and deeds (vv. 4–5, 9–21). At another level, the chapter moves from Abram’s vision (vv. 1–11) to his sleep (vv. 12–21).

Some scholars identify this structure as the lament-salvation oracle pattern; however, each section begins with a divine promise. They are more like narratives in which a question or objection follows the promise (e.g., Judg 6:12-13). Hence, this text should be viewed more in terms of theological disputation (see 18:23-33). The text’s mood may reflect exilic discussions regarding divine promises.

15:1-5. The expression “the word of the LORD came” (vv. 1, 4), so common in the prophets, occurs only here in the Pentateuch (cf. Abraham as prophet in 20:7 and the link to Davidic promises in 2 Sam 7:4). This link to prophetic texts gives to the promises a special status; this is not “just another” divine word. That the word comes in a “vision” (see 46:2) reinforces this prophetic quality. Theophanies share similar formal features: the divine self-identification, the reassuring word not to fear, and the promise (see 26:24; 46:3). The vision may continue through v. 11.

The phrase “after these things” attests a close relation to the preceding narrative (see 22:1). This word provides God’s response to Abram’s actions in chap. 14, confirming the judgment of Melchizedek. The link between the identification of Yahweh as “shield” (@gm mAgen) in 15:1 and 14:20, where God Most High has “delivered” (miggen) Abraham, is especially important (for God as shield in Davidic contexts, see 2 Sam 22:3, 31, 36; Ps 144:2). Abram had refused any spoils, but God now sees to Abram’s “reward.” God promises that Abram will receive his “spoils” from

<Page 444 Ends><Page 445 Begins>
God (cf. v. 14; Psalm 132 for David; Isa 40:10). (The NIV has God as the reward, but no such image for God occurs elsewhere.)

The “reward” in v. 1 thus involves neither deliverance nor a promise of land or posterity (those have already been promised). In the context provided by chap. 14, God’s “reward” introduces a promise of spoils—the content of which is not made clear—in recognition of Abram’s faithful action on behalf of others, including the king and people of Jerusalem. The promises of offspring and land come later, not in view of what Abram has done, but in response to his questions.

God’s promise prompts Abram’s question in vv. 2-3 (“Lord GOD” is rarely used, and its import uncertain). In royal terms, Abram raises the question of dynasty: What good will spoils be, if I cannot pass them on to my children? (Cf. Davidic texts: 2 Sam 7:11-16; Ps 132:11-12, 17-18.) The question turns the issue from “reward” generally to an unfulfilled promise, God’s promise of offspring (12:7; 13:15-16). This impatience is repeated in v. 3, but now centered on “seed,” suggesting the depth of his concern; the focus of the verb—now in a statement rather than a question—has moved to what God has not given rather than to what God will give. The repetition about his servant may be designed to motivate God, as if to make sure God understands the implication of nonfulfillment: Eliezer will be Abram’s heir. Is the promise of offspring still in place? The text focuses not on whether there will be an heir (Eliezer of Damascus—a difficult Hebrew phrase—could be adopted), but whether the heir will be from Abram’s own line, a matter of great importance in that culture. What God had promised was “seed,” not simply an “heir.”

God speaks to Abram’s concerns, with “heir” repeated and word order designed to emphasize the point: No, Eliezer will not be your heir. Yes, one whom you will father will be your heir (see 2 Sam 7:12). Indeed, his “seed” will be as numerous as the stars in the sky. The stars are not a sign to Abram, but a rhetorical move to make a point about the promise in the face of his questions: God keeps promises (cf. Deut 1:10; 10:22 for fulfillment). The image does not center on power, but on stability and sheer numbers (note the repetition). This rhetorical shift from dust (13:16) to stars suggests stability and security in a way that dust does not (see Jer 33:20-26 for its reference to Davidic offspring; 31:35-37).

15:6. This verse is commonly cited, not least because of its prominent use in the NT (Rom 4:3, 20-24; Gal 3:6; James 2:23).

Unlike his response to the promise of v. 1, Abram believes God; i.e., he trusts in the one to whom his faith clings. Abram fixes his heart on God, rests back in the arms of the promise-giver. The narrator, and not Abram, states this, perhaps to move more naturally (from within the vision) into theological reflection. Here the narrator interprets Abram’s faith. This does not speak to the (need for such) faith in the narrator’s own time; Abram’s faith is not restricted to this later generation.

Abram’s faith was “reckoned to him as righteousness.” The verb for “reckon” likely has a cultic background wherein the priest formally declares that a gift has been properly
offered (Lev 7:18; 17:4). In response to Abram’s faith, God in effect functions as a priest, although outside of a worship setting, and formally declares that Abram is righteous (cf. Ps 106:31). Righteousness (hqdx zudAqâ) often involves doing justice to a relationship in which one stands (cf. 38:26; 18:23-26; 7:1); here it refers to what Abram becomes by virtue of God’s declaration in view of his faith. (Credit language [see NIV] is less than adequate because it suggests a divine keeping of account books.)

15:7-21. The author structures this section in a way similar to vv. 1-6. It begins with a divine self-identification: “I am the LORD who brought you [axy yAzA] from Ur of the Chaldeans” (v. 7; see 11:28). This language may also refer to the exodus, so that Abram’s journey anticipates Israel’s (see v. 14; Exod 3:7-10; 6:6-7; 20:2). God’s promise here focuses on the gift of a land, a creational goal—life in a land he can call his own.

Abram requests a sign, some concrete indication that this will be so (v. 8), to which God responds positively. While the question in v. 2 focuses on God’s giving, this question focuses on Abram’s knowing. God clearly responds to this new issue (v. 13): Know for certain (with infinite absolute verb, cf. 24:14). A key point: Abram’s knowing will come not only from what God says, but also from what God does.

God’s response to Abram’s question involves a rite, for which Abram must prepare. God, rather than the human being, goes through the rite and submits to its terms. While there are extra-biblical parallels to some of the details, Jer 34:18-20 provides the only biblical analogy, where participants walked between divided animals and thereby invoked death upon themselves should they be unfaithful to the terms of the covenant. Not a regular sacrificial act (animals used for sacrifice are specified, but too many elements of the sacrificial ritual are missing), it is a special rite for the formalization of a solemn oath or promise, which is what “making a covenant” entails in this context (v. 18). The promise works itself out as a ritual event, involving both word and deed.

God asks Abram to become involved in the preparation of the rite. The narrative focuses not simply on what God will say; the entire rite will constitute an answer to Abram. He goes beyond the divine directive (v. 10), suggesting that he is familiar with the rite. Note that Abram brings the animals directly to God (v. 10), so that we should think of the messenger of God in human form. We do not know why the birds were the only animals not divided, why the animals had to be three years old, or the meaning of v. 11. It does evoke some basic themes of the rite, involving a life-and-death matter. At the least, it stresses Abram’s vigilance and care in the preparation. An allegorical interpretation, where, for example, the birds of prey are foreign nations, perhaps Egypt, whom Abram drives away, seems strained in view of Jer 34:18-20.

The rite (vv. 12-19) begins at sunset (v. 12) and concludes in total darkness (v. 17). The darkness in v. 5 seems at odds with v. 12, but vv. 1-11 are visionary (so v. 1).
Abram falls into a deep sleep, with all dark and foreboding (see Job 4:12-16). Darkness appears integral to the rite, perhaps to shroud what God does. Such darkness symbolizes dreamlike seeing and knowing (cf. 28:10-22), which penetrates to the deepest recesses in Abram’s being.

God, symbolized by the smoke and fire, actually passes through the divided animals (v. 17). God here acts alone; this specifies the unilateral character of the promise. The deity takes on the only obligation in this covenant (royal grants in the ancient Near East are a possible parallel). God’s personal involvement constitutes the unusual character of the rite. In an act of self-imprecation, God in effect puts the divine life on the line, “writing” the promise in blood! “God’s swearing by his own self” refers to this promise (and 22:16; 24:7; 26:3; 50:24). The author uses this phrase because God cannot invoke a higher power regarding the penalty. In some sense Abram functions as a witness, because he is involved in the preparations. God’s “swearing” also alludes to promises to David (2 Sam 3:9; Pss 89; 100:4; 132:11) and to Noah (Isa 54:9).

Verses 13-16 are a divinely spoken word about the future, for Abram personally (v. 15) and his descendants (vv. 13-14, 16). Then, in conjunction with God’s passing through the divided animals (v. 17), the deity proclaims an unconditional promise of the land (vv. 18-21).

We may discern that vv. 13-16 (and not just vv. 18-21) are integral to Abram’s request expressed in the language of knowing (v. 13). The upshot of this prophetic word resides in v. 16b (the only proper name occurs here), because it explains the long delay before the fulfillment of the promise of v. 7. The sins of the Amorites (i.e., Canaanites) will not have “yet reached [their] full measure”; it takes time for sins to have their full effects (see Exod 20:5, note the reference to the fourth generation; Lev 18:24-25). Verses 13-16 involve the nations, as does chap. 14; God judges them, whether they oppress Israel (v. 14) or are iniquitous more generally (v. 16), and thereby delivers Abram’s descendants (this time with spoils) and enables them to have a home of their own.

The relationship between the 400 years of v. 13 (Acts 7:6; 430 years in Exod 12:40; cf. Gal 3:17) and the fourth generation of v. 16 remains uncertain and may reflect different traditions. The “generation” probably refers to a lifetime (more or less than 100 years, see 6:3; Ps 90:10; Isa 65:20). It could, however, refer literally to the fourth generation—namely, Jacob’s sons; they come back from a kind of exile (in Haran) and begin to settle in the land (cf. the “Amorites” in 48:22), a process not completed for centuries. Since “Egypt” does not appear in v. 13, the author does not appear concerned to speak about the future with precision. Hence, readers might apply the word to more than one life situation (fourth-generation language would work well for the exiles).

Abram himself will not see the land, and his descendants will do so only after considerable delay. Abram’s relationship to the land remains tied to a much larger divine
purpose than his own personal life. Because Abram knows that God will continue to be at work on behalf of the promise, he can die in peace after a full life and will “go to” his ancestors (see 25:8, “gathered to his people”; on Sheol, see 37:35). This personal note about a good life and death also responds to Abram’s question about knowing, for in some sense it prefigures that of his descendants (and that may be why v. 15 comes before v. 16). His descent into death will be the experience of his descendants as well. Unlike him they will return to the land, but Abram will receive a kind of immortality.

The ancestral promise, yet delayed in its fulfillment, will come to pass. Verses 18-21, which recollect an earlier moment in the rite (“on that day”), return to the basic promise in greater detail and in specific association with God’s commitment (v. 17). The narrative here returns to the beginning (v. 7) in its reiteration of the promise. This involves more than an inclusio; the situation at the end of this text has changed from the beginning. The promise depends decisively on the very nature of God; God has staked God’s very own life on the promise.

These boundaries are important to the people of God at various times in their history (cf. Deut 11:24; Josh 1:4; Isa 27:12). They extend from the Euphrates to the “Brook of Egypt” (not the Nile, but of uncertain location). That God has promised such a land, however, does not necessarily mean that they must possess every territory noted or at all times. Only with Solomon does the land even approach this size, and then not totally (1 Kgs 5:1, 4; 8:65). This list of ten peoples stands unique and in contrast with most OT lists, which have five to seven names enumerated; they all lived within a territory smaller than that envisaged in v. 18.

We do not hear Abram’s response to God’s unilateral promise. This may be because of the way God enables Abram’s knowing. The event functions at levels of consciousness deeper than in vv. 1-6. Yet, the point of this rite lies elsewhere. God’s response to Abram more than matches Abram’s faith in God (v. 6). God, in swearing by the divine self, does justice to the relationship with Abram and thereby shows forth the divine righteousness. Abram trusts, and God can be trusted. Abram’s faith is matched by God’s faithfulness.

REFLECTIONS

1. If our analysis of Genesis 12–14 is correct, wherein the later history of Israel from the descent into Egypt to the kingship of David is prefigured in Abram’s own life, then Genesis 15 caps that story off in its talk about covenant. The covenant with Abram prefigures the covenant with David. The latter exists in fundamental continuity with God’s commitments to Abraham; in the Davidic kingship, God’s promises to Abram find a renewed realization.

The covenant in these chapters parallels that of David. God chooses Abram (12:1-3); God chooses David (1 Samuel 16). God saves Abram from Egypt (12:10-20); God saves David from his enemies (2 Sam 5:24-25; 7:1). Abram worships God (12:7-8; 13:18); David worships as well (2 Sam 6:15-17). God establishes the covenant with both (15:18; 2 Samuel 7). We may discern a consistent order: election, deliverance, faith/worship,
covenant. God’s choosing and saving actions constitute the foundation of the covenant; God establishes the covenant with those who have faith, evidenced not least in worship. The covenant does not establish the relationship; it becomes a moment where God’s promises spoken to faithful ones carries an obligation for God.

Moreover, God’s “bringing out” Abram from one land to another (v. 7) prefigures more than exodus and land settlement. The prophets use similar language to speak of a new bringing out of Israel by God (Jer 16:14-15; 23:7-8; Ezek 34:13). Abram prefigures the return of the exiles from that same far country to the land promised them. The specification of boundaries in vv. 18-21 proclaims that God’s promises concerning this expanse of land are still in place (cf. Lev 26:44-45).

2. Regarding Abram’s “reward,” God expresses concern about the faithfulness of human beings, since they affect the future of God’s intentions for the world. What people do counts for God as well as for the world. Hence, reward ought not to be thought of in simplistic terms, a “stars in my crown” mentality. The matter remains interrelational, not unlike the role that recognitions play among human beings. God, too, recognizes the contributions people make toward realizing God’s plans for the world.

3. Abram believes in God without having any concrete evidence that God’s promise will come to pass (Heb 11:1, 8-12). Abram’s faith (v. 6) has been enabled by what God has done in the previous verses. God’s word makes Abram’s faith possible, indeed creates faith; faith arises not from within him or by his own resources. Rather, God particularizes the promise for Abram by addressing the specific situation opened up by Abram’s question. Abram has expressed some very particular needs concerning the future of his family, and God responds directly to those questions. Not just any word from God will do; the promise of v. 1 did not issue in v. 6. God put the promise in relation to the need, and in a particular rhetorical fashion.

This way of speaking of Abram’s faith may be related to the context in which the passage was written. It could be the exile or any time of great difficulty for the Israelites’ faith. How can anyone believe the promises of God in such a time? Nothing in the present situation provides a reason to believe. The task for the proclaimer of promises is to link the promise to actual life situations using the most penetrating rhetorical images possible. One may so speak the promises that the hearer will come to believe that nothing is so difficult in the present circumstance as to prevent God from seeing them through to completion.

4. Upon reading v. 8, one may well ask, What has happened to Abram’s faith, so amply evident in 15:6? Should such faith be seeking signs? Evidently, believing and seeking signs do not necessarily stand over against each other (see Exod 3:11-12). It is not unnatural to faith, or unbecoming to the believer, that questions persist in the midst of
belief. Indeed, if the just-declared statement of righteousness indicates that the God-
Abram relationship exists in good order, then his question is appropriate.

5. In this context, covenant means a promise under oath, solemnly sworn, not an
agreement or contract, and the making (“cutting”) has reference to the rite with cut
animals. God unilaterally declares and swears to it at his own initiative. The promise
grants the land with specific boundaries to Abram’s descendants. Not a future gift, it is
now theirs (they are in a land that is “not theirs,” v. 13). God makes the covenant with
one who has faith.

God will never nullify this promise. It is by Yahweh, as God assumes obligation (and
hence not strictly “legal”). Yet, the covenant has been made with Abram, a person whose
faith has just been acclaimed, though not in a contractual sense. The relational element
cannot be divorced from the content of covenant. Making and keeping promises to
Abram entails a relationship of consequence, an ongoing attending to the promise as it
relates to the lives of Abram and his descendants. Yet, while the promise is everlasting,
God does not guarantee that every person or generation will participate in its fulfillment.
The promise always remains available for believers to cling to, knowing that God
remains available to fulfill it, but a rebellious generation may not live to see it. Faith does
not function as a condition for the giving of the promise, but one can, by unbelief, leave
the sphere of the promise. “Unconditional” promises do not make faithfulness irrelevant
(see chaps. 17; 22; Exodus 26:5).

6. When compared to 12:7 and 13:14-17, the divine oath constitutes the new reality in
this reiteration of the promise. God enters into that promise at a depth not heretofore
evident, at least from Abram’s perspective. This kind of divine involvement responds to
Abram’s

question! Abram thereby moves God to take steps to assure Abram of the irrevocable
nature of the promises. Abram should now “know” how deeply God has entered into this
commitment.

7. Some commentators have had difficulty conceiving of God as a participant in an oath
of self-imprecation; one’s view of God does affect one’s reading. However, that God
would swear that the animal’s fate would apply to God should the promises be broken is
the most natural, and the more difficult, reading of the rite. This should give the reader
pause before backing away from it. God commits to the promise at such a depth that God
considers an experience of suffering and even death. This reveals the depth of the divine
faithfulness to Abram and the divine willingness to become vulnerable for the sake of the
promise. This text should be associated with other passages about divine suffering (e.g.,
Hos 11:8).114 These levels of divine vulnerability resonate in the minds of Christians
because of a comparable move that God makes in the incarnation and at the cross. In that
event, God actually does enter into suffering and death on behalf of the promises. In
Jesus Christ, those possibilities are not only a potential divine move, but they become actual as well, and all for the sake of the promises.

8. In v. 16, the descendants of Abram will receive the land, not because of their own qualities of being or life, but because the sins of its present inhabitants will reach such proportions that they will be engulfed in their effects (see Deut 9:4-5; Lev 18:24-28; 1 Kgs 21:26). The relationship between sin and judgment means that sins do not necessarily have immediate deleterious effects. The judgment of God may work in an accumulative way, as a buildup of forces, and not as the result of a forensic divine act. Particularly in thinking about communities, it may take time for the effects to build up and overwhelm its perpetrators. The story of Sodom and Gomorrah may be considered the beginning of the fulfillment of this word, and the prophets did not hesitate to apply the very same principle to Israel itself. It invites reflection by the reader on the various communal contexts to which one belongs; how close might we be to experiencing the “completion” of our iniquities?

The text remains open regarding some details of these matters, given the virtual absence of proper names and the ambiguity regarding timing. If so, the “plan of God” language for this text can be used only in a general way as well. There is no effort to lay out the future with precision. As such, it opens up the text to generations of the people of God other than those of Abram. The text allows us to speak of comparable ways in which the people of God will experience life in the world, often as exiles and sojourners, oppressed and under just judgment. It also speaks to the way in which God will be involved in their lives, judging oppression and iniquity, delivering the people of God, and giving them a home in which to dwell.

9. God makes clear to Abram that there will be a delay in the fulfillment of the promise; 400 years is a long time. The story of God’s people during those centuries attests that God’s promises will move through dark and complex times. The people of God often want immediate fixes, instant gratification; this text might help teach the faithful to live with delay.

10. This chapter, particularly v. 6, is central to the apostle Paul (Romans 4; Galatians 3). For Paul, faith does not earn or merit righteousness. God’s gracious action preceded anything that Abram is or does, and the word announcing that gracious action creates Abram’s faith; at the same time, God’s word can be resisted. Abraham becomes the father of all who have faith (see Eph 2:8-9). God observes Abraham’s faith and declares Abraham to be righteous.

The Epistle of James uses this material for somewhat different reasons (2:18-24); he focuses not on faith but on response in life on the part of one who has faith. Faith should issue in a shape for life that corresponds to what God wills for the world. James draws on a common
understanding of righteousness: to do justice to the relationship in which one stands. Abraham’s works do justice to the relationship and thereby witness to his righteousness.

GENESIS 16:1-16, HAGAR AND SARAI
Link to:

COMMENTARY

Interest in this story has at times focused on the history of the Ishmaelites, bedouin tribes to the south and east of Canaan (see 25:12-18). More recent interest in Islam, which traces its religious heritage to Abraham through Ishmael, has renewed study in Ishmael’s heritage in this and related texts (17:15-25; 21:8-21). Whatever its history, the present narrative has been decisively shaped by theological interests and integrated within the story of Abraham. The story has often been identified with the J source (with Priestly framing elements).

In terms of form, scholars have described the story as a “conflict narrative,” centering on a conflict between two women, Sarai and Hagar.116 The nature of this conflict has been much debated in recent years, not least by feminist scholars, who have provided much insight into the text.117 At the same time, the conflict should be more broadly conceived in terms of the family of Abraham. This text must be placed within the whole of Genesis, which reveals, in contemporary terms, a highly dysfunctional family system in which individuals—both male and female—are caught up in swirls of dissension beyond their own making or ability to control. This text narrates, fundamentally, a family problem. Yet, because the story occurs in a patriarchal system, the males involved deserve special blame, and this does not go entirely unrecognized by the narrator.

In terms of structure and plot, the story begins with a statement of the problem, and in a highly compact way moves through various difficulties toward an ambiguous resolution. While a division might be made between vv. 1-6 and vv. 7-14 from the perspective of the history of traditions, the inclusio provided by the repeated word bear (dly yAlad ) in vv. 1-2 and 15-16 ties the chapter together into a unified whole. The chapter relates to what precedes by references to Egypt (12:10-20; 13:1, 10; 15:18) and the promise of a son—linking son with the blessing on nations. The text now shifts from a focus on land in chaps. 13–15 to a focus on a son in chaps. 16–21.

16:1-6. Sarai remains barren (see 11:30), and Abram has no children. The story moves quickly to Sarai’s strategy, as she (not Abram) takes the initiative to resolve the matter. The author does not mention previous discussions or the shame associated with childlessness in that culture; nor does Sarai raise a moral issue, as if she were being judged for something she did. She raises only a theological issue; she interprets her situation to mean that God has kept her from having children, whether such were actually the case (see 20:18; 25:21; 29:31; 30:2, 22). At the same time, she recognizes that God does not act alone, that human agency is important (“by her”; cf. 4:1;
17:16; 19:32; 30:3-4). Humans can thwart the will of God concerning progeny by their sexual practices (38:9-10).

Sarai certainly knows that God has promised Abram offspring (15:4), but not necessarily by her. At the same time, she wants to have children she can call her own. To accomplish this, she makes a self-sacrificing move. She not only shares her husband sexually, but allows Hagar to be a wife to Abram; 16:3 portrays a formal act on Sarai’s part. Ancient Near Eastern parallels show that this was common practice.118 Rachel and Leah take a similar initiative in 30:3-13, with God’s apparent approval (30:6, 18). Since Sarai’s strategy appears customary, she should not be condemned. Her decision stems not only from an interpretation of God’s action, so that “she must do as she does,”119 but from a recognition that God works through human agents.

Abram accedes to the plan, though without speaking. A problem arises when, after becoming pregnant with Abram’s child, Hagar’s attitude toward Sarai changes. The verb l’ilq (qAlal) describes her action (also used in 12:3 for contempt shown to Abram’s family), which would bring Hagar under the divine curse. Hagar somehow diminishes Sarai’s status in view of her new place as mother-to-be of Abram’s child (cf. Prov 30:23).

Hagar’s qAlal action certainly justifies Sarai’s sharp raising of the issue with Abram (v. 5). Rather than voice her objections to Hagar, she speaks to Abram, the husband of both of them, presumably with the authority in such matters (and 12:3 was spoken to him). In language from the legal sphere, she accuses Abram and gives a rationale; he bears responsibility for this distressful situation (see the NIV). It was within his power to stop this kind of treatment of Sarai and his to settle now, and God will be the judge of how he handles the issue. By so appealing to God, Sarai gives evidence of her own relationship with God.

Abram’s only speech in the chapter comes at this point (v. 6). Admitting no responsibility, he puts Hagar into Sarai’s hand (i.e., power), giving Sarai authority to do as she wills. Abram thus tips the balance in favor of Sarai, giving no apparent regard for the effect it might have on Hagar. Abram has not handled this conflict very well, to say the least. Sarai seeks no reconciliation with Hagar, but treats her harshly. Sarai acts strongly (hn[ (Anâ, vv. 6, 9, 11) against the Egyptian and invites comparison with Exodus texts, for the author uses this verb to describe Israel’s oppression by Egypt (15:13; Exod 1:11-12; Deut 26:6-7). Hagar, taking her future and that of Sarai and Abram’s child into her own hands, flees (see Exod 14:5) toward her home in Egypt (Shur is near the border). She prefers the dangers of the wilderness to continuing life in Abram’s household. Ironically, she thinks she can find more freedom in Egypt than among God’s chosen people! With this problem seemingly resolved, the issue of v. 1 seems to be front and center again, but not in this narrative. God remains focused on Hagar. Sarai and Abram
have sent Hagar away, not God. God appears on the scene on behalf of this oppressed one, as one day God would for oppressed Israel.

16:7-16. Out in the same wilderness where Israel would later wander, Hagar encounters the “angel of the LORD” (repeatedly introduced, vv. 7, 9-11; cf. Moses in Exod 3:2). This figure, better called a messenger, should not be confused with later angelic beings. The narrator’s report in v. 13 shows that Yahweh speaks to Hagar, and Hagar recognizes that she has seen God. This messenger is God in human form (cf. 21:17-19; 22:11-12, 15-16; 31:11, 13).120

Hagar’s partial reply to God’s inquiries (v. 8)—God does not predict her reply—suggests that she envisions no future; she can speak only of the past. God responds by focusing on the future. First, God directs Hagar to return to Sarai and to submit to her (Hagar’s return is not noted). Given her treatment of Sarai in view of 12:3, she needs to get this matter resolved. She will not find salvation in being freed from Sarai and Abram as yet (though in her faith she stands on her own).

Instead of following through on the curse, as a mechanical view of the moral order might suggest, God responds to her affliction and makes promises to her (vv. 10-12). In fact, God names Hagar’s affliction in exodus-like terms ((Anâ, v. 11). Unlike Abram and Sarai, God addresses her by name, and for the first time she speaks. God is present to her and draws her into conversation rather than reducing her to silence (vv. 8, 13).

The salvation Hagar receives focuses on the promise of a son. We can recognize the Abrahamic promises regarding offspring in v. 10 (13:16; 15:5), while in v. 11 we hear the familiar cadences of the annunciation in Isa 7:14. Although the oracle in v. 12 is more difficult, Hagar’s response remains positive (the narrator has a comparable view).121 Ishmael will be free, roving the wilderness (the “wild ass” is celebrated by God in Job 39:5-8), and he will not be submissive to oppressive people like Sarai and Abram. He will be frequently at odds with others, but such tension often occurs between sedentary and nomadic groups in that world (OT texts project similar difficulties for the other side of Abram’s family, too; cf. 25:23; 27:28-29, 39-40). He will live at odds with his kin (some translations [TNK] have him living “alongside”), but no OT text speaks of a fulfillment in these terms; such oracles are not interpreted as a precise shaping of the future (see 25:23).

Hagar will follow through on bearing the child for Abram; the possibilities for a future of nonoppression will thereby be opened up for her own family (see 21:13-21). While the reader might wish for a freer future for Hagar at this point, she moves with what has become possible in that situation, trusting in the word of God that the future will contain a new form of freedom. Salvation for Hagar must take the form of waiting, but she knows that God sees and hears the afflicted, and so she can rest in the knowledge that God keeps promises.122
Hagar’s response in v. 13 shows her not only as a trusting spirit but a person of faith. She recognizes the messenger as the voice of God, though he offers no word of self-identification (cf. 31:11-13). Moreover, she publicly confesses that God has come to her rescue (“You are El-roi”—that is, a God of seeing or a God who sees me). The last phrase in v. 13 presents difficulties, but at the least it speaks of a mutual seeing on the part of God and Hagar (so the NIV), and may include the idea of still living after having seen God (so the NRSV; cf. Exod 33:20).

Hagar’s new name for God presents a metaphor born of her experience of having been given a future and a hope, rather than an already existing name/epithet. This is not a “new” God who needs a name; the word to her from the messenger uses the name Yahweh (v. 11), as does the narrator (v. 13). Her confession focuses on a God who sees rather than a God who speaks. Her experience mirrors that of Leah and Jacob (29:32; 31:42) and Israel in Egypt, whom God also “sees” and delivers (Exod 2:25; 3:7; 4:31). The name she gives to the well also centers on the God who sees “me” (see the NRSV footnote to v. 14). By these namings the event is pressed into the memory of succeeding generations in terms of a seeing God. A parallel theme is sounded about a God who hears (v. 11). The name Ishmael, meaning “God hears,” witnesses to God’s hearing one in distress (see 17:20; 21:17; 29:33; 30:6, 17, 22). In this naming of God, Hagar (like Sarai) shows that she has an independent relationship with God.

The text presents God’s promises of a son and descendants as a genuine fulfillment of God’s promise to Abram (cf. v. 10 with 13:16; 15:5; cf. also 17:20; 21:13). Abram has a son in Ishmael and numerous descendants through him (25:12-18). In addition, v. 10 picks up on the promise in 1:28; God’s designs for the creation are being fulfilled in and through him. One may assume that the promise of nationhood includes land (17:20), although language about covenant does not occur. Hence, we ought not to minimize or set aside the vigorous promises given to Hagar and Ishmael.

Verses 15-16 confirm this understanding; they form an inclusio with vv. 1-2, with the verb bear (dly yAlad) occurring five times. Hagar bears “Abram a son,” and Abram gives “his son” the name that God had given him (v. 11). This assumes that Abram was told of the encounter between Hagar and God and that Abram knows the significance of the name. Sarai does not appear; her intention (v. 2) seems not to be realized.

Genesis 17:15-27 allows such questions at this stage of the narrative (and to some extent in 21:10-13), where the decision as to Ishmael’s status remains up in the air; only a new word from God resolves the issue. The reader of chap.

<Page 453 Ends><Page 454 Begins>

16 must not underinterpret these developments, as if Ishmael were a dead-end issue. Chapter 17 must be interpreted with the understanding that God’s promise to Abraham has apparently been fulfilled. The passing of thirteen years between 16:16 and 17:1 reinforces this judgment.
REFLECTIONS

1. Hagar is Sarai’s trusted servant; she no doubt came out of Egypt with Abram and his family (see 12:16). With this status, she possesses no choice and has no voice in becoming a surrogate mother; she is simply taken and given to Abram (v. 3). However much she may have accepted the customs of the time, her vulnerability ought not to be played down. She has no powers or rights should she be mistreated by those in authority over her. Since neither Abram nor Sarai ever names her (only God does, v. 8), and even though the narrator never calls her a slave, we are to be mindful of her precarious situation. Even more, the text stresses that Hagar is an Egyptian (vv. 1, 3; 21:9)! She is thus an outsider and an African.

Hagar is the first person in Genesis to be encountered by the angel of God, and the first woman to be given promises (see 25:23). In response, Hagar becomes the only person in the OT to name God. She engages in theological formulation, using her own experience with God and the knowledge of God gained thereby to shape new language for God. She thereby shapes contemporary language for God in view of ever-changing human experience and new experiences of God in the midst of that change. Being open to naming God in new ways based on personal experience was not a luxury, but a necessity if God would accompany people in their changing lives.

2. At the same time, Sarai comes onto the scene for the first time as a character in her own right. She takes the initiative with her husband, taking charge on the issue of offspring and not backing away from issues that need to be addressed. Although she treats Hagar harshly, Abram tacitly participates as well. Many commentators are hard on Sarai, claiming that she seeks to fulfill the promise by her own efforts. Von Rad is typical: “Sarai’s is “a fainthearted faith that cannot leave things with God and believes it necessary to help things along . . . a child so conceived in defiance or in little faith cannot be the heir of promise.” Such a judgment reflects a docetic view of God’s ways of working in the world. God often works in and through humans to carry out the divine purposes in Genesis (and the rest of the OT). Theologically, it should be stated as strongly as possible: Sarai should not in any way be faulted for taking the initiative, and the means she uses are typical for that culture.

3. Language about Sarai’s (and tacitly Abram’s) mistreatment of Hagar (hn[ Anâ, v. 6) also describes Israel’s oppression by the Egyptians (15:13; Exod 1:11-12) and commandments that forbid oppression binding on Israel (Exod 22:21-22). The story of the outcast contains themes and experiences parallel to that of the insider. Given the prefiguring concerns played out in chaps. 12–15, this chapter may also reflect how Israel, or any who have been delivered, can quickly deny their own history. It is a sad dimension of Israel’s story and that of the people of God in every age that the liberated so often become the oppressor. While this kind of behavior can occur at the level of community or society, this text would have us examine the family sphere more closely, not least the relationship between husband and wife or parents and children.
4. The author gives this tale, so attentive to persons outside the chosen family, considerable space in the story of Abraham; it will not be the last time. In terms of the usual recounting of the salvation history, this story doesn’t belong; it’s a dead end. At best, the story seems to have only a negative purpose. The fact that women play a key role in this story has probably meant for a certain neglect as well.

Such narrow perspectives will not do. Israel’s God plays an important role in the lives of these “unchosen” ones. Indeed, God appears to Hagar, converses with her, and makes promises to her that approximate those given to Abram (vv. 10-11). This divine concern will continue in chap. 21. The author portrays God as a Creator who makes promises to those who do not belong to the “people of God” (which should include their descendants, both physical and spiritual, in Islam). God acts in both word and deed outside the boundaries of what we normally call the community of faith. God’s attentiveness to Hagar and Ishmael comes more in spite of what Abram’s family has done than because of their concern for outsiders and their welfare. Indeed, God enters the picture most decisively at precisely that point when exclusion from the chosen family has taken place (the move from v. 6 to v. 7). The chosen people cannot confine God’s works and ways—even words of gospel and promise (vv. 10-11)—within their often oppressive and narrowly conceived structures. One ought to recognize that “God has not exclusively committed himself to Abram-Sarai.” 126

What does it mean that Hagar and Ishmael receive the continuing promises of God? What might the fulfillment of such promises mean for the people of God, not least for their continuing relationships to the descendants of Ishmael in Islam? What might it mean to continue to confess in and through the retelling of this story that the Ishmaelites are who they are because God has kept promises? A key question for the modern interpreter thus becomes, Has God been faithful to these promises made to Hagar and Ishmael? In search of the answer, we should remember that Ishmael does not receive negative treatment in the rest of the OT, and the Ishmaelites never seem to be in conflict with Israel. When Isaac and Ishmael bury their father, no sign of conflict appears (25:9). One of David’s sisters married an Ishmaelite (1 Chr 2:17), and an Ishmaelite and a Hagrite were administrators for David (1 Chr 27:30-31).

5. At times the community of faith can so center on the speaking God that the theme of the seeing God is left aside. Not so with Hagar, and not so with Israel either. Israel’s confession includes the claim that its God sees the human situation and responds to it (see 29:31-32; 31:12, 42; Exod 2:25; 3:7; 4:31). God’s seeing (and hearing) remains crucial, because it means that God’s speaking will address the human need in a precise way. God’s word can bring a future and a hope because God has seen the situation and, hence, has been able to address actual needs in a specific way. God’s saving acts respond directly to creaturely need.
On Paul’s use of this story in Galatians 4 and other aspects of its significance, see commentary on chap. 21.

GENESIS 17:1-27, COVENANT AND CIRCUMCISION

Interpreters usually understand this chapter (assigned to P) as an alternate version of the covenant in chap. 15. Although the two texts do have distinct origins, the redactor of the present text probably does not so view the matter. Most likely we should view this covenant as a revision (not simply a renewal) of the earlier covenant in view of events that seem to take the future of the promise in directions not fully satisfactory (cf. the relationship between the covenants in Exodus 24 and 34, with the intervening sin in Exodus 32). The promise of a son (15:4) has been fulfilled, and thirteen years pass between 16:16 and 17:1 (vv. 24-25), during which time Abram lives with what 16:15-16 and 17:18 suggest to be a settled matter. It may be that, during these years, everyone—including God—lives with Ishmael to see what opens up regarding the future. Experience shows (for reasons unknown) that Ishmael will not do. The story begins again, this time with Sarai as mother (v. 19), not simply Abram as father. In a new moment for God, he reveals a new name and shapes a somewhat different future. This new divine identity, correlating with newly shaped promises, associates with both Abraham and Sarah, who are also given new names.

God particularizes the promises in other new ways. For example, the promise focuses less on land and more on Abraham as a progenitor of a multitude of nations and kings (vv. 4-6), which also involves a promise to Sarah (v. 16). The covenant as everlasting is new, though the land was so viewed in 13:15. The links with creation (cf. 1:28) are also new; in some sense the command

within creation is focused in this family (cf. Exod 1:7). God being God to Abraham and his descendants (mentioned thirteen times) provides a new element, or at least a new formulation (v. 7). Finally, the text highlights Abraham’s response within this covenant.

17:1-22. The author structures this segment as a typical theophanic narrative. (a) God’s appearance: Given the appearances in human form elsewhere in the cycle (e.g., 16:7; 18:1) the reader should think of the divine messenger (note that God “went up” in v. 22).
(b) Self-identification (El Shaddai): the meaning of this name remains uncertain, perhaps “God of the Mountains” (Breasts?; recalled in Exod 6:3), commonly translated “God Almighty” (based on Greek and Latin renderings). (c) A word to the recipient, including commands as well as promises: The three introductions focus on God (v. 4, “as for me”), Abraham (v. 9, “as for you”), and Sarah (v. 15, “as for Sarah”). (d) Abraham responds to the word (vv. 17-18), occasioning a more emphatic and particular divine word (vv. 19-21), after which God departs. The narrative concludes with a report of Abraham’s obedience to God’s command (vv. 23-27).

The word of God dominates the narrative. (1) God begins with imperatives (v. 1; cf. 12:1-2). As Noah did (6:9; cf. Pss 15:2; 101:2; Prov 20:7), Abraham is to walk before God (i.e., be loyal; 24:40 and 48:15; cf. 5:22-24) and be blameless (i.e., unreserved faithfulness in every aspect of the relationship, but not sinless; so also Jacob, 25:27, and David, 2 Sam 22:24; cf. 1 Kgs 3:6). The second imperative presents the consequence of obeying the first (and you will be blameless). Walking before God does not constitute a condition for giving the covenant, but Abraham intends to do so; walking before God becomes obligatory for relationship within the covenant. As in chap. 15, God establishes the covenant with one who has faith (15:6; the same pattern occurs in covenants with Noah, Israel, and David). For Abraham to fall on his face (v. 3; cf. v. 17) involves a response of faith, agreeing to what God expects for one in a covenant relationship. Hence, v. 2 provides an announcement of what God will do if Abram acknowledges in faith that he intends to walk before God.

(2) God, having taken the initiative, makes (literally, gives) a covenant (i.e., speaks promises) with Abraham and with his descendants (note the ABBA structure in vv. 4b-5). The content of the covenant consists of vv. 4b-8 (note the colon at the end of v. 4a). One should understand covenant here as a royal grant, attested elsewhere in the ancient Near East. It bears close similarities to the covenants with Noah (9:10-17; see 6:9) and David (2 Sam 23:5; 7:8-17) involving stability, eternity, and unconditionality (though not apart from faithfulness). These are the components of this word of God:

(a) Abraham will be exceedingly fruitful (vv. 2, 6). These words recall the creation account (1:28; 9:1, 7). But that creational command here becomes a promise (and in 22:17). Looking forward, it will be conveyed to Isaac in 26:4, 24, from Isaac to Jacob in 28:3, but restated as a command by God in 35:11, and again as promise in 48:4. It also involves a promise made to Ishmael in 16:10 and 17:20. This command/promise is fulfilled in Exod 1:7 (anticipated in Gen 47:27). In other words, in Abraham’s family the commands of creation are being fulfilled because of God’s promise. The command reaches fulfillment because promise accompanies it. “Abraham is the first fruit of the new creation.”127

(b) Abraham and Sarah will be ancestors of a multitude of nations and kings, those whose physical ancestry can be traced to Abraham (see 28:3; 35:11; 48:4), for example, Edomites and Ishmaelites. Yet, as Sarna notes, the phrase “has a more universal application in that a larger segment of humanity looks upon Abraham as its spiritual
father,” including Christians and Muslims (see John 1:13). “Kings” has Davidic links (see 49:8-12) and later takes on messianic overtones (see Matt 1:1).

(c) God will be God to Abraham and his descendants (vv. 7-8), a statement of divine commitment (see Exod 6:7). The repeated emphasis on descendants (vv. 7-10, 20) understands this promise to stand for all generations.

(d) Abraham will receive the land in which he now resides as an alien for an everlasting possession (v. 8; NRSV “perpetual holding”; cf. 13:15; 48:4). And so he lived in the land, but could not yet consider it his. The promise was for the future; it would not be fully realized in his lifetime (see chap. 23). This would have been an especially important word for landless exiles.

(3) God changes Abram’s name to Abraham, a dialectal variation of the name Abram (“exalted father”), but here understood to carry a different meaning: “father of a multitude.” A name change does not refer to a change in personality or character, but marks a new stage in his identification with the divine purpose. He must now live up to his new name, which focuses not on his personal relationship with God but on his relationship to the nations. The name looks outward, centered on the lives of others. Abraham’s election involves mission.

(4) Abraham and his descendants (including Ishmael) are commanded to keep (rmv sAmar) the covenant. Genesis 18:19 and 26:5 articulate more precisely Abraham’s “keeping,” which involves more than circumcision (cf. Exod 19:5, referring to this covenant). Generally, “keeping” means doing justice to, being faithful to, the relationship with the promising God. Verse 10 does not identify covenant with circumcision (cf. v. 4); v. 13b signifies that the covenant is marked in the flesh, an instance of synecdoche, a physical sign referring to the whole (covenant).

Circumcision serves as a sign of faithfulness to the covenant from the human side (different from the rainbow in 9:12-17, which is a sign for God); it resembles the sabbath of Exod 31:16-17. Although we read about Isaac’s (21:4) and Jacob’s sons’ circumcisions (34:15), the OT seldom mentions the practice elsewhere.

The last clause in v. 14 does not derive causally from the first clause. Neglecting circumcision does not constitute the essence of breaking the covenant; such neglect signifies unfaithfulness, a mark of an already broken relationship. An act of omission symbolizes an act of commission. Those who are unfaithful can remove themselves from the sphere of the covenant; the promises of God, however, will always remain in place for the faithful to cling to.

God will never be unfaithful, yet human unfaithfulness can lead to severe consequences (v. 14). What being “cut off” from the people entails is not certain (note the play on
“cut”). The text does not refer explicitly to any action by court or cult—execution or excommunication; the matter is left up to God (see Lev 20:1-6). One has difficulty imagining that noncircumcised children would have “broken” the covenant. Rather, the text refers to the community in which circumcision functions as a sign (see the admixture of singular and plural “you”). The author may have in mind a situation where Israel had become lax, perhaps the exile. The repeated reference to slaves (vv. 12-13, 23, 27; is their status in question?) indicates that presence in the community is what matters, not racial stock or social standing.

(5) Sarai receives a new name and promises of blessing (twice!), nations, and kings (v. 16). The name Sarah (princess?) presents a less archaic form of Sarai; it may be related to the name Israel, and hence recognizes Sarah as the forebear of Israel and other nations. These promises are repeated for Sarah (even if spoken to Abraham); the text does not subsume her under Abraham, finding her importance for the future only through him. She participates genuinely in the covenant.

Abraham first responds by internal musing and laughter based on their ages as potential parents (v. 17; cf. 18:12; qiṣṣ [yizhAq], a play on the name for Isaac [“he laughs”], becomes a narrative theme, 18:12-15; 19:14; 21:6, 9). Then, he asks God (or claims?) that Ishmael be the one who bears the promise (v. 18). While Abraham responds by falling on his face in obeisance in v. 3, here he falls on his face in laughter. His questions suggest that this laughter expresses incredulity (contrast 15:6), or possibly bewilderment. Abraham’s laughter appears similar to Sarah’s (18:12), demonstrating that Sarah was not told what he here learns. He accepts the goal but not the means of gaining descendants.

Remarkably God does not chide Abraham; he simply says no, and speaks of a new son, to be named Isaac (God also names Ishmael, 16:11), with whom God will establish the covenant. God responds to Abraham’s concerns, however. He speaks promises regarding Ishmael similar to those given Isaac; these amount to a covenant (though that word does not appear), which includes nationhood and royalty (see 21:13, 18; 25:12-16 lists the twelve princes). The heart of the difference would seem to be 12:3b, the role of mediating blessing to the nations.

God answers Abraham’s questions of v. 17 by

asserting again that Sarah will be the mother of his son (21:1-7), and Isaac the one with whom the covenant will be continued (26:3-5). God’s own decision results in the selection of Isaac. The reference to a male son (cf. 18:14) does not testify to absolute foreknowledge, but to God’s knowing what God will do.

After the conversation, God leaves the scene, and the narrator repetitively reports that Abraham follows through on the divine command, himself wielding the knife for all male members of his household. The author refers to the circumcision of Ishmael, “his son,”
three times, and to that of the others twice (vv. 23-26). Abraham responds to the covenant on behalf of his own generation.

REFLECTIONS

1. The common translation “God Almighty” (from Greek and Latin renderings) presents an unfortunate abstraction; it unpacks (and hence limits) the concrete image of mountains in a single direction; the image should be retained in translation or (typical for names) transliterated. The image of mountains for God occasions a variety of reflections (cf. Ps 36:7). As Hagar gave a new name to God in 16:13, so here God reveals a new name. God’s new name matches the new names for Abraham and Sarah, signaling a new beginning in their relationship. The community of faith must be open to new names for God, names that may be more congruent with the life experiences of people in new times and places.

2. Circumcision was common among Israel’s neighbors (and beyond), often as a rite of passage (see Jer 9:25-26; God assumes that Abraham knows the rite). God does not institute a new rite that would set Israel apart from its neighbors. God takes an existing practice—a sign from the world of creation—and “baptizes” it for use within the community of faith.

Circumcision provides a mark on the body, which symbolizes the command to walk before God, involving all aspects of the person’s life. Relationship with God does not express itself simply as a spiritual journey; it draws in the bodily dimensions of life to which God lays claim. Women are included only by virtue of being members of a household where the males are circumcised (clitoridectomy, female circumcision, was and is practiced in other cultures). Yet, the later metaphoric use of circumcision (see below) becomes a way of including women.

The physical act of circumcision does not provide the primary sign of faithfulness to the covenant (v. 11). Although external and ineradicable, it was not a visible sign of belonging. Hence, it was, essentially, a sign of belonging for the individual, though also a sign for the community, who are thereby true to God’s command. The eighth day may refer to the completion of creation in seven days, here applied to the individual, so that covenant becomes the realization of creation.

Having fulfilled this obligation, the way one’s life is shaped remains consequential. Circumcision never guarantees; other traditions will speak of judgment on circumcised ones with an “uncircumcised heart” (Jer 4:4; 9:25; Ezek 44:7-9; cf. Deut 10:16; 30:6). One senses the danger in isolating religious forms from faith, as if the sign in and of itself will suffice. Circumcision will not be a sign if it points to nothing; it becomes an empty sign. The NT picks up on this spiritual circumcision (Phil 3:3; Col 2:11-13 links it to baptism). The NT neither condemns nor makes the sign decisive for membership in the Christian community (1 Cor 7:18-19; Gal 5:6; 6:12-15), a principle framed against those who thought it essential. Paul argues (Rom 4:9-12) that Abraham’s faith was decisive for inclusion in the community before he was circumcised.
3. The use of the word everlasting with respect to the covenant (vv. 7, 13, 19) and the land (v. 8; cf. 13:15) may occasion questions about continuing applicability. These “terms” involve the promises from God’s side. If those to whom such promises are made do not walk before God (namely, remain faithful) they can remove themselves from the sphere of promise and everlasting no longer applies to them in terms of either covenant or land. This possibility does not take away from the unconditionality of the covenant. Nonetheless, humans must remain faithful (22:16-19; 26:5, 24).

4. Ishmael, the one who stands outside the chosen line, remains integrally related to it due to his circumcision. Generally, the rite provides democratization: slaves as well as sons, foreigners as well as family, chosen as well as unchosen—are all included within its scope. Circumcision allows for a genuine openness to the outsider.

GENESIS 18:1-15, GOD VISITS ABRAHAM AND SARAH

Link to:

COMMENTARY

Since Abraham’s name does not occur until v. 6 (on v. 1, see the textual notes), we may judge that the editor has fully integrated this narrative into the larger story. While the story may not have originally centered on an appearance of God, it now does (18:1). While it differs in some ways from typical theophanic narratives (e.g., no self-identification of the deity), we may view the story as a variant of the form (cf. 16:7-14; 26:24). The divine appearance reaches completion when the deity leaves (18:33). We are not certain at what point Abraham recognizes that God has appeared to him.

Scholars often think this narrative (usually J) centers in the announcement of the birth of a son. Yet, inasmuch as the promise of a son through Sarah has just been emphasized (17:16), a somewhat broader function for the story seems likely. Both biblical and nonbiblical parallels combine the themes of hospitality and birth announcement; 2 Kgs 4:8-17, a story of a “man of God” and a Shunammite woman, provides a good example. Parallels in Greek literature—perhaps late developments of Near Eastern prototypes—include a story in which three gods in human form are received hospitably and give the childless host a son.130 Stories about visits from strangers are found in many cultures.

The relationship between vv. 1-8 and vv. 9-15 remains difficult to discern. Chapter 17
makes it unlikely that the promised son constitutes a “reward” for Abraham’s hospitality or a “gift” from the guests. Verses 1-8 set the issue as one of hospitality extended to strangers; Abraham may pass a “test” of some sort in this. Verses 9-15 retain some interest in hospitality, with their focus on Sarah’s reception of the announcement: How hospitable will Sarah be to this word? Will her response be similar to Abraham’s (17:17)? Issues of hospitality relate to both receiving others and the words they may speak.

This theme (with men/angels) plays a key role in 19:1-3 (Lot) and 24:18-20 (Rebekah). Moreover, in 18:16-33, issues of divine hospitality are raised, especially regarding God’s reception of the human. God receives the “outcry” from those affected by the conduct of the people of Sodom and Gomorrah and moves to deal with it. God tends to Abraham’s words and takes them into account when moving into the future. Another link with vv. 16-33 involves the prominence of questions, from Abraham and God. In all cases, the questions are serious, posed for the purpose of continuing the conversation. God’s conveyance to Abraham of matters concerning the future also tie vv. 10-13 with vv. 17-19.

18:1-8. From the narrator’s point of view, Yahweh appears to Abraham at his home (v. 1). From Abraham’s point of view, however, three men

stand near him (v. 2). Yahweh has assumed human form (see 16:7), appearing among the three men;131 the other two are angelic attendants (so 19:1; perhaps presented in abstract form in Pss 23:6; 43:3). The separation between Yahweh and two of the messengers in 18:22 and 19:1, 13 supports this, as does the singular “you, your” in v. 3 and the shift from plural (v. 9) to a single spokesman (vv. 10-15; a comparable move occurs in 19:17-19, cf. NIV footnotes). All are involved in destroying the city, as the angels mediate God’s action (cf. 19:13 with 19:14, 24). But Abraham does not yet know these identities, so the reader understands more at this point than he does. Abraham does not act hospitably due to a desire to please a divine visitor. Sarah’s response (vv. 9-15) also must be interpreted with this same intentionality in mind.

Abraham’s hospitality has several characteristics: It extends to strangers, toward those who appear unexpectedly; it follows a certain protocol: seeing, running to meet, honoring, inviting, refreshing, preparing, serving. Bowing, an everyday gesture, was appropriate for all visitors, not only for important people. “Haste” language appears five times (vv. 2, 6-7; cf. 24:18-20). Abraham gives of the best he has (a calf!), makes and serves food, remains available to them and concerned about their welfare, and accompanies them on their way (v. 16). The phrase “find favor in your eyes” (v. 3; see 19:19; 32:5; 33:8-15) includes courtesy; it gives the visitors a higher status and so the freedom to respond without embarrassment. Abraham depicts what the visitors may expect (vv. 4-5), in view of which they accept the invitation, and he goes beyond what he promised in providing meat—these heavenly beings eat! As the visitors stand near Abraham (v. 2), so he stands near them (v. 8); he reciprocates in being attentive. He understands himself to be their servant (vv. 3, 5).
18:9-15. The home setting integrates Sarah into the conversation. Yet (unlike 17:16), neither Sarah nor Abraham seems to be clear that God speaks. Initially, all three persons are involved (v. 9), then one takes the lead (the NIV’s “LORD” in v. 10 is an inference drawn from the words that follow). In v. 13 only the narrator identifies the speaker as Yahweh; v. 14 speaks about Yahweh, but the identity of the “I” remains unclear. The fear shown by Sarah (v. 15) comes from knowing what this person has said about her (including her laughing to herself where she could not be seen). This introduces an element of mystery, amazement that this one could speak for God.

The reader will remember that God had spoken such a promise to Abraham and that he had also laughed to himself, asking essentially the same questions (17:16-17). Abraham’s falling on his face implies a more explicit negative response, however. The narrator inserts a word about their age (cf. 17:17) and that Sarah no longer menstruates (v. 11), as if to provide an objective view on Sarah’s own comments (v. 12). These comments soften Sarah’s response, making it more understandable, as does her observation about the end of sexual pleasure (note that Abraham fathers other children, 25:1-4). For Sarah, the issue has become more than barrenness (cf. 11:30).

All of the questions directed to Abraham in this section seem genuine. The question in v. 9 ensures Sarah is within earshot of what will be said; the narrator states (v. 10) that she listens “off camera.” God inquires about Sarah’s laughter in v. 13. If an accusatory question, then it could claim that Sarah should know better than to laugh, for nothing is too wonderful for God. Yet, it seems unlikely that God would be critical of Sarah if not of Abraham in 17:19. More likely, the “why” introduces a genuine question designed to continue the conversation, especially if one or both of them do not know God speaks in v. 10. God’s question in v. 14, also a genuine question, moves Abraham and Sarah beyond their limited view of the future to a consideration of God’s possibilities. Then the author repeats v. 10, as if to start over again in the light of the intervening conversation.

That the deity directs the questions of vv. 13-14 to Abraham means that God seeks a response from him regarding Sarah’s laughter. God holds him accountable for her response. This may be due to Abraham’s not informing her of the events of chap. 17, which means that he shares blame for Sarah’s response. Abraham remains silent, as questionable a response as Sarah’s. At the same time, if the author intended Sarah to hear the promise expressed in v. 10, the same must be true for vv.

13-14 as well, as her response suggests (v. 15). She does not step forward to speak, so hers may be a voice from “off stage.” Her denial of laughter (v. 15) could be a lie, or an attempt to withdraw her laughter,132 now being more aware of the nature of the moment and the probable identity of the one who has spoken. But the messenger says it remains a fact. This affirmation keeps both Sarah and Abraham on the same level regarding the reception of the promise and also links her response to the naming of Isaac (“he laughs”).
Sarah’s incredulous response belongs to a literary convention for such announcements, (e.g., the Shunammite woman to a “man of God” [2 Kgs 4:16] and Mary to an angel [Luke 1:34!]); so also the “due time” reference (2 Kgs 4:16), which is the one innovation beyond chap. 17. The relation between the twice-stated temporal—but general—reference “due time” (vv. 10, 14) and Sarah having a son finds its explanation in 21:1, which speaks of God visiting Sarah “as he had said.” Although God enables Sarah to become pregnant, the normal time for the child to develop in the womb is not set aside.

The precise meaning of the verb alp (pAle ), translated “to be wonderful” or “to be hard/difficult” (v. 14), remains obscure. Does the word push in the direction of competence (Deut 17:8) or ability to accomplish something (Jer 32:17, 27) or something extraordinary or marvelous (Pss 118:23; 139:14)? The related plural noun commonly refers to God’s wonderful deeds of redemption and judgment (Exod 3:20; 34:10), not a claim that only God possesses power, or that the divine power is irresistible. The term claims God’s promises will not fail, that God will always find a way into the future.

The end of this segment seems incomplete, but the intent may well be to leave the reader (and Sarah and Abraham) in a state of some uncertainty concerning what the future will bring.

REFLECTIONS

1. The motif of hospitality extends into the NT. Jesus specifies that the lack of hospitality serves as grounds for judgment (Matt 25:43). Hebrews 13:2 stresses its importance, for “some have entertained angels without knowing it” (see Acts 14:11; 28:1-6; those visited by Paul say, “The gods have come down to us in human form!”). Hospitality is commended to all Christians (see 1 Pet 4:9; 3 John 5-8), especially leaders (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8). See Luke 24:29 on welcoming the risen Christ.

This text involves not only human hospitality, but also hospitality toward God. One could speak in terms of Matthew 25; acting on behalf of one of “the least of these” constitutes an act on behalf of God. Hospitality toward God is not simply a spiritual matter, but a response of the whole self in the midst of the quite mundane affairs of everyday life. Although we are not always able to identify the presence of God in the midst of life, God assumes flesh and blood in the neighbor (1 John 4:20).

Modern culture presents numerous challenges to the practice of hospitality toward others. Hospitality may be defined as acts of benevolence toward those outside of one’s usual circle of family and friends. In North American culture, people live increasingly isolated lives, seldom reaching out beyond a very close circle. We live in a self-protective age where parents must warn their children about strangers; who knows what might be lurking beneath a kind and gentle facade? Hence, we seldom move out toward strangers. Hospitality in the modern world entails some risk of moving toward the stranger with less than full certainty as to how one might be received. Such hospitality should be especially
important in the life of worship; worship ought to be a setting in which the stranger is welcomed in premier ways.

2. A text such as this calls for sentences in which God appears as the subject. God makes the promised future possible. God serves as the source of hope in situations where the way into the future seems entirely blocked off. God gives shape to possibilities when all around us seems impossible. The active engagement of God in the midst of the problems of daily life opens up the future rather than closing it down.

3. The question “Is anything too wonderful [hard] for the LORD?” (v. 14), is difficult to understand. The text probably presents a genuine question designed to continue the conversation, not a rhetorical question, which would declare that nothing is too hard. Brueggemann recognizes that the question has no simple yes or no answer. If the answer is yes, then we could delimit in a specific way what is possible for God. No human construct can finally define God’s possibilities in a given situation. If the answer is no, “that is an answer which so accepts God’s freedom that the self and the world are fully entrusted to God and to no other.” It would fail to recognize that God has given genuine power into the hands of the creation (so 1:28) and that what is possible for God must be consistent with who God is. One must deal with the issues of divine self-limitation raised by many OT texts. But, in this text, God finds a way into the future of a promised son. And this, in spite of the seemingly insurmountable hurdles of human bodily limits (postmenopausal births have been documented in modern times) and the uncertain responses of both Abraham and Sarah. No situation can finally stymie the divine purposes.

New Testament texts use such language, e.g., Mark 10:27 and Luke 1:37. We also need to consider texts such as Matt 17:20 (nothing is impossible for faithful human beings); Matt 26:39 (where Jesus’ “if it is possible” raises questions of divine self-limitation), and Mark 6:5 (where Jesus’ healing powers are limited by the dynamics of a situation).

4. Male commentators discussing this passage have often been unfair to Sarah, excusing Abraham’s laughter (17:17) but judging Sarah severely. Neither Abraham nor Sarah responds in exemplary ways to the word of God; at the same time, we should not call it unbelief, especially given the conventional form present here (see Mary in Luke 1:34). Many OT texts depict humans questioning God as a natural part of a genuine God-human conversation, and Abraham will shortly do just that (vv. 23-25; cf. Moses; Gideon in Judg 6:13). In this case, God’s response continues the conversation, and God makes no judgment, even when Sarah denies that she laughed.
Genesis 18:16-33, Abraham’s Intercession

Link to:

<Page 465 Ends><Page 466 Begins>
<Page 466 Ends><Page 467 Begins>

COMMENTARY

This passage picks up a narrative thread from chaps. 13–14. The author introduces an intercessory dialogue between God and Abraham concerning the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah (vv. 23-33) by means of divine reflections on the role of Abraham as God’s chosen one (vv. 17-21). The entire text constitutes a judicial inquiry. Abraham’s intercession functions as a judicial rather than a worshipful act (prayer formulae are absent). More broadly, in this theological narrative, the author does not report an event in Abraham’s life, but reflects on theological issues by juxtaposing an ancient tradition about a natural disaster and a religious crisis in the community of the redactor. This tactic grounds theological reflection deeply within Israel’s ancestral heritage.

The crisis prompts the question Will the righteous fare as the wicked? (v. 25; cf. Job 9:22-24). Such issues were prominent at those points in Israel’s history when its future seemed to be at stake, from the fall of Samaria (Amos 7:1-9, also an intercessory dialogue regarding a “shower of fire”) to the fall of Jerusalem (Jer 5:1; Ezek 14:12-20; 18:1-32). Why would God sweep away the faithful with the wicked, not save all of Israel for the sake of the righteous few? So, while commonly assigned to J, the narrative in its present form is also a relatively late composition.

The shift from Sarah’s laughing to the long episode on Sodom and Gomorrah seems abrupt. The fulfillment of God’s promise remains up in the air. Perhaps Sarah’s laughing and the jesting of Lot’s son-in-law (19:14) are linked to highlight the potentially devastating effects of taking God’s words lightly (note the prophetic parallels). The road to fulfillment is precarious, through many a dark valley, and faith and hospitality will not be irrelevant. Perhaps, too, the reader catches a glimpse of the kind of world within which this new son of Abraham is to be a blessing.

18:16-19. The men of v. 16 are the three who had appeared to Abraham (v. 2). Three transitional phrases mark developments regarding the fate of Sodom: The three men/angels (then two) “looked toward Sodom” (18:16; cf. 19:28); “went toward Sodom” (18:22); and “came to Sodom” (19:1). This progression correlates with developments in the judicial inquiry. While both Sodom and Gomorrah are in view in the larger narrative, the author focuses on Sodom, the home of Lot.

Verses 17-21 are spoken by Yahweh to the other two men and are overheard by Abraham (v. 23 presupposes their content). In effect, these verses work as inner divine reflection about the situation in Sodom and Abraham’s relationship to it (cf. 1:26; 2:18; 11:6-7). We receive insight into God’s thoughts as background for the dialogue.
Abraham should not be kept in the dark regarding what God is “about to do,” for God has chosen him ([dy [yAda(, “known”]; cf. Amos 3:2) and made promises to him. God does not intend human ignorance of God’s work (cf. Amos 3:7). Even more, God consults with Abraham because he and his descendants are chosen to have a role among the “nations” (“families” in 12:3; cf. 22:18; 26:4). Abraham responds by interceding on behalf of the righteous, none of whom would be among the chosen, not even Lot (as in 20:17).

God calls Abraham to charge his family “to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness [hqdx zudAqâ ] and justice [fpvm mispAt ]” (v. 19; cf. Ps 33:5; Prov 21:3). These key words—uncommon in Genesis—are picked up in the dialogue, mispat in v. 25 and the root zdq seven times in vv. 23-28 (cf. 6:9; 7:1; 15:6; 20:4; 30:33; 38:26). The two words are closely related, characterizing

individually and communities that exemplify and promote life and well-being for all in every relational sphere, human and nonhuman. As such, their lives would correspond to God’s creational intentions for the world order, including blessing on all nations. After so charging Abraham, God brings to his attention a case where these divine purposes are being subverted. To be a blessing to all nations, Abraham must become involved in situations of injustice. Just as God enters into the life of the chosen regarding these issues, so also God identifies the divine way with the world more generally.

The author deems the transmission of the faith to subsequent generations an appropriate topic in view of the imminent birth of Isaac. This brings Israel’s life into view and its practice of “justice and righteousness” and the implications thereof (including judgment). Hence, the question of Sodom’s fate could become a question of the fate of Israel (Isa 1:10; Jer 23:14; Ezek 16:49) or any people.

The fact that God raises the issue of justice (in vv. 17-19) before Abraham does is important. If God chooses Abraham to address issues of justice within his household, then God’s ways of relating to these issues must be clear (raised by a non-Israelite in 20:4). God’s people are to walk in all of God’s ways (v. 19; cf. Deut 8:6; 10:12; Jer 5:4-5) and so they should know what justice means for God.

Verse 19 may seem to make God’s promises conditional. Yet, the text focuses on Abraham’s transmitting the faith to the next generation, without which there would be no community to whom the promises apply. The promises are not genetically transmitted. The community of faith can continue only if children receive instruction. If the generations to come are not faithful, they remove themselves from the sphere of the promise. Nonetheless, the faith of Abraham and his descendants will survive (see commentary on 22:16-18 and 26:5, 24).

18:20-22. God reports the cries of unidentified persons about the gravity of the sins of
Sodom and Gomorrah (against their own?). Outcry language (also 19:13) describes the oppressed (4:10; 27:34), including Israel in Egypt (Exod 2:23; 3:7, 9). The sins of Sodom involve social injustice (to which Jer 23:14 and Ezek 16:49 also testify).

Verse 20, with a new introduction, reports the decision of God as Judge (v. 25) formally to investigate the situation; Abraham will be involved in this judicial inquiry (11:5; Num 12:5; on “seeing” as judicial activity, see 6:5, 12; Exod 3:7-9; 32:9). God will consult with him to discover whether the situation is in fact so grave that it warrants the judgment that God has preliminarily drawn. The dialogue thus follows naturally from this divine intent. Abraham understands that he has been invited into such a conversation.

This inquiry is not just rhetorical, so God’s words, “and if not, I will know [acknowledge, recognize]” (v. 21). This divine knowing for judicial purposes depends on the inquiry. God admits the possibility of an “if not.” For God to use “if” language means the future remains open (Exod 4:8-9; Jer 7:5; 22:4-5; Ezek 12:3). God holds out the prospect that the inquiry will issue in a verdict other than that preliminarily drawn. Abraham presumes the integrity of this consultation; what he has to say will be taken seriously (cf. Exod 32:9-14; Num 14:11-20).

The departure of two of the men marks the transition to dialogue (cf. 19:1, v. 16). Abraham now stands before God, though originally the text read that God stood before Abraham (NRSV footnote). The subjects were reversed by scribes who thought it indecorous for God to stand before a human being. “Remained” refers more appropriately to God, who remains behind while the two men depart. God seeks to communicate with Abraham, not the other way around.

18:23-33. Abraham proceeds to raise very specific questions regarding God’s preliminary decision. He is blunt, persistent, and nontraditional. His questions (vv. 23-25) pull no punches; he gets right to the point without preliminary niceties. The author stresses this confrontative approach by the “indeed?” (vv. 23-24; cf. 18:13; Job 34:17), as well as the repeated “far be it from you” (cf. 44:7, 17). Abraham understands his relationship with God to be such that direct questions are not only in order but welcome (cf. Exod 32:11-14). Indeed, God exhibits no disapproval. Abraham does become more deferential as the dialogue proceeds. His motives for this shift are not stated, but God’s positive response to his candor may have humbled him. We may not know enough about ancient methods of argumentation to assess this shift properly.

One could suggest that God plays with Abraham, for God knows the number of righteous persons in Sodom. But this would deny the integrity of the inquiry. Something may emerge out of this consultative interaction that calls for a different divine direction. Given the divine “if,” God does not appear certain just how far and in what direction Abraham might push the discussion.
Abraham’s argument moves in stages to its climactic question at the end of v. 25. Abraham first expresses concern that God not “sweep away” (19:15, 17) the righteous (not sinless—righteousness is measured in terms of creational relationships, cf. 38:26) with the wicked; they must not be treated in the same way. He raises a more specific question: How many righteous must there be in order for God to save the city (see below)?

While Lot may have prompted Abraham’s action (as in 14:14, see 19:29), he places the matter on a much broader canvas of concern, i.e., the number of righteous he mentions (fifty!) and the absence of Lot. The “righteous” are any who had not participated in the behaviors that led to the “outcry.” While Abraham focuses on them, he knows their deliverance would mean the saving of many wicked. In not suggesting that the few righteous simply be removed (which is what happens) he shows his concern for the many. God’s fourfold “for the sake of” carries a double meaning: God will not destroy for the sake of saving the few; for the sake of the few, the many will not be destroyed (in 12:13, 16, Pharaoh dealt well with Abraham for the sake of Sarah; see 26:24; 1 Sam 12:22; 2 Sam 5:12; 9:1, 7). The verb acn (nAZA), “spare”) means to annul the decision to destroy. The righteous do not exercise an atoning function for the others, yet the effect is comparable. Certainly God’s mercy toward those who deserve another future grounds this divine response.

Abraham’s most direct question is Will not the Judge of all the earth do right (mispAt)? (cf. 1 Sam 2:10; 1 Kgs 8:32; Ps 9:7-8). If God expects Abraham and his family to do mispAt (v. 19), justice must be God’s own way. Only then would “doing justice” be keeping “the way of the LORD.” Abraham’s question does not accuse; it provides a debating point, warranted by what God has said (v. 19).

This question suggests an implicit theology. Abraham considers God to be subject to an existing moral order. God has freely created that order but is bound to attend to it faithfully. That is, God cannot ignore doing justice to established relationships (i.e., righteousness) and still be faithful, not least because God expects this of Abraham and his family. God thus is held to certain standards in dealing with issues of justice. Hence in Abraham’s eyes, God cannot ignore differences between the righteous and the wicked in acts of judgment. God accepts Abraham’s argument.

As Abraham continues to raise the numbers question, God responds in a consistently positive way. Abraham’s concerns are matched by God’s. The author reveals here the ends to which God will go to save the righteous and the divine patience in matters of judgment. God’s will to save over the will to judge so predominates that no reward-punishment schema can explain what happens. The text is making one basic point: No retributionary schema will explain why disastrous events do not occur. The wicked may not suffer the consequences of their own sins because of the presence of the righteous.

We should not move too quickly past this point, not least because it answers most clearly why Abraham cut the questioning off at ten, a number not to be taken literally. It may be
that “the number ten represents the smallest group”137 and that a smaller number would be dealt with as individuals, who could be (and were) led out of the city. It may be that it represents the point at which Abraham saw that God’s justice had been established beyond the shadow of a doubt; he could now leave the fate of the few righteous up to God. It may be that Abraham realizes that this “numbers game” cannot be pressed exactly, for that would mean a precise number “out there,” which would trigger a divine decision, as if all that counts is “counting noses.” God has no quota system in these matters.

Most basically, however, the numbers speak to

the issue of a critical mass in relation to the moral order. The wickedness of a few can have a contaminating effect on the larger group of which they are a part (cf. Deut 21:1-9). Here the issue is reversed; the righteousness of a few can so permeate a wicked society that they can save it from the destructive effects of its own evil ways. However, a buildup of wickedness can become so deep and broad that nothing can turn the potential for judgment around. The “critical mass” effect of the presence of the righteous can be so diminished as not to be able to affect positively the shape of the future. There may come a point where even God cannot turn the situation around and still be just; judgment must fall. Abraham recognizes this by not taking the numbers lower than ten. He tacitly admits that a few righteous may indeed “fare as the wicked” (v. 25). Eschatological thinking will speak finally of a distinction in the world to come rather than in this world.

God does not reappear as an agent until 19:24. Abraham, too, reappears only in 19:27, looking down on the destroyed cities. Chapter 19 now brings readers into the city of Sodom. They will be given an example of behaviors that occasioned the “outcry” and be asked to judge for themselves whether God’s judgment appears just. (See Reflections at the end of the next section.)

Genesis 19:1-38, Sodom and Gomorrah

Link to:

COMMENTARY

This chapter brings the story of Lot to an end, concluding with the faintest of hopes for the future. Lot was part of Abraham’s journey of faith (12:5). A conflict over land rights concludes when Lot picks the region around Sodom. The author makes three telling comments (13:10-13): a fertile area like the garden of the LORD; like “the land of Egypt,” where Israel’s “outcry” will be heard by God; its people are “wicked, great
This text (assigned to J) is the most frequently cited Genesis passage in the rest of the Bible. Sodom and Gomorrah become a conventional image for heinous sins and severe disaster. Apparently these cities symbolize the worst that can be imagined. The nature of Sodom’s sins may vary, but the mistreatment of other human beings tops the list; inhospitality lends itself to diverse development (Jer 23:14). Later texts recall Sodom’s judgment, even its specific form (see Ps 11:6; Ezek 38:22; Rev 21:8).

We do not know where these cities were located, but some now place them southeast of the Dead Sea (rather than under the southern part of the sea). The area lies in a geological rift, extending from Turkey to East Africa, the Dead Sea being its lowest point (1,305 feet below sea level). The area has extensive sulphur and bitumen deposits and petrochemical springs, which the text points out (14:10; 19:24; cf. Deut 29:23; Zeph 2:9). An earthquake with associated fires (19:28; brimstone is sulfurous fire) may have ignited these deposits, producing an explosion that “overthrew” these cities.

The tradition has taken up tales of some such ecological disaster and woven them into the story of Abraham and his family. The area around the Dead Sea had not always been desolate, and its present state was due to human wickedness. Such an interrelationship of human and cosmic orders stands in continuity with 3:16 and the flood story (see 13:10). Scholars have noted parallels with the latter, from the lack of sexual restraint (6:1-4), to natural disaster (note v. 24, “rained” on Sodom), to the saving of a remnant (and God’s remembering, 8:1; 19:29), to the drunken aftermath (cf. 9:20-27 with vv. 30-38). The NT also appropriates these texts (see Luke 17:26-32; 2 Pet 2:5-8, which identifies Lot as righteous). We may also discern continuities with the exodus events, such as the outcry of the oppressed, the ecological disasters (plagues), the fate of the Egyptians, and Lot’s being brought out of the city (axy yAzA), vv. 12, 16, 17).

We may also view this chapter from the vantage of its close parallel in Judg 19:22-30, a text that depends heavily on this passage. Sexual abuse comes from Israelites, however, not from foreigners. While the inhospitable mistreatment of others in the two stories contains similar components, the focus in Genesis on divine judgment through a natural disaster and the preservation of a remnant push the story in somewhat different directions.

19:1-11. Readers are not explicitly informed about the upshot of the conversation in 18:23-33. For all they know, God has found ten righteous people in Sodom and the city will be saved. The narrator now gives readers an inside view, enabling them to judge for themselves what ought to be done to Sodom. So 19:1-11 develops an illustration of Sodom’s character; in view of this, readers should have little difficulty agreeing with the verdict—even Lot comes off as one whose righteous behavior we might question.

The author develops this illustration in relationship to 18:1-15. Both chapters share the basic thematic link of hospitality, which should not be narrowly conceived, as if it were a
matter of putting out a welcome mat. Hospitality involves a wide-ranging image, revealing fundamental relationships of well-being for individuals and society. Abraham shows hospitality in exemplary fashion. Lot follows suit to some extent, but he fails at a key juncture. The people of Sodom show no sign of what hospitality entails at all.

It seems wise not to overdraw the differences between Abraham’s hospitality in 18:1-8 and Lot’s in 19:1-3. Initially, Lot’s hospitality parallels Abraham’s; thus, when the differences appear, they

have a greater shock value. Lot does engage the crowd on behalf of his guests, and he names directly the sin of the Sodomites (v. 7; r ra). At the same time, his language to them as “brothers” raises problems, and his treatment of his daughters reveals deep levels of inhospitality.

Abraham had welcomed his visitors wholeheartedly and treated them in an exemplary way. Lot behaves in a basically similar way: He rises (but does not run), bows before them, speaks of them as “lords,” provides for their rest and refreshment (the preparations are less thorough and the provisions less sumptuous). He also invites them to stay the night to protect them from the street, which also makes for problems. The visitors accept only upon his strong urging. The word brought to Abraham was one of hope (18:9-10); the word to Lot is one of destruction (19:13-14). Both words are introduced with a question regarding the whereabouts of others (18:9; 19:12). Both households respond to the word in similar fashion; they consider it laughable (qjx zAhaq), both Sarah (and Abraham) and Lot’s sons-in-law (v. 14). While the response to Sarah was left up in the air (18:15), the narrative pursues the issue of Sodom to its disastrous conclusion. Is the reader invited to draw parallels?

The author makes the depth of Sodom’s inhospitality immediately evident. Verse 4 (cf. v. 11) shows that every man (!) in the city was caught up in this threat of violence through homosexual activity (they even threaten Lot himself, v. 9). If the assault had succeeded, the result could only be described as gang rape, not a private act. The text presents the sins of Sodom more as social than individual, something that characterizes the entire city. This deed would be but one example of Sodom’s sins, as other texts show (see below). Inasmuch as Sodom serves as the evil counterpart to Abraham’s hospitality, we trivialize the narrative if we focus on this one sin.

Lot’s reply (v. 8) borders on the incredible. Interestingly, he thinks that the men of Sodom would be satisfied with heterosexual abuse (as in Judges 19–20, where it is condemned). The offer of his daughters to be abused “as you please” provides but another example of the depravity of Sodom (ironically, Lot will become the abuser of his own daughters, see below). His daughters were betrothed (v. 14); Israel condemned to death those who rape betrothed women (Deut 22:23-24). Threatened sexual abuse and violence, both homosexual and heterosexual, constitutes sufficient evidence to move forward with judgment.
The men of Sodom now raise the issue of justice, which God and Abraham had broached earlier (v. 9); the men of Sodom alone can judge the rightness of their own action—no external standard obtains here. The strangers save Lot—who sought to save them—from their violence and strike them with temporary blindness, perhaps a sudden flash of light (see 2 Kgs 6:18; Acts 9:3-9). We hear no more from the men of Sodom; they are left still blindly groping for the door to complete their objective! But God (and the reader) who came to “see” them has seen enough for the judgment to fall.

19:12-23. The angels mediate God’s destruction (v. 13; so also Lot and narrator, vv. 14, 24); they save Lot and his family. In spite of Lot’s warning, the sons-in-law treat it as a laughable matter (cf. 18:12-15). The word for “punishment” in v. 15 is @w[ ((Awon,) a common word for “sin” (cf. 4:7). The effects of sin flow out of the sin itself; they are not introduced by God from outside the situation.

These are tension-filled moments, emphasized by the use of imperatives alongside Lot’s lingering. Lot’s dallying ends only when he is forced to leave the city, an effort due to the undeserved mercy, graciousness, and kindness (dsj hesed) of God (vv. 16, 19). Commanded not to look back lest his family be delayed and engulfed by the fallout, Lot still hesitates out of fear of the open hills (to which he later retreats, v. 30); the angels agree to exclude the city of Zoar. They are “not able” to do anything until Lot is safe (v. 22). In view of v. 29, God’s delay for Lot’s sake testifies to the efficacy of Abraham’s intercession.

Verses 18-23 explain the meaning of the name Zoar (“little”), but more remains at stake. Because of Lot, one of the smaller cities to be destroyed is saved from destruction, as are the wicked living there. Hence, God honors one of the principles for which Abraham argued in 18:22-33. The emphasis on its smallness suggests that the presence of Lot and his family were sufficient to provide the “critical mass” of righteous among the wicked.

19:24-26. The author describes the destruction only briefly. The repetition in v. 24 suggests that the brimstone and fire—a traditional expression—come from the very presence of God. Verse 25 describes its calamitous effects, from the cities and environs to the people and the vegetation. The verb overthrow may not fit the nature of the event precisely (but cf. catastrophe, which has the same meaning; see Jon 3:4).

The fate of Lot’s wife echoes a common motif in folklore. Lot’s wife mirrors his irresoluteness, only she lingers to the point of death. The nature of the cataclysm could explain the salt pillar; she was engulfed in the fallout of fire and chemicals. Human-shaped pillars of salt still found in the area may have prompted this element in the story (see Wis 10:4).

19:27-29. Abraham retraces his steps (18:33) and “freezes in the awe-inspiring horror of the sight.” He says nothing. He simply witnesses the judgment of God, and his
silence speaks volumes. The nations of the earth are to find blessing through him, but not inevitably so. In spite of his efforts, intercession could not turn the situation around (cf. Jer 11:14; 14:11).

God rescues Lot both because God is merciful toward him (19:16, 19) and because God remembers Abraham (19:29). God does attend to his prayers; without him Lot would have been lost. The repetition in v. 29 stresses the destruction from which he escaped. Both judgment and rescue witness to the universal work of God the Creator, here powerfully at work outside of the chosen community.

19:30-38. The author/editor has integrally related this text to the preceding story (cf. Zoar). Interpreters have tended in two directions. Most commonly, they understand this passage as the conclusion to the story of Lot, the final stage of a downward spiral, showing the depths to which this man of faith had fallen. It presents one possible journey for any person of faith, and in view of 18:19, even for Abraham. Lot meets an end as destructive as the cities from which he is taken, having taken on their character in his own life. Yet, his fear of dwelling in Zoar may mean he was not accepted among these people either. He is a person without a home. The man who had chosen paradise (13:10) ends up in a barren cave, far removed from others, utterly destitute.

Lot, who earlier had offered his daughters for sexual abuse, ironically becomes the one who engages in such acts, but passively so. He becomes the passive sexual object he had determined his daughters should become. The narrator thereby passes sharp judgment on Lot for offering his daughters; his fate corresponds precisely to his earlier deed. What goes around comes around.

The only “positive” note involves his lack of knowledge; his daughters get him drunk to engage in incest.

Other interpreters see the story as a new beginning; Lot’s daughters take the initiative to continue the family line, a larger narrative theme (vv. 32, 34). Parallels with 9:18-27 have been noted, including drunkenness, sexual impropriety, ethnological concerns, and the issue of continuing progeny (the emphasis on Zoar in v. 30 shows that the daughters are concerned about their family line, not a repeopling of the earth). Such a “desperate deed” resonates, especially, with that of Tamar (chap. 38; cf. also the midwives in Exodus 1). Westermann speaks of “acts of revolt against prevailing standards of morality and customs” for the laudable goals of life and family well-being.140 Given the precarious situation into which their father had led them, their options had narrowed to a single one. Hence, no negative judgment on them seems to be in order, except the judgment of Judah regarding Tamar, “She is more righteous than I” (38:26 NIV).

The reader should also note the genealogical interest in the text. The reference to the Moabites and Ammonites (vv. 37-38) may attest that these peoples were rarely on
friendly terms with later Israel (see Deut 23:3). Yet, Ruth was a Moabite, making this son of Lot’s daughter an ancestor of both David and Jesus (Ruth 4:18-22; Matt 1:5). The messianic line has one of its roots in this initiative by Lot’s daughter. Even out of the worst of family situations, God can bring goodness, life, and blessing to the world.

REFLECTIONS

1. Abraham concerns himself with the future of the nonchosen, both righteous and unrighteous, those who are outside the community of faith, almost all of them strangers. He does so by focusing, not on narrowly religious matters (e.g., idolatry), but on issues of justice. This testifies to an interpretation of 12:1-3 that involves the chosen in their relationship to the nations. The fact that God also enters into the lives of others on the issue of justice sets a pattern for those who are “to keep the way of the LORD” (18:19).

Sodom is condemned, not because they have no faith in God, but because of the way in which they treat their brothers and sisters. God holds the nonchosen accountable for such behaviors. This assumes an understanding of natural law, wherein God’s intentions for all people are clear in the creational order (cf. the oracles of the prophets against the nations, e.g., Amos 1–2).

2. One wonders whether those who think God’s decision about Sodom is final from the beginning do so because of a view of God that does not allow for consultation. But God takes Abraham’s thinking into account in deciding what the divine action will finally be. God takes seriously what human beings think and say, which can contribute in a genuine way to the shaping of the future. While God would have thought of all the options, to have them articulated by Abraham gives them a new level of significance that God will take into account. Abraham brings new ingredients into the situation—energies, words, insights—that give God new possibilities with which to work. This interaction has the potential of changing the divine decision (see Exod 32:9-14).

Abraham participates with God in matters of divine judgment. Hence, Abraham’s role may be compared to that of the pre-exilic prophets (cf. 18:17 with Amos 3:7). We are accustomed to thinking about God working through human beings on behalf of what is positive and good. The nature of the continuing role of the people of God in matters of judgment needs closer scrutiny (see Rom 13:4).

3. This text centers on the future of a corporate entity, not individuals in isolation. It does not deny that individuals are to be held accountable, but it focuses on communal responsibility, on what happens when sin and its effects become so pervasive that the entire community is caught up in it.

The text links corporate responsibility and ecology, a strikingly contemporary concern.
Human behavior affects, not simply the human community, but the entire cosmos (though the link may be difficult to discern). Although we often consider individual sins in an analysis of environmental problems, the ecological issue may involve a social dimension in which the innocent (from children to the ozone layer) are caught up in the disastrous consequences. Historical evil can cause creational havoc, as moderns know all too well.

But does not God cause all the damage? The text links God to this catastrophe (19:24) as an ecological disaster of divine judgment. God sees to a creational form for this disaster; it corresponds to the anticreational form of human wickedness, focused especially in the language of outcry and the deprivation of life and well-being (18:20-21; 19:13). God midwifes or sees to the moral order, through already existing human or nonhuman agents.141 Many such events are just part of the normal workings of the natural order (the rain falls, or does not fall, on the just and the unjust, Matt 5:45). Yet, both Israelites and moderns know that human behaviors have led and will lead to cosmic disaster (flood story; plagues). The devastation of Sodom and Gomorrah and their environs offers a major instance; the depletion of the ozone layer may be another.

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah serves as a warning of what could (and did) become of Israel’s own land; the text may allude to the fall of Jerusalem (Deut 29:22-23; Jer 4:23-26). The link between the practice of justice and righteousness and the future of the land remains very close, as the prophets often point out (see Hos 4:1-3). They focus their message of judgment in a sharply corporate manner, rooted in God’s concern for the oppressed, deeply embedded in the law (Exod 22:21-23). The prophets do voice a hope regarding the regardening of the land (Isa 51:3; Ezek 36:35), but only on the far side of ecological and historical disaster.

While judgment language may be difficult to accept, for God not to be concerned about the oppression of people would mean that God does not finally care about evil and its effects. What are misdemeanors to us may be disasters to God, not least because God sees the evil effects they have on the creation in a way that we do not. At the same time, this story shows that God is not eager that judgment fall. God consults with Abraham about the possibility of another future short of judgment; God appears open to alternatives. The speech of God in Ezek 18:32 (NRSV), “I have no pleasure in the death of anyone,” also characterizes the God of this text. This cuts against the grain of any notion that Israel’s God acts as a punitive God focused on the punishment of the wicked. Israel’s God is “slow to anger,” even with the nonchosen.

4. This text illustrates the situation in Sodom as homosexual activity (condemned for males in Israel [Lev 18:22; 20:13]), but refers specifically to the abusive violence and savage inhospitality. The text does not talk about homosexual activity or orientation generally, or nonviolent sexual behavior. Other biblical references to Sodom lift up a wide range of behavior, from neglect of the poor and needy to lies, greed, luxury, heterosexual abuse, and inhospitality to strangers (Isa 1:9-10; Jer 23:14; Lam 4:6; Ezek 16:48-55; Zeph 2:9). Jesus remains true to the text in condemning a town to a fate like Sodom’s because of its refusal to receive strangers who bear the word of God (Matt

5. Abraham forthrightly raises the issue of theodicy. He brings questions about the justice of God directly to God, who fields them in a way that does not close off conversation. These issues are raised so sharply because of crisis contexts in which this material functioned. The fate of the righteous, not least the children (Lam 2:20; 4:10), in the judgment of Samaria (Amos 7:1-6) or Jerusalem (Ezek 14:12-20) was a lively issue, as was the saving role of the few for the many (see Isa 53:1-12; Jer 5:1). In such events the innocent (many more than ten!) often have perished with the guilty. Would it be Abraham’s view that the Judge of all the earth has often not acted correctly?

We usually conceive of the relationship between act and consequence in individual terms, letting the judicial system “take care of” the penalty. We think less often about corporate sin and judgment, but actions against a corporate aggressor (e.g., war) are rooted in such understandings. In God’s concern for the moral order at this level, the righteous are caught up in the judgment of the wicked and suffer with them, e.g., children in the fall of Jerusalem (or the World Wars). In such cases, we are seldom able precisely to sort the innocent and the righteous from the wicked. More generally, the interconnectedness of life means that evil actions will have dire consequences for those who are not guilty. The innocent often suffer the consequences of acts committed by the wicked.

Abraham’s question focuses on the fairness of the moral order. Should the innocent perish when the wicked are judged? But Abraham argues for the saving of not only the righteous, but also the entire city because of the presence of the righteous, more precisely in order to save the righteous. The priority ought to be given to the righteous. In effect, the presence of the righteous would lead to the extension of the divine mercy upon all. This, of course, would mean that the wicked would not receive their just deserts. So Abraham seeks to abandon any exact retribution system, but discovers in the process that no such system exists.

Abraham, however, introduces a qualification. He raises the precise number of righteous people that ought to be present. The numbers ought not to be taken literally; that would establish a kind of quota to which divine judgment would be bound. Yet, the numbers are important (the dialogue focuses there) and indicate the kind of issue Abraham raises. Two questions will help to address this issue:

Why does Abraham not begin with one righteous person or take it all the way down to one? If he wanted to reverse this approach completely, the presence of one would be sufficient to make his case. He must want to make another point. Moreover, he stops at ten. God takes leave at that juncture, with Abraham and God in apparent agreement. Why are fifty or ten righteous persons enough to spare the city, but one or so not? Sarna pushes
in the right direction. Ten represents the limit of the number of righteous who could outweigh the cumulative evil of the community. Ten constitutes the “minimum effective social entity,” a critical mass, for this situation (for other situations, the number would vary considerably). The buildup of wickedness and its effects in Sodom are such that ten righteous would not be able to turn around the potential for judgment. So few righteous could not affect the shape of the future in a positive way.

Through this conversation, Abraham recognizes that God will indeed act justly concerning Sodom, and indeed any corporate entity. But, with respect to corporate justice, there comes a point when justice must be done, even radical surgery undertaken, even if some righteous people get caught up in the judgment. Other options are not finally tolerable, especially an option where the Sodomites would not be brought to account in any way for the terrible injustice they are visiting upon people. To avoid judgment would allow evil to go unchecked in the world.

God agrees that the righteous few can often save a city. But Abraham recognizes that there comes a point when even the righteous are too few to turn a situation around (fewer than ten). Even then, what the righteous do in such situations will make a difference, but not a predictable one. Perhaps even ten (or whatever) will not finally be enough. Abraham persuades

God to think of a lower number of righteous that might make a difference in Sodom’s situation, but finally he chooses not to seek to overturn the moral order, recognizing the justice in it.

Genesis 19:29 presents one other point of persuasion when God remembers Abraham and saves Lot. Abraham is concerned about all righteous persons who may have been in the city (he begins with fifty!). Although Abraham does not specifically mention Lot, neither does the author identify Lot as righteous; one has difficulty in linking God’s remembering in 19:29 with anything other than Abraham’s expressed advocacy. Does God then make an extraordinary exception to the judgment that will catch up the righteous in Sodom? Does God save Lot (and the people of Zoar!) arbitrarily?

For one thing, the fact that the righteous will suffer judgment with the wicked does not belong, necessarily, to the order of things. The moral order does not involve a tight causal weave, with no room for chance or randomness, for the serendipitous or the extraordinary event.

For another, intercession counts for something: Abraham’s intercessory advocacy makes a difference. The community of faith tends to intercede for those of whom it approves or causes it endorses. We do not often intercede for the Lots and Sodoms of this world, persons who have disappointed us by the direction they have taken with their lives. Jesus
identifies our obligation: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matt 5:44-47 NRSV; see Jer 29:7).

At the same time, such activity cannot be separated from the kind of response to the warnings one sees in Lot and his family in chap. 19. If such alarms are deemed to be in jest, the potential effect of intercession will be cut off. Lot illustrates how the journey of faith may end on a very tragic note. Choices people make can adversely affect the power of intercession and the divine engagement in their lives.

This text witnesses to the significance of the presence of the righteous in any situation; they can subvert the effects of sin and evil from within the city so that the consequences are less severe, perhaps even sparing the wicked and reclaiming the city. This author argues against fatalism among the righteous, the belief that nothing can be done about society’s problems, that plays down the potential impact of human activity and resigns itself to sin’s consequences. The righteous can indeed make a difference, to the world and to God.

The positive note in vv. 30-38 entails an understanding of a God who works for good in the midst of great evil (50:20). The decision of Lot’s daughters correlates to their father’s earlier abuse of them. A father who would offer them to the entire male population of the town for the purpose of sexual services could hardly have had an appropriate relationship with them, no matter how patriarchal the family structures may have been. Their father showed them the way, as have abusive fathers over the centuries; it takes little imagination to recall abusive situations just as devastating in our own society. In such moments, hope in a God who keeps promises through the worst of times can sustain one through to another day. Even then, the journey of a family may continue to be filled with troubles, as the Genesis narrative unfolds. Yet, that one grandson of Lot (Moab), an ancestor of David and Jesus, witnesses to what God can bring out of the worst of situations. Someday God will raise up a single innocent one who does have the power to save the many unrighteous, not by resigning himself to that wickedness or ignoring it, but taking it into himself and exploding the powers of death from within (Isa 53:5, 10: Hos 11:8-9).

Genesis 20:1-18, Abraham, Sarah, and Abimelech

This text (often assigned to E) closely parallels 12:10-20 and 26:1-11 but includes more
dialogue and theological reflection. These ties invite a comparison, but such analyses ought to center on the text’s role within its present literary context. The narrative provides a return look at Abraham after all that has happened in chaps. 12–19. Given these events, especially Abraham’s developing relationship with God, how might he fare in a situation like the one he faced in 12:10-20?

Links with chaps. 18–19 are especially strong: issues of justice, human and divine (Abraham proves to be closer to the Sodomites than Abimelech!), sin and consequence, Abraham as intercessor. Chapter 21 will return to contact between Abraham and Abimelech (vv. 22-34), but sandwiched in between is a narrative of birth and separation. Focus on the closing of wombs in 20:18 leads into the story of the conception and birth of Isaac (21:1-7), where God’s action and Abraham’s paternity reinforce 20:4-6.

The author builds this story around three dialogues: Abimelech with God (vv. 3-7), Abimelech with Abraham (vv. 9-13), and Abraham and Sarah (vv. 15-16).

20:1-7. Abraham journeys (lšn nAsa () and sojourns (rwg gûr ) for the first time since 12:9-10, which introduced the previous story of threat to Sarah. Now Abraham sojourns in the city-state of Gerar (in the southwestern corner of Canaan in what became Philistine territory, see 21:34).

In 12:10-20, the narrator presented early the reasoning behind Abraham’s calling Sarah his sister; here the rationale is delayed until vv. 11-13. Abraham, already in Gerar, initially claims that Sarah is his sister. Only in v. 5 are we told that Abraham spoke these words to Abimelech, the king of Gerar, and that Sarah had concurred. Placing Abraham’s claim at the onset of the story suggests that he has not learned from the previous experience. Once again, he deliberately betrays Sarah. Her acquiescence notwithstanding, Abraham knowingly places her life and well-being in jeopardy. Even more, he apparently still does not believe that God’s promise of a son includes Sarah (see 17:16-17). In spite of all the divine words and deeds in his life, Abraham does not address the issue in theological terms. Even more, he fails to consider the effects of his actions on outsiders. These actions may well provide some of the backdrop for the testing in chap. 22.

In view of what Abraham does, and Abimelech’s taking Sarah, God abruptly enters the situation to protect Sarah. God speaks to Abimelech in a dream (see 28:10-22; 37; 40–41; dreams were considered a medium of divine revelation and no less real or personal than a direct divine encounter). Abimelech and God carry out a conversation within the dream; Abimelech claims

innocence since he did not know that Sarah was married to Abraham. This interchange (vv. 3-7) appears unusual in a number of respects.

(a) God speaks to one who stands outside the community of faith (cf. 31:24; Num 22:20), indeed engages in dialogue with him. Abimelech’s response (vv. 4-5) occasions a
positive response in God (vv. 6-7), which opens up the possibilities for life rather than death.

(b) Similar to Abraham in 18:22-33, Abimelech acts in a situation of perceived injustice. He not only pleads with God, but sharply questions God and flatly states his innocence (“pure heart and clean hands” may be a legal formula; cf. 17:1; Pss 24:4; 78:72); he places his action in the context of his general loyalty to interhuman relationships. He refuses to acquiesce in the face of a divine decision or resign himself to the announced fate of death. He expects his innocence to be acknowledged if justice is to be served. His question in v. 4 appears like Abraham’s in 18:25: “Lord, will you destroy an innocent people [ywg gôy]?” Verses 7, 9, 17-18 indicate the events have affected more than Abimelech as an individual. God acknowledges Abimelech’s innocence.

(c) Verse 6 states that God has been so active in his life that Abimelech was prevented from touching Sarah (we learn from v. 17). Because God states this reason, the claim is incontestable.

(d) God announces that Abimelech is a dead man because of what he has done (v. 3), even though v. 6 makes clear that God knew he was innocent. Hence, the announcement of v. 3 serves not as a forensic judgment, but as a matter-of-fact divine statement regarding the moral order and its effects on Abimelech. We learn from vv. 17-18 that Abimelech’s death would have been caused by a malady that was capable of being healed and that the women of his household were unable to conceive. The moral order means that certain deeds have an effect just by virtue of their having happened, and people reap the consequences quite apart from their intentions or their knowledge of what they have done (a reality just as true today as then).

(e) God devotes attention to the effects of the deeds apart from questions of guilt or innocence. In preventing Abimelech from touching Sarah through an illness, God has prevented a worse deed from occurring and even more serious effects. So the situation is not as bad as it might have been! Possibilities for the future are more hopeful as a result.

God specifies that two things must happen for Abimelech’s life to be preserved (v. 7): He should restore Sarah to Abraham, and then Abraham, a prophet, should pray for him. Indeed, if he does not so proceed, his entire family will be claimed by death. Abimelech must do more than restore the situation to the point where it started. He also must consider all the effects that his action has let loose. God deems prayer necessary in order to deal with such realities (see v. 17).

God’s word about Abraham’s being a prophet serves a double purpose. It protects Abraham from any precipitous judgment that Abimelech may wish to pass, for it makes his life dependent on Abraham’s intercession. It also shows God’s concern for Abimelech, providing a means by which he can be brought through this difficulty alive. To use the word prophet for Abraham is anachronistic, and may be used because prophets were commonly associated with intercessory activity (cf. 1 Sam 12:23; Jer 11:14).
Abimelech reacts in two basic ways. (1) He calls all his servants together and reports the event to them (cf. 41:8). Their response is fear; the fallout from this act will adversely affect their lives (see v. 17). (2) Having been assured by God that he has acted innocently, Abimelech confronts Abraham and in effect conducts a judicial inquiry. He does this with knowledge regarding Abraham’s complicity that Abraham does not know he has. He does not reveal where he got the information, however, and seeks to get Abraham to tell the story from his own point of view. His charges, expressed as assertions and as rhetorical questions, are on target. Given what Abimelech knows and has suffered, he shows notable restraint and magnanimity toward the guilty one.

Two striking things occur in this: (1) the outsider pronounces Abraham guilty: “You have done things to me that ought not to be done” (v. 9). Abimelech’s sin language reveals the essence of the problem. He has not sinned (afj hAtA) against Abraham, but Abraham has brought a “great guilt” (hafj hatA) on him. Abraham’s sin lies at the root of the problem, and its effects have reached out through Abimelech’s innocent deed and engulfed his entire kingdom. Gerar faces a situation not unlike Sodom and Gomorrah, but this time due to Abraham’s unrighteousness. (2) God uses the outsider as a confessor, eliciting a confession from Abraham himself.

In responding (vv. 10-13), Abraham does not deny his guilt, but becomes very defensive and seeks to justify his actions. He gives three reasons: (a) He had determined with certainty (qr raq) that there was no fear of God in this place and so had to protect himself (as in 12:10-20, killing an alien was considered less an offense than adultery). In view of what Abraham has done, and what the reader has learned about Abimelech, this reason appears highly ironic (and may explain its delay). The “fear of God” may indeed be found in this place. Not all cities are like Sodom! It is Abraham who has not exhibited the fear of God; this lays the groundwork for the testing of Abraham’s fear of God (22:12; to distinguish between Abimelech’s and Abraham’s fear of God misses this point).

(b) Sarah, his half-sister, became his wife (a permissible practice, later forbidden, Deut 27:22). This rationale does not speak to the point being made. Abraham had not given Abimelech sufficient knowledge to make a proper decision regarding Sarah.

(c) Genesis 20 does not offer a special case; Abraham has done this at every place where they have sojourned! His focus on kindness (dsj hesed) to himself, and laying the blame back on God for making him wander (not the full truth of the matter), have a self-serving ring. This suggests a less than trusting relation to God, let alone an inability to develop strategies for life that are in the best interests of all those who might be affected.

Given the defensiveness of Abraham’s reply, Abimelech’s response seems magnanimous indeed. He not only restores Sarah (the use of “brother” means he either accepts
Abraham’s explanation or keeps his deed front and center in the midst of the generosity), he gives Abraham a significant sum of money for the purpose of vindicating her within her family (literally, a “covering of eyes”)—a public demonstration that she has not been wronged and hence can be held in honor within her community. He also gives them animals and servants and offers them a place to live in his land (unlike 12:19-20).

Abraham responds by interceding on Abimelech’s behalf (see 18:22-33; Num 12:13; 21:7). God responds to his prayer and heals Abimelech (of an uncertain malady) and his wife and female slaves so that they can once again bear children (illness? Was Sarah included?). Instead of being an agent of blessing, Abraham had been an agent of curse; but by praying he can begin to turn around what he has done. Note that the narrator uses the name Yahweh for the first time in this narrative (v. 18), perhaps to make clear that this activity functions consistently with the work of God, whom Abimelech’s community confesses. This community of outsiders receives, thereby, order (salvation).

REFLECTIONS

1. God attends to what Abimelech has to say in vv. 4-5; it affects the shape of the future. God takes seriously religious questioning by the “unchosen” ones. Moreover, God engages them directly, albeit through less than “orthodox” channels (such as dreams). The fact that Abimelech is a Canaanite ruler makes this point even more notable.

The reader finds goodness and a keen sense of justice among the outsiders. “The Canaanite king hears the voice that speaks as God’s voice because it says what he recognizes to be just and valid.”143 The narrator, of course, understands this voice as that of the God of Abraham. Throughout the ages, nonchosen people often have had a profound sense of justice and truth, and they have often been teachers of the community of faith regarding such matters. The text functions with a sense of natural law as a part of the created order of things that can be discerned and observed apart from faith. (See Jesus’ evaluation of the centurion in Matt 8:10: “In no one in Israel have I found such faith” [NRSV].)

Once again, God uses an outsider to convict the chosen ones of their sinful deeds (see 12:18-19). Persons of faith have not listened to outsiders as often as they should, perhaps thinking that they cannot be called to account by such persons on moral issues. Many people who are not a part of the community of faith have consciences more sensitive than the people of God, who do not have a corner on discerning right and wrong. One might claim that Abimelech is motivated by self-interest, for he needs Abraham’s intercession to be healed. Yet, the overall portrayal of Abimelech suggests a person of character. Although not the root cause of this problem, he seeks to bring healing to the situation far beyond the level of his own involvement.

2. For God to hold an individual back from sinning (v. 6) raises a theological issue. If
God can enter into people’s lives and, at will, prevent them from sinning (in this case, through Abimelech’s illness), then human sin reflects a divine choice, occurring only when God chooses not to hold individuals back from doing so. A more likely interpretation would be that Abimelech does not sin because he responds to the work of God in his life.

Texts such as this should prompt reflection concerning God’s relationship with those outside the chosen community. It should prevent easy assumptions about God’s presence and activity in their lives. Whether such persons recognize the transcendent reality at work is another matter, of course. They often may be unable to name the experience for what it is. The community of faith faces a challenge to speak about the faith with these persons in such a way that connections can be made with the God experiences they have already had, enabling them to move toward naming that experience for what it in fact has been. God speaks with Abimelech fundamentally to preserve Sarah, but also because of a concern for Abimelech.

3. References to the effect of Abimelech’s deed upon his people highlight the communal impact of an individual’s sin, insufficiently recognized in modern individualistic understandings of sin and guilt. Words for “sin” can refer to any point on a continuum from the sinful act (the first reference in v. 9) to its far-reaching effects (the second). An innocent person, indeed an entire nation, has been caught up in the effects of another’s sin. Because of the seamless web of life, the interconnectedness of all things, those who are innocent are often caught up in the consequences of the sinful deeds of others (from personal abuse to wars).

In a related matter, this narrative clarifies the importance of distinguishing between forgiveness and salvation. One may be forgiven for a sin committed and thereby be restored within the broken relationship; but forgiveness, however many positive results it may have, does not wipe out with one stroke the effects of the sin. Those effects have to be dealt with in other ways, the result of which may be called salvation. Isaiah 40:1-11 is an illustration: God announces forgiveness in vv. 1-2, but salvation still lies in the future. A contemporary illustration: A parent may be forgiven for the abuse of a child, but the effects of that abuse in the child’s life will need considerable attention over the months and years to come before the child is healed.

4. Abraham, once again, has brought trouble rather than blessing to outsiders (v. 9). He has not attended very well to the call to be a blessing to all families. This no doubt mirrors the people of God in later generations, who have often mistreated strangers and aliens in their midst (a concern deeply rooted in Israel’s law, cf. Exod 22:21-27). Deeds of the chosen have all too often led to the suffering of others.

5. God does not heal directly, but works through Abraham’s prayers. The prayer of a righteous person may avail much (James 5:16), but here the prayer of an unrighteous Abraham proves effective. The righteous one needs the prayers of the unrighteous chosen one. God has chosen to work through even such persons to carry out the divine purposes.
Other texts will speak of additional means (e.g., 2 Kgs 20:7), but prayer appears here as a powerful vehicle through which God works to heal.

6. God works for life and goodness, both within and without the community of faith, and often

<Page 484 Ends><Page 485 Begins>

in spite of the words and deeds of the chosen ones. Although they may complicate and frustrate the divine activity, they cannot finally stymie it; God will find a way to work toward the divine purposes. The next narrative speaks about other ways in which God continues this task.

GENESIS 21:1-34, ISAAC, ISHMAEL, AND ABIMELECH

OVERVIEW

The three episodes in this chapter are sewn together by word plays and other verbal and thematic links. The stories of the birth of Isaac and the expulsion of Hagar and Ishmael are internally linked, and together they are enclosed by stories about Abimelech. The first (20:1-17) is tied to 21:1-7 by the references to God’s involvement in the lives of women having difficulty bearing children; the second (21:22-34) follows a story in which water and wells, and relationships between insiders and outsiders, also play a role. The birth of Isaac is surrounded by many texts associated with nonchosen people, suggesting that issues of Israel’s relationship to such people (see 12:3) are central. The story of Hagar and Ishmael also has many links with chap. 22 (see below).

Genesis 21:1-7, The Birth of Isaac
Link to:

COMMENTARY

Isaac’s birth brings a key aspect of the story of Abraham to a climax. The writer depicts it in quite straightforward fashion, considering all the problems and possibilities that have led up to this moment (some twenty-five years have passed since 12:4).

The work of the redactor (the narratives are a mix of JEP) includes cross-references, with four citations back to earlier narratives (vv. 1, 2, 4). They stress that God has made good on the promises (17:15-21) and that Abraham has been obedient in naming and circumcising Isaac (17:12,

<Page 485 Ends><Page 486 Begins>

19; cf. 17:23). Readers will recall the ages of Sarah and Abraham; that constitutes the wonder of the occasion (see 24:36; barrenness is no longer in view). The theme of laughter associated with Isaac’s name continues. Only Sarah speaks in response to Isaac’s
birth (vv. 6-7). Abraham remains silent here and throughout much of the chapter, for reasons that are not entirely clear.

The distinct divine acts in v. 1 (cf. Luke 1:68) stress that God has made Isaac’s birth possible. The first verb (dq pAQad, various translations are possible) links this act of God with Exodus events (50:24-25; Exod 3:16; 4:31), showing the import of Isaac for the larger divine purpose. The promise language in 17:16 focuses on blessing, so one should think of a divine creative activity that makes Sarah’s pregnancy possible (see 11:30).

God’s naming of Isaac leads to his naming by both Abraham (v. 3) and Sarah (implicitly in v. 6). Whether vv. 6-7 contain one or two explanations of the name Isaac is debated, but the element of shame is unlikely. Verse 6 refers to Sarah’s joy at the birth of Isaac; others who hear about the birth will rejoice with her. Verse 7 gives the reason: No one would have dreamed of announcing to Abraham that two such old people would become parents. They themselves did not believe it could be so!

Isaac’s name thus expresses the joy at his birth, with only an indirect reference to the earlier laughter at God’s promise of a son. Indeed, the author construes the former disbelief as something anyone would do. We best understand the final line in v. 7 (an inclusio with v. 2) as a cry of joy: “I have borne him a son in his old age” (see Reflections).

REFLECTIONS

1. Isaac, though the son of promise, will also cause problems, tearing this family apart. But at this moment he is the source of deep joy. The cynical laughter of these parents has not been held against them; it has been turned into genuine joy at this new life made possible by God. God has brought an end to cynicism and despair of the future; joyful hope fills the scene.

2. God does not act independently when dealing with Sarah (v. 1). The author uses the verb bear/beget (dly yAlad, used five times, twice in v. 3, but obscured in NRSV/NIV; cf. 17:17) to describe the roles of both Abraham and Sarah. At the same time, this event occurs only because God has become involved in some way, when all the roads into the future seem blocked (the text stresses their age). God works in and through human beings to carry out his purposes in the world, with all the complications and potential difficulties related thereto. The unusual cross-references stress not only the fulfillment of God’s word, but also that this was not the only future possible for God. The faith of Abraham and Sarah remains relevant to all of this (as Rom 4:16-21 and Heb 11:11-12 make clear).

A modern question arises, however: In what sense can we (do we!) still speak of God’s involvement in bringing a new life into being? The question is especially poignant for those parents who have had difficulty having children. The OT speaks graphically of this in some texts (e.g., Job 10:8-12; Ps 139:13). One might speak of multiple agency; both God and parents are involved in the shaping of new life. We do not normally understand God’s power as all-determinative; the parental situation can profoundly affect matters,
e.g., cocaine babies. Genetics or unknown factors appear more complicated. One should think of God’s creative involvement in and through the medical community seeking to overcome these realities, resulting in breakthroughs for many parents.

This text might suggest that God can set aside natural processes (in this case, age) for his own special purposes. At the same time, the NT texts noted above indicate that this divine action relates to human response (in this case, faith in a specific promise). A likely reason for the long delay in the fulfillment of the promise relates to the developing response of Abraham and Sarah (including their lack of trust in 17:17; 18:12). Generally, God’s perseverance within a human situation may find openings into the future that seem impossible to us, but God’s will may also be frustrated in view of human response.

Genesis 21:8-21, Hagar and Ishmael
Link to:

COMMENTARY

This story has often been considered a doublet with chap. 16 (J and E versions; see the distinctive use of Yahweh and Elohim). Through this “doubling,” Hagar and Ishmael become more prominent figures in the story of Abraham, receiving almost as much attention as Isaac. They cannot be set aside as minor diversions in the larger story.

The fulfillment of the divine promise in Isaac’s birth occasions problems as well as possibilities. The immediate problem has to do with the relationship between Abraham’s two sons. Ishmael and Isaac are both children of promise (see their parallel genealogies in 25:12, 19). In 17:19-20, however, God has made clear to Abraham the difference between the sons. God would make a covenant with Sarah’s son, the yet-to-be-born Isaac. But God would not overlook Ishmael; indeed, God makes promises to him as well (16:10; 17:20; 21:13, 18). God’s redemptive purposes on behalf of the world (including Ishmael!) will manifest themselves through Isaac. Some of the dynamics associated with this divinely determined distinction are worked out in these verses.

21:8-14. The author begins by noting that Isaac is growing up; hence, the relationship with Ishmael will need attention. At the same time, the relationship between Sarah and Hagar (16:3-9) was either not resolved amicably or has deteriorated in the three years since Isaac’s birth. The references to Hagar as an Egyptian and bearer of Abraham’s child are linked to the conflict in chap. 16, as is Sarah’s repeated reference to Hagar as the “slave woman” (cf. 16:2, 5) and her concern about inheritance rights (legally, both sons would inherit). Sarah expresses concern about her maturing son’s future.
These factors are sufficient explanation for Sarah’s action. Yet, the difficulty in translating v. 9 (see Gal 4:29, where Ishmael “persecutes” Isaac) prompts a closer look. The verb qjx (zAhaq, “mocking” [NIV]; “playing” [NRSV, adding “with her son Isaac,” see footnote]) can have positive or negative senses (cf. 19:14). The verb has appeared in earlier narratives—the name Isaac and Sarah’s and Abraham’s laughter (17:17-19; 18:12-13). The word play associated with Ishmael’s activity may have reminded her of the divine decision (17:19-20). Not unlike Rebekah (cf. 25:23), she decides it is time to act; Abraham must choose between his sons. Inasmuch as God will support her objective, at least in this regard the author views Sarah’s action in positive terms.

Sarah’s strategy is also difficult to understand, however. She demands that Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away, using language that recalls Pharaoh’s action in Exod 12:39 (and led to Israel’s freedom!). She also chooses the festival associated with the weaning of Isaac, a time of rejoicing because he has survived the difficult first years. Her timing and means seem unnecessarily harsh, and (unlike chap. 16) she does not speak to Hagar. Yet God, agreeing with Sarah’s objective, chooses not to interfere with her strategy.

Abraham appears distressed at Sarah’s request (v. 11). His concern centers on Ishmael rather than Hagar (cf. 17:18), because Sarah insists that he choose between his two sons; God’s reply (v. 12) expresses concern about Hagar as well. The narrator’s use of “his son” (i.e., Ishmael) intensifies his anguish. Abraham is genuinely torn. This characteristic of Abraham has recurred in the narrative (cf. 16:6; 17:18). He has difficulty taking decisive action or following through on what God has said; yet, he shows deep levels of concern for the plight of the persons involved, and he does not finally stand in the way of God’s directive.

In responding to Abraham (perhaps in a dream, v. 14), God sides with Sarah, adopts some of her language, and tells him to do as she says! God supports her objective and lets her set the strategy; Abraham must set his own feelings aside. God’s rationale basically repeats what had been told to Abraham earlier (17:19-21), making it doubly clear that Abraham must make a choice. Both sons are recognized as Abraham’s offspring (vv. 12-13; literally, “seed”), but God’s particular future will be worked out through Isaac, however difficult or unpleasant that may be. God announces that it is through Isaac that descendants will be “named” for Abraham (NRSV), which probably refers to the covenantal line. At the same time, Abraham can be assured that God will care for the future of Ishmael. God will make of him a great nation also (vv. 13, 18).

This divine concern appears immediately (vv. 15-21). Abraham does as God tells him (jlv [sAlah, “send away”] again—see chap. 16—is language for Israel’s freedom in Exodus, e.g., 5:1-2). The author creates a poignant picture in v. 14—not a single word is spoken (the text remains ambiguous as to whether Ishmael—now about sixteen years old—is placed on Hagar’s shoulder). This verse stands parallel to 22:3, as do other elements in this text (see below).

21:15-21. The parallels with Exodus continue in
Hagar and Ishmael’s “wandering in the wilderness,” again mirroring Israel’s later experience (as does the provision of water). With water supplies depleted, Hagar puts Ishmael under a bush and moves away in deep sorrow; she cannot bear to watch him die. God hears “the voice of the boy” (her lament and Ishmael’s are telescoped) and responds to “her” (by name; no “slave-girl”) with a salvation oracle: God quells her fear and assures her of Ishmael’s future in words used with Abraham (v. 13). God opens Hagar’s eyes and she sees (cf. the seeing in 16:13) the source of water needed to save Ishmael’s life. The now-familiar God/messenger of God rhythm appears (see 16:7).

The story closes with three themes that bode well for the future of both mother and child: “God was with the lad” (as with Abraham in v. 22); Hagar exhibits no little strength in continuing to care for his needs (finding a wife for him among her own people, the only time a mother does this in the OT); and he becomes an expert hunter. All these are important for shaping Ishmael’s life well, but God’s presence with him and God’s promise to be creatively at work in his life stand out. His twelve sons parallel Jacob’s progeny (25:12-18). Ishmael and Isaac, both as “sons,” will return for the burial of their father (25:9).

REFLECTIONS

1. The modern reader may tend to side with Abraham rather than Sarah on the issue of sending Hagar and Ishmael away. Yet, some such move must occur if the sons are to shape their separate futures consistent with God’s choice (17:19-20), a historical and theological reality for the narrator. Her objective seems to be on target, even if the means are unnecessarily harsh. It may be more troubling that God lets Sarah set the strategy for the separation. Here, again, God chooses to work through complex situations and imperfect human beings on behalf of the divine purposes. God works with individuals on the scene; God does not perfect people before deciding to work through them. God may see Sarah’s strategy, however inadequate, as the best possible way into the future for this particular moment in the life of this family.

2. Although Genesis 22 has received most of the attention, this story of Ishmael is certainly just as difficult and heart-rending. The father-son relationship between Abraham and Ishmael is close and strong. Note some of the parallels between the episodes: In 21:14 and 22:3 Abraham rises “early in the morning” and wordlessly proceeds to put his son’s future in jeopardy; both seem to move relentlessly toward death. In both cases, Abraham obeys God’s command and trusts in the divine promise, leaving the future of his sons in the hands of God. Hagar voices her lament, while Abraham voices his confidence that God will provide; the sons voice laments, though only Isaac speaks. The angel of the Lord calls from heaven and speaks of a role for their hands, assuring each parent that the son will live. The eyes of both see a source of life that saves their sons.

These are parallel events in Abraham’s life. What he endures as a parent of what is now
an “only son” (22:2, 12, 16) appears all the more extraordinary. The character of God’s “test” of Abraham in chap. 22 is intensified; God’s promises are placed in jeopardy in both cases. This should occasion reflection about why the threat to the life of the “outsider” (see chap. 16) is so widely neglected compared to the threatened life of the chosen one of God. The narrator thinks otherwise. The narrative holds us to “the tension between the one elected and the not-elected one who is treasured” by God.144

3. Hagar’s lament ensues in the assurance of salvation. This typical rhythm characterizes Israel’s communal and individual life, so evident in the Psalms. In this story the people of God should recognize and rejoice that God’s saving acts are not confined to their own community. God’s acts of deliverance occur out and about in the seemingly godforsaken corners of the world, even among those who may be explicitly excluded from the “people of God.” Here we see God at work among the outcasts, the refugees of the world—who fill our world as much as they did then. Persons of faith are to participate in their lives, to lift them up and hold them fast until the wells become available. They are also to discern where God’s delivering activity may have occurred, to name these events for what they are, and publicly to confess them as such to the participants and to all the world. Once again, we see how Genesis witnesses to the workings of the Creator God. Telling and retelling stories like this one keeps that testimony alive and serves to remind the chosen that their God is the God of all the world, including the outcasts.

Phyllis Trible speaks eloquently about Hagar’s becoming many things to many people (see chap. 16): “Most especially, all sorts of rejected women find their stories in her. She is the faithful maid exploited, the black woman used by the male and abused by the female of the ruling class, the surrogate mother, the resident alien without legal recourse, the other woman, the runaway youth, the religious fleeing from affliction, the pregnant young woman alone, the expelled wife, the divorced mother with child, the shopping bag lady carrying bread and water, the homeless woman, the indigent relying upon handouts from the power structures, the welfare mother, and the self-effacing female whose own identity shrinks in service to others.”145 How does the community of faith respond to these Hagars of our world?

The text does affirm that God chooses the line of Isaac, not that of Ishmael. This is a strong claim, and it occasions a sharper question for Isaac’s descendants than if the treatment had been more “even-handed.” What one does with the Ishmaels of this world in the face of the claims for Isaac comes front and center. Abraham was chosen so that all families might be blessed through him. This means that the children of Abraham who are also the children of Isaac are so to comport themselves that blessing rather than curse comes upon the nations.

4. This text reminds us that the world is filled with both physical and spiritual (as Christians relate to Abraham) descendants of Ishmael. Nearly one billion Muslims, 85
percent of whom live outside the Middle East, call Abraham father, too. Even more, they are the descendants of God’s promise to Ishmael, which remains a contemporary theological reality. How is the other half of Abraham’s family going to relate to these brothers and sisters in ways that acknowledge this ongoing work of God? Our words and actions may run so counter to God’s activity that the divine will for this people, embodied in the promises, is thereby frustrated and hence less effective than it might otherwise be.

Paul’s use of this text in Gal 4:21-31 picks up on the story in a somewhat narrow way, but does not finally stand over against this point. Using an allegorical approach, Hagar and Sarah symbolize two different ways of conceiving of life in God’s world: Hagar, the way of slavery and law (Sinai); and Sarah, the way of promise and the freedom of the Spirit. Ishmael was produced in natural, humanly planned ways; Isaac came only as a gift of God’s promise. Paul uses this contrast to address differences between Christianity and Judaism, with Christians belonging to the line of promise. From another angle, Hagar could be the embodiment of Paul’s argument, with her combination of necessity (her return to Sarah) and freedom. Paul’s word in Gal 3:28-29, that there are neither slave nor free, but that all are one in Christ Jesus, could provide another perspective on Hagar, who bears public witness to the God of Abraham and Sarah.

Genesis 21:22-34, Abraham and Abimelech
Link to:

COMMENTARY

This episode explores the relationship between Abraham and Abimelech, which began in chap. 20 (cf. Isaac in 26:1-33). It may be an interweaving of two covenant stories (from J and E?) that explain the name Beersheba (cf. 26:33) as the “well of the oath” and the “well of seven [ewe lambs].”

Abimelech appears as a character in two separate episodes, a common feature in the Abraham cycle (witness the wife-sister theme, covenant, Lot, Hagar, and Ishmael). This “doubling” brings greater coherence to the larger story. Here it suggests that the relationship between Abraham and other peoples (especially those in Canaan) matters. Isaac’s birth occurs in the midst of a world filled with various problems. The story also highlights Abraham’s initial acquisition of land in Canaan (cf. chap. 23). Beersheba, at the southernmost boundary of Judah, did not become a city until later times.

The transition between vv. 21 and 22 is abrupt but presupposes the problems created for Abimelech by Abraham in chap. 20. There are few links to the story of Hagar and Ishmael, but both relate Abraham to non-Israelite peoples, and in ways that exhibit the importance of positive relationships about which God expresses concern.
We may compare the content of vv. 22-24 to

the report about Isaac and Abimelech/Phicol in 26:26-33. Abimelech’s testimony regards God’s presence with Abraham and Abimelech’s concern that the basic human loyalty (dsj hesed) he has shown Abraham be returned to his family (and to the land!). Abraham swears that he will do so. The reference to posterity brings the problematic relationships between Israelites and Canaanites over the years into view. Abraham serves as a mirror in which those generations can reflect about such relationships.

Within the relationship just established, Abraham complains to Abimelech about his servants’ actions in seizing a well (v. 25), an important resource in that world (see 26:27). Abimelech pleads ignorance, but also notes that he had not been informed until this moment (in view of chap. 20, this response is not evasive). This exchange concludes with a nonaggression pact, according to which the two agree to maintain a relationship of integrity. Abraham contributes sheep and oxen for his part, but from among them sets seven ewe lambs apart and gives them a special significance.

Abimelech’s reply to Abimelech’s natural query about the lambs indicates that, by accepting them as an addendum to the oath, Abimelech makes a public witness that the well is not his but Abraham’s. This shrewd move settles the conflict over the well. Beersheba receives its name based on this sworn oath and the gift/acceptance of the seven lambs. In this way, the story provides grounding for both meanings—well of seven or well of the oath (NRSV)—of the name Beersheba.

Abimelech and Phicol return to their own territories. The “land of the Philistines” could be an anachronism (the Philistines settled in that land around 1200 BCE), yet it probably represents the knowledge of the Abrahamic era available to the narrator. Philistines may represent all pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land. Abraham plants a tree at Beersheba as a permanent sign of the treaty and worships God. The epithet used for God (only here)—El Olam, the Everlasting God—may testify to the appropriation of an epithet/name of the god El for Yahweh (cf. Ps 102:24-29). When related to the nature of this specific event, it expresses a confidence in God’s tending to this relationship long after the death of the present participants. The final note that Abraham sojourned for an extensive period of time in Abimelech’s land testifies not only to the effectiveness of the treaty, but also to Abraham’s continuing alien status in a land included in the promise (15:18-21).

REFLECTIONS

Abimelech again discerns the character of Abraham’s situation theologically. He interprets Abraham’s relationship with God: “God is with you in all that you do” (v. 22), in language identical to the narrator’s interpretation of Ishmael in v. 20. In other words, God has blessed Abraham in all observable circumstances of life. In spite of the way
Abimelech was treated in chap. 20, he discerns that God’s presence functions decisively in Abraham’s life. Given God’s promise (12:3), Abimelech participates in God’s blessings to Abraham and Abraham gains some rights in the land. That an outsider like Abimelech makes such a confession and treats Abraham well in spite of what happened earlier testifies notably to God’s work as Creator in his life.

Abraham enters into a mutually agreed-upon covenant with outsiders. God’s purposes in the world are for the good order of the creation, which includes relationships with all, regardless of their faith commitments. The story implies that Abraham is not somehow inevitably trustworthy; specific agreements will be needed by the outsider, because loyalty on the part of chosen ones all too often fails.

In response to the secular event of reconciliation, Abraham worships Yahweh. This connection made by Abraham between peacemaking events of everyday life and the worship of God is significant. Linking such events of peace and justice explicitly to God recognizes that God has been involved behind the scenes, enabling such salutary effects. The OT regularly refuses to separate sacred and secular, though God-talk is often reserved for explicitly religious matters in the modern world. The confession of the community of faith should be clear: “All things work together for good for those who love God” (Rom 8:28 NRSV). This should issue in worshipful gratitude to God whenever any good thing happens.

Recent readers of this famous story have been particularly interested in delineating its literary artistry. Significant gains have resulted, but one wonders whether this approach has overplayed its hand by overdramatizing the story and reading too much between the lines. Likewise, religious interpretations, especially in the wake of Kierkegaard’s Fear and Trembling, seem often to intensify the contradictoriness of the story, perhaps in the interests of heightening the mystery of the divine ways. While the frightening, even bizarre, character of the divine command ought not to be discounted, it should not be exaggerated either.

This story (commonly assigned to E, with supplements) remains firmly within the circle of the family, which suggests an original pre-Israelite setting. At the same time, the theological force of the story takes on new contours as it is passed through many generations (especially vv. 15-19). Exilic Israel may have seen itself in both Abraham
and Isaac: God has put Israel to a test in which many children died, has called forth its continuing faith, has delivered it through the fires of judgment and renewed the promises.

Israelite ritual regarding the firstborn informs this text. Israel knew that God could require the firstborn (Exod 22:29), but that God had provided for their redemption (Exod 13:13; 34:20). Here, God does just this: God asks that Isaac be sacrificed and provides an animal “instead of” Isaac. This issue belongs indisputably to the story, but with a metaphorical understanding of Israel as God’s firstborn (see below). The text bears no mark of an etiology of sacrifice (see 4:3-4; 8:20) or a polemic against child sacrifice, clearly abhorrent to Israel, though it was sometimes a problem (cf. Lev 20:2-5; 2 Kgs 3:27; Jer 7:31; 32:35).

This text fits into the larger sweep of Abraham’s life. The relationship between God and Abraham is in progress; it has had its ups and downs, in which each has affected the other. Abraham has exhibited a deep faith and engaged God in significant theological conversation, while God has consulted with Abraham regarding the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. At the same time, Abraham’s response has been less than exemplary, even distrusting the promise (17:17) and not showing the “fear of God” in relationship to outsiders (see 20:11). His response has raised an issue for God, indeed what God truly knows (v. 12). Generally, though, this text presupposes “familiar mutual trust” built over no little experience together. From Abraham’s perspective, the God who commands has filled his life with promises; he understands that God has Abraham’s best interests at heart. He has already learned to trust this God. He has no reason to distrust the God from whom this word comes, however harsh and frightening it may be.

The test appears especially poignant in view of the parallels with the story of Ishmael (see 21:8-21). Abraham has just lost his son Ishmael, hence the repeated reference to Isaac as “only son.” Now he is asked to sacrifice his remaining son. We may view these stories as mirrors of each other, focusing on the potential loss of both sons, as well as on God’s providing for both children.

Parallels between Gen 12:1-4 and Genesis 22 provide an overarching structure. Although this divine command does not appear as abrupt as in 12:1, they are similar in other ways, in vocabulary (“take, go” to a “place that I shall show you”), along with Abraham’s silent, but faithful, response. Both are ventures in faith and enclose the story of Abraham; Abraham begins and ends his journey with God by venturing out into the deep at the command of God. The former cuts Abraham off from his past; the latter threatens to cut him off from his future.

We may observe the structure of the entire text in the threefold reference to “your son, your only son” (vv. 2, 12, 16). Also, the repetition of Abraham’s “Here I am,” spoken to
God (v. 1), then Isaac (v. 7), and finally God (v. 11) highlights basic moments in the story.

22:1-14. God commands Abraham not to kill or murder his son, but to present him “on the altar” as a burnt offering to God (hl (olâ; cf. Exod 29:38-46; Lev 1:3-17). The offering language places this entire episode within the context of the sacrificial system. The deed will be a specifically religious act, an act of faith, a giving to God of what Abraham loves (only then would it be a true sacrifice). Inasmuch as sacrifice involves a vehicle in and through which God gives back the life that has been given, the hope against hope for Abraham would be that God would somehow find a way of giving Isaac—or another life—back (hence the link made to the resurrection by Heb 11:17-19). We should note that Abraham does, finally, offer a sacrifice.

Abraham’s silent response to God’s command (on test, see below) may be designed to raise questions in the mind of the reader. Why is Abraham being “blindly” obedient, not raising any questions or objections (especially in view of 18:23-25)? Abraham’s trust in God seems evident in his open stance (“Here I am”) and unhesitating response. At the same time, the text gives us no clue as to his emotional state (e.g., whether he was deeply troubled).

God’s command is accompanied by an (na)), a particle of entreaty or urgency. Rarely used by God (cf. Judg 13:4; Isa 1:18; Isa 7:3), God thereby may signal the unusual character of the moment and the relationship of mutual trust. It may help Abraham to see that God has as much stake in this matter as he does; God needs to know about Abraham’s faith. This may account for Abraham’s silence. However, God does not engage in a ploy, but offers a genuine command. Yet, the command pertains to a particular moment; it is not universally valid. Moreover, God does not intend that the commandment be fully obeyed. Hence, God revokes the command when the results of the test become clear and speaks a second command that overrides the first (v. 12).

We should note the emphasis on “seeing.” Twice, Abraham lifts up his eyes (vv. 4, 13), and five times the verb “to see” (har rA já) is used of Abraham (vv. 4, 13) and God (vv. 8, twice in 14). From a distance, Abraham sees the place where God told him to sacrifice Isaac and then, close up, he sees the ram provided at that very place. This process testifies to a progressively clearer seeing. Abraham places his trust in God’s seeing (v. 8) and that trust finally enables him to see the lamb that God has seen to. Seeing saves the son (cf. Hagar’s seeing in 16:13; 21:19, which saves Ishmael).

The writer offers another important feature: “the mountains that I shall show you” (v. 2; cf. 12:1). The narrative stresses it early on (vv. 3-5, 9) and returns to it in v. 14, when a name appears: God will provide. God shows Abraham that place (by v. 3 NRSV). It is as if God has
prepared the scene ahead of time, ram and all, and hence Abraham must be precisely directed to it. Moriah, three days’ journey away (a general reference), a place unknown to us, but not to him, may refer to Jerusalem (2 Chr 3:1; cf. “the mount of Yahweh” [v. 14] in Ps 24:3; Isa 2:3). The place name Moriah gives the command a special quality: Abraham will not sacrifice at any altar, but in a specific God-chosen place a great distance away. Might this arrangement have given Abraham a clue to what God intended?

Verses 7-8 are central. The statement “the two of them walked on together” encloses this interchange between Abraham and Isaac. Abraham’s statement of faith that God will provide (v. 8) is the only time Abraham responds more fully than “Here I am.” This is also the only time that Isaac speaks. Note also the movement from the more distancing language of “boy” in v. 5 to the repeated “my son” in vv. 7-8, perhaps testifying to a shift in perspective.

By this point Abraham stays on course because he trusts that God will act to save Isaac. He conveys to Isaac what he believes to be the truth about his future: God will provide. He testifies to this form of divine action in v. 14, as does Israel’s witness to the event “to this day” (v. 14). God tests precisely the nature of Abraham’s response as unhesitating trust in the deity. As God puts it (v. 12), it involves Abraham’s fear of God, a faithfulness that accords with God’s purposes and works itself out in daily life as truth and justice (see 20:11). Abraham obeys because he trusts God; trust out of which obedience flows remains basic. Disobedience would reveal a lack of trust. At least by v. 8 Abraham’s obedience is informed and undergirded by a trust that God will find a way through this dark moment.

Anticipations of this trust occur earlier. In v. 5 Abraham tells his servants that both of them will worship and both will return; the servants witness to this conviction. The author relates the trustful reference to worship with the worship in v. 8. To suggest that Abraham is equivocating or being ironic or deceptive or whistling in the dark finds no basis in the text; such ideas betray too much interest in dramatization. It would be strange for a narrative designed to demonstrate Abraham’s trusting obedience to be punctuated with acts of deception.

Verses 7-8 also focus on Isaac. The author initially devotes attention to Isaac as a child (without recalling the promise). Abraham loves this child (in God’s judgment, v. 2); we should not assume an abusive relationship. Although ignorant of the journey’s purpose, Isaac does not remain entirely passive. He breaks the silence with a question of his father (v. 7)—the only recorded exchange between them. He senses that something is not right (his lack of reference to the knife no more suggests this than does the absence of fire in vv. 9-10). Yet, Isaac does not focus on himself. (Isaac’s emotions are often overplayed.) Isaac addresses Abraham as a loving father, mirroring Abraham’s trusting relationship to God. Abraham responds in like manner.

Abraham centers on what his son has to say, attending to him as he has attended to God (“Here I am”). He does not dismiss Isaac’s question, as if inappropriate. It even elicits
Abraham’s trust in God in a public form. Isaac enables his father’s trusting action to be joined with trusting words. While not telling him everything, Abraham does answer Isaac’s question directly and conveys to him what he believes will happen. What had been implicit (v. 5) here becomes explicit. Their walking on together conveys indirectly Isaac’s response. He exhibits no resistance, even later when his father prepares him for the sacrificial moment (some descriptions of the knife go beyond the text). Isaac believes his father’s trust to be well placed. Abraham’s trust in God has become Isaac’s trust: God will provide a lamb, which is God’s intention from the beginning, of course, and Abraham and Isaac are now both attuned to that intention and trust it.

The text also focuses on Abraham’s continuing trust in God. The trusting departure does not settle the issue, or God could have cut off the journey much earlier. The question becomes: Will Abraham stay with the journey? The author stresses the journey as such, which provides opportunity for second thoughts (vv. 6, 8) following each expression of trust (vv. 5, 8). Abraham exhibits his trust in God by staying the course. Only at the end of the journey can God say, “Now I know.”

Tensions in the text also center on God. What is at stake in this for God?

1. God’s testing. God and the reader know this is a test; Abraham does not. God intends not to kill Isaac but to test Abraham’s faithfulness, which is essential if God is to move into the future with him. In responding, Abraham no doubt observes (as do all commentators) the apparent contradictory character of the command: God, having fulfilled the promise of a son, asks Abraham to sacrifice that son and the future that goes with him. The fact that Abraham obeys shows that he trusts God will find a way into the future. God had found a way to fulfill the promise of a son when nothing seemed possible (see 18:14); given that experience, Abraham trusts that this comparably impossible situation will not be beyond God’s ability. Abraham trusts that God’s promise and command are not finally contradictory; whatever conflict there may be, it is up to God to resolve it, and God is up to it.

If Abraham had known in advance that it was a test, it would have been no real test; for he (or anyone) would respond differently to a test from a more indirect method of discernment. Moreover, the test would not work simply at the verbal level; words might not lead to action. Abraham may recognize this fact by his silence, responding in deed rather than word. In the OT, God tests Israel to discern whether they will do justice to a relationship in which they stand (Deut 8:2-3). God can test by discerning the human response to a command: Is Abraham’s loyalty undivided? God initiates the test to gain certainty.

2. God’s knowledge. Brueggemann notes correctly that this test “is not a game with God; God genuinely does not know. . . . The flow of the narrative accomplishes something in
the awareness of God. He did not know. Now he knows.”150 The test is as real for God as it is for Abraham.

The test is not designed to teach Abraham something—that he is too attached to Isaac, or that Isaac is “pure gift,” or that he must learn to cling to God rather than to the content of the promise. Experience always teaches, of course, and Abraham certainly learns. But nowhere does the text say that he now trusts more in God or has learned a lesson of some sort. Rather, the test confirms a fact: Abraham trusts deeply that God has his best interests at heart so that he will follow where God’s command leads (a point repeated in vv. 12 and 16). The only one said to learn anything from the test is God: “Now I know” (v. 12; on the angel, see commentary on 16:7). God does not teach; rather, God learns. For the sake of the future, God needs to know about Abraham’s trust.

While God knew what was likely to happen, God does not have absolute certainty as to how Abraham would respond. God has in view the larger divine purpose, not just divine curiosity or an internal divine need. The story addresses a future that encompasses all the families of the earth: Is Abraham the faithful one who can carry that purpose along? Or does God need to take some other course of action, perhaps even look for another?

Is the promise of God thereby made conditional? In some sense, yes (see vv. 16-18). Fidelity was not optional. God could not have used a disloyal Abraham for the purposes God intends.

3. God’s vulnerability. Some people read this story as if God were a detached observer, a heavenly homeroom teacher watching from afar to see if Abraham passes the test. But God puts much at risk in this ordeal. God had chosen Isaac as the one to continue the line of promise (at one point Abraham would have chosen Ishmael, 17:18; 21:11). Although God does not intend that Isaac be killed, the test places God’s own promise at risk, at least in the form of the person of Isaac. The command has the potential of taking back what God has taken so many pains to put in place.

This story presents a test not only of Abraham’s faith in God, but of God’s faith in Abraham as well, in the sense that Abraham’s response will affect the moves God makes next. God places the shape of God’s own future in Abraham’s hands. Given his somewhat mixed responses to God up to this point, God took something of a risk to put so much on the line with this man. As E. Roop puts it: “God took the risk that Abraham would respond. Abraham took the risk that God would provide.”151 One cannot project what God would have done had Abraham failed, or if Abraham had actually killed Isaac, but God would have had to find another way into the future, perhaps another way with Abraham.

Why would God place the promise at risk in

<Page 497 Ends><Page 498 Begins>
order to see whether Abraham fears God? Why not just get on with it, or wait to put Isaac to the test? But, according to vv. 16-18 (and 26:3-5, 24), it is not enough for the sake of the history of the promise that Isaac be born. There are also other promises to be fulfilled. Abraham’s continuing faithful response to God remains a central issue. God waits upon him before getting on with the promised future.

The interpreter may find difficulty in relating Genesis 22 to the divine promises of chap. 15, where God participates in an act of self-imprecation; God’s potential sacrifice there (reinforced here by God’s own oath) correlates with Abraham’s potential sacrifice of Isaac. While the promises are not given a new shape in Genesis 22, they receive a new emphasis in view of Abraham’s response.

4. God’s trustworthiness. The test raises the question of whether God can be trusted. This God promises, proceeds to fulfill that promise, and then seems to take it back. Can readers trust this God only because they know this is a test, and that God does not intend to kill Isaac? For Abraham, trust was there without this knowledge. What will God’s response be?

Abraham departs for the place of sacrifice because he believes that God can require Isaac of him (and of God!); yet he trusts that God will somehow find a way to fulfill the promises. By v. 8 in his long journey, his trust has taken the form that God will provide a lamb. His public confession constitutes a new situation with which God must work. This ups the ante for God. The test no longer involves simply Abraham’s trust but becomes a matter of God’s providing as well. Will Abraham’s trust in God be in vain? Is God free to ignore Abraham’s trust? If God did not provide, then that would constitute another kind of test, at a much deeper level than the one initiating this journey.

If God tests within relationship to determine loyalty, then God cannot disdain the expression of such loyalty. Given God’s previous commitments (especially in chap. 15), God is bound to stay with a trusting Abraham. So God does speak, forbidding the sacrifice of Isaac and providing an animal; even more, God provides it as a substitute for Isaac, “instead of his son.”

5. God’s providing. Why should God be praised as a provider for following through on God’s own test? God appears praiseworthy for being faithful to the commitment to Abraham. But why was the ram even necessary? After discerning that Abraham did fear God, God stopped him before he saw the ram (vv. 12-13). Yet, God provided the ram, and Abraham offered it “instead of his son.” A sacrifice seems necessary, even if not expressly commanded. If not Isaac, then it must be another.

The redemption of the firstborn remains as a concern in this text (Exod 13:13; 22:29; 34:20). But the interest is not etiological or historical. This motif underscores Israel as the firstborn of God (Exod 4:22), an issue faced by the exiles (Jer 31:9, 20; cf. 2:3). This story presents a metaphor for Israel’s life with God, in which Israel becomes both Abraham and Isaac (see below).
22:15-19. These verses report God’s response in straightforward language (reinforced by 26:3-5, 24, but often obscured by efforts to wiggle out of the implications), twice spoken as if to ensure the point: Because Abraham has done this, previously spoken divine promises can be reiterated. The promises were originally made (12:1-3) independently of Abraham’s response. God’s promises create his faith (15:6), though Abraham could still be unfaithful. That is not reversed here so that his faith creates the promises. The covenant in chap. 15 was made with Abraham as a person of faith (as all covenants in the OT are). Here the promises are reiterated (in an emphatic way) to a trusting Abraham. If he had been unfaithful to God, we do not know what would have happened (God may have given Abraham another opportunity), but we do know that the promises would always be there for Abraham to cling to. Having seen Abraham’s faithfulness, God swears an oath for the first time in the narrative, in effect laying the divine life on the line, putting the very divine self behind the promise.

REFLECTIONS

1. This is a classic text. It has captivated the imaginations of numerous interpreters, drawn by both its literary artistry and its religious depths. It has played a special role in both Jewish

<Page 498 Ends><Page 499 Begins>

and Christian traditions. Before its depth and breadth one stands on holy ground. But this text also presents problems. It has occasioned deep concern, especially in a time when the abuse of children has screamed its way into the modern consciousness.

Psychoanalyst Alice Miller claims this text may have contributed to an atmosphere that makes it possible to justify the abuse of children. She grounds her reflections on some thirty artistic representations of this story over the centuries. In two of Rembrandt’s paintings, Abraham faces the heavens rather than Isaac, as if in blind obedience to God and oblivious to what he is about to do. Abraham’s hands cover Isaac’s face, preventing him from seeing or raising a cry. Not only is Isaac silenced, but only his torso shows—his personal features are obscured. Isaac “has been turned into an object. He has been dehumanized by being made a sacrifice; he no longer has a right to ask questions and will scarcely even be able to articulate them to himself, for there is no room in him for anything besides fear.”152

We may not simply dismiss the possible negative impact of this text; it would not be the first time the Bible has been used knowingly or unknowingly for such purposes. The text contributes to such an understanding, as God asks and then twice commends Abraham for not withholding his son, his only son (vv. 2, 12, 16). Abraham asks no questions, and God offers no qualifications. The child seems to be a pawn in the hands of two “adults” who need to work out an issue between them.

Yet, while moderns might wonder about the psychological abuse Isaac endures in all of
this, the narrator gives him a questioning voice, and his father attentively responds to his query. This dialogue leads Isaac to place himself trustingly in the arms of his father and his God. The text offers no evidence that trust in God ever wavers for either father or son. We must be careful to stress these elements for the sake of a proper hearing of the text. Children must be allowed to ask their questions about this text, to which adults should be highly alert.

2. Once again, an Abrahamic text mirrors a later period in Israel’s life. Israel, God’s firstborn, had been sentenced to death by God in the fires of judgment. But exilic Israel remains God’s firstborn (so Jeremiah affirms, 31:9), the carrier of God’s purposes into the future. As Isaac was saved from death, so was Israel delivered from the brink of annihilation. But what of the future? Out of this matrix the Israelites developed an understanding that a sacrifice was necessary to assure Israel’s future, shaped most profoundly in Isaiah 53 (see the use of hc (Zeh), lamb, in 53:7 and vv. 7-8; cf. Jer 11:19). Israel’s redemption would not occur without cost. At the same time, Israel’s faithfulness was not an optional matter as it moved into a future shaped by God’s promises. The emphasis on descendants in v. 17 also connects well with these exilic concerns (see Isa 51:2, and the renewed interest in Abraham in exile). The NT use of this story to understand the sacrifice of God’s only Son constitutes an appropriate extension of the text (see John 1:14).

3. To trust God does not mean always to respond in an unquestioning way; this text does not commend passivity before God. Chapters 18 and 22 must be kept together, showing that Abraham’s faithfulness to God works itself out in various ways. Perhaps Abraham responds as he does in chap. 22 because he learned from the encounter in chap. 18 that God is indeed just, and that he need only trust on this occasion. The confession that God will provide pertains as much to times of questioning and challenging as to moments of ‘blind’ trust. It may well be the reader who, having learned from Abraham in chap. 18, responds with questions to God’s command to sacrifice Isaac.

Abraham does not simply obey; he obeys because he trusts. He could have obeyed because he was ordered to do so; if God commands, he had better respond. But v. 8 makes clear that he obeys because he trusts God, that God will be faithful and will act in his best interests.

<Page 499 Ends><Page 500 Begins>

Hebrews 11:17-19 posits the Resurrection at this point; if necessary, the promises will remain in and through death. Moreover, Abraham does not claim ownership of the promise, as if it were his possession, as if his faithful response counts for little or nothing (see Jas 2:18-26).

4. This story presents the last dialogue between Abraham and God and between Abraham and Isaac. It follows closely on the heels of the birth of Isaac and precedes Sarah’s death (23:2). The narrative’s literary setting intimates a concern for the (unprecedented) turning of the generations; Isaac now moves out into the world on his
own. The absence of an explicit reference to Isaac at the end (v. 19) may witness to a future open to the next generation, with uncertainty as to what will happen to the promises as Abraham moves off the scene.153

One promise has been fulfilled. Yet, promises of land, numerous descendants, and being a blessing to the nations remain. What status do these other divine promises have now? Are they a matter of course, to be fulfilled irrespective of Abraham’s (or anyone else’s) faith in God? Are God’s promises now to be carried by genetics, by a natural biological succession? What happens if Abraham ceases to trust God? At times scholars speak of the unconditionality of God’s promise to Abraham in such a way that faith becomes irrelevant. Verses 16-18 together with 26:3-5, 24 make clear, however, that God reiterates the promise to Isaac because of the way in which Abraham responded in faithfulness. Hence, the promise does not automatically or naturally carry on into the family’s next generation.

Although God will never invalidate the promise, people do not participate in the sphere of the promise independently of a faithful response. Abraham could have said no to God, and complicated God’s moves into the future, though not finally stymied them. While the divine word of promise inspires Abraham’s trust (15:6), he could resist the word of God; if that were not the case, then the command would have been no test at all, for the outcome would have been settled in advance. God, however, does not coerce or program Abraham’s fidelity.

The apostle Paul incorporates this point when making the claim that the promises of God cannot be reduced to genetics (Rom 4:16-25; Gal 3:6-9). Those who have faith in the God of Abraham have received the promises irrespective of biological succession.

At the same time, the text does not imply a spiritual succession across the centuries, for the promise takes shape in the actual lives of people, whose own words and deeds are centrally involved in its transmission. This means that the word of God, in some general way, does not provide for the continuity across the generations. God places the promise in the hands of those who are faithful, and their witness ought not to be discounted.

Another way of putting the issue: What happens to faith when the promise reaches fulfillment? Granted, other promises reach out to the future. But receiving the promised son could have tempted Abraham to push other promises to the side: I now have what I want. How do promises already fulfilled affect the relationship with God? Will Abraham’s trust in God still be the core of his life? Will Abraham still ground his life in the divine promises rather than bask in the sunshine of fulfillment? In order to explore these questions, the test focused precisely on the point of fulfillment: Isaac.

5. Testing must be considered relationally, not legalistically. Life in relationship will inevitably bring tests; individuals will often find themselves in situations where their loyalty is tested. What constitutes testing will be determined by the nature of the relationship and the expectations the parties have for it. As a relationship matures and trust levels are built up, faithful responses to the testing of the relational bond will tend to
become second nature. Yet, even in a mature relationship, sharp moments of testing may present themselves. Abraham may have faced this kind of moment.

Is the relationship with the deity one in which the people of God can expect to be put to the test again and again? Are there absurd, senseless experiences in life that can become the occasion to turn away from God? There may well be a deep, dark, and seemingly hopeless valley through which we travel. Maybe we think God protects us from such moments, especially those who have been given promises; if God does not protect us, then we will turn away from God. We should learn from this story that receiving promises does not entail being protected from moments where those promises seem to be called into question.

To move to the NT, God does not expect of Abraham something that God would be unwilling to do. God puts Jesus through a time of testing to see if he will be faithful, and hence could be a vehicle for God’s redemptive purposes in the world. God risked that Jesus would not be found faithful. Even more, God put Jesus through a time of testing in the Garden of Gethsemane. How was it possible for Jesus to believe that God would be faithful to promises in such a time? Jesus trusts himself to the will of God, trusting that God will find a way to be faithful to the promises even in the face of death. And God does prove faithful in raising Jesus from the dead.

Some NT words on testing may be helpful: “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested” (Heb 2:18 NRSV; cf. 4:15). We are promised by 1 Cor 10:13, “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it” (NRSV). These affirmations do not make trust an option, but we can count on the faithfulness of God, who in the midst of the worst possible testings will provide a way through the fire.

GENESIS 22:20-24, REBEKAH’S FAMILY
Link to:

COMMENTARY

This brief genealogy chronicles the family of Abraham’s brother Nahor, including children of his wife Milcah and his concubine Reumah (see 11:27-29; 31:53). As with Jacob, Nahor has twelve sons; their names later become associated with tribes and places (see Job 1:1; Job 32:2).
The insertion of the genealogy at this point anticipates the role of Rebekah (granddaughter of Nahor), shortly to be introduced (see 24:15, 24). The writer thus makes clear that Isaac’s wife comes from the same family (cf. Ishmael, 21:21). The genealogy lists the children of both the wife and the concubine; the list identifies Rebekah as a granddaughter of the wife.

GENESIS 23:1-20, ABRAHAM BUYS LAND IN CANAAN

COMMENTARY

Within the inclusio provided by the death and burial of Sarah, the chapter (usually assigned to P) provides a report about negotiations between Abraham and the Hittites for purchase of a family burial place. Since Sarah is the first member of the core family of promise to die, the textual moment is appropriate. The prominent use of burial language (thirteen times), especially the expression “bury your [my] dead,” demonstrates the centrality of this concern. The matter concludes (23:20) with this particular space within the promised land transferred legally to Abraham. No explicit theological language occurs in the chapter; any such understandings must be developed out of the larger context.

Ancient Near Eastern documents provide parallels to aspects of this transaction. Abraham negotiates with the Hittites, a people infrequently encountered in the OT. Their eponymous ancestor Heth, the second son of Canaan, appears in 10:15, while 28:1 seems to equate Hittites and Canaanites (see Judg 1:10). Esau marries two Hittite women (26:34), and Rebekah expresses concern that Jacob might do the same (27:46). Although the Hittite kingdom was centered in Anatolia, and their empire did not extend into Canaan, there may have been enclaves of such non-Semitic peoples in Canaan. To the ancient reader of Genesis, the Hittites would have been one of the pre-Israelite peoples living in the promised land; here the author calls them “the people of the land” (vv. 7, 12-13; see 15:20).

Abraham’s chosen burying place, Machpelah, was located in the southern part of Canaan near Mamre. This became the burial place not only of Sarah and Abraham (25:9), but also of Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Leah. It was an important site during the biblical period and has remained so during subsequent centuries. Jacob’s request to be buried there underscores the importance of a person’s burial site (49:29-33; 50:13). And
although Joseph is buried at Shechem (Josh 24:32), the importance of burial in the promised land is similarly evident (50:24).

The Story. Sarah has died, and the report of the purchase of land for her burial place begins with Abraham acting much as he did in chap. 14. While he identifies himself as a lowly outsider without property rights, the Hittites immediately recognize and acknowledge his reputation (“mighty prince,” v. 6; cf. 24:35). Perhaps in view of his status, the Hittites openly receive his initially quite general request for a burial place (v. 4; “give” probably means “sell”). Abraham negotiates with them as an apparent equal, but with proper deference, at the place for such legal transactions, the city gate (v. 10).

The Hittites grant Abraham’s request in a general way; in fact, they offer him the pick of available tombs (v. 6). But Abraham has his sight on a particular cave. One of the elders, Ephron, owns the burial cave he wants to buy, and Abraham requests that he be allowed to proceed with negotiations for it. Ephron twice publicly offers to “give” him not only the cave for burying, but the surrounding field as well (v. 11). This may be an opening gambit for a sale, not generosity. In any case, Abraham, who will not be obligated to strangers (cf. 14:22-24) and wants use of the land, insists on paying for it. Ephron, seemingly not concerned about payment, claims that it is worth 400 shekels; we do not know whether this was a fair price (cf. Jer 32:7). Abraham agrees and, without speaking a word, gives him the money on the spot, carefully measuring it according to local standards.

Verses 17-18 summarize the transaction, with the narrator specifying that the entire plot of land—field, cave, trees—is deeded to Abraham “in the presence of the Hittites,” who have been witnesses to all that has transpired. After Sarah’s burial, which confirms the agreed-upon use of the land and makes the transaction firm, v. 20 seems concerned to attest Abraham’s legal claim to this land one more time.

REFLECTIONS

1. This account has generated a number of interpretations. The text provides no evidence that Machpelah was a hallowed spot or sanctuary. A more theological explanation relates the text to the land promise. In death, these Israelite ancestors are no longer strangers and aliens in the land (Abraham’s self-identification in v. 4), but heirs; they come to rest in the land promised them by their God. The repeated language of “possession” (hzja ahuzzâ, vv. 4, 9, 20; cf. 49:29-30; 50:13) relates to its immediately prior use in 17:8, where God promised the land to Abraham as an “everlasting possession” (repeated in 48:4; cf. 36:43; Lev 14:34; 27:24; Num 32:32; Josh 22:4, 19). Hence, one can make an explicitly theological interpretation on intertextual grounds (cf. also Jacob’s purchase in 33:19 and Jeremiah’s in Jer 32:1-15, a text of similar antiquity that bears an explicitly theological meaning).
2. When one places the repetitive burial language within an exilic context, other meanings may emerge.156 The text may address the issue of exiles' having to bury their dead outside of the land and their interest in having a special burial place in both exile and Canaan (cf. the interest in transporting bodies from Egypt back to Canaan in 50:12-14, 24-25). These exiles were, like Abraham, sojourners and aliens; Israelites may have understood burial places in Canaan in terms of the land as an everlasting possession. This text shows that Abraham comes by the land on terms that were both legal and fair, and hence should be honored by future generations.

The chapter may also involve issues of family life, as do 17:9-14 (circumcision) and 27:46–28:9 (marriage). Burial practices were an important matter in ancient societies, and texts such as these grounded customs in ancient times.

While these factors may seem to be nontheological, they relate in direct ways to creation, particularly the proper ordering of individual, family, and communal life. A comprehensive theology of creation includes concerns for social order, which in the ancient (and modern!) world is intimately connected with cosmic order. If the social fabric is in disrepair, deleterious effects on the cosmic order may ensue. So the good order of the entire cosmos may be at stake. Hence, this chapter relates to chap. 1 and creational concerns. There are also connections between creation and the promise of the land as an everlasting possession. For the promise to be fulfilled, land must be available. The promise of a specific land for one’s own possession presupposes the creational activity of God.

3. Abraham’s purchase of a plot in the land does not stand over against God’s promise to give the land to his descendants. Again and again, God works through humans on behalf of divine purposes. The purchase of land provides a symbol of hope, a concrete anticipation of what God has in store for those who trust in the promises.

GENESIS 24:1-67, THE WOOING OF REBEKAH

Link to:
interest passes to “master” Isaac (v. 65). Abraham’s good and faithful servant (possibly Eliezer, 15:2) serves as the mediator of this transition. The story follows a pattern (“type-scene”) similar to that of Jacob/Rachel in 29:1-14 and Moses/Zipporah in Exod 2:15-22—a meeting between a man and a woman at a well that results in a marriage (cf. John 4; Ugaritic parallels have also been noted). We may also discern a literary form used to depict the commission of a messenger, a pattern similar to the calls of the prophets (cf. Exodus 3; Isaiah 6), evident not least in the objection that the servant raises (vv. 5, 39).

Within the larger story of Abraham, this chapter (esp. vv. 1-7, 35-41) provides an inclusio with 12:1-7, with specific references to the call and initial journey, as well as the promises of land and blessing. Genesis 24 provides a similar introduction to the beginning of the second generation. In some sense, however, Rebekah rather than Isaac parallels Abraham; she continues the faithful response of leaving home and family that furthers God’s purposes. The story also includes recapitulations of scenes that have already occurred (cf. vv. 17-19 with 13-14; vv. 34-49 with 1-27), a technique that retards the action and helps to interpret the event, especially God’s important role.

Abraham initiates the journey by commissioning his servant to find a wife for Isaac (vv. 1-9). The servant carries out the commission (vv. 10-27), and Rebekah and her family respond (vv. 28-61), resulting in the marriage of Rebekah and Isaac (vv. 62-67).

24:1-9. Abraham’s final days provide an occasion to note how God has filled his life with blessings. God has indeed kept the promise to him, a promise worked out largely through God’s work as Creator.

Abraham now focuses on finding a proper wife for Isaac. Functioning without divine directive, he commissions the most senior of his servants for the task. (In what follows, God’s leading actually responds to Abraham’s initiative!) He binds the servant with an oath (placing his hand under the genitals, a vehicle of life, vv. 2, 9; cf. 47:29) to find a woman only among family members, not from among the resident Canaanites (see 28:1, but not applicable to Jacob’s sons; cf. Deut 7:3-4 for Israel’s later history). After an objection by the servant and Abraham’s response (note his emphasis on the woman’s own decision, v. 8; cf. v. 58), the servant takes the oath. The author explains in v. 7 the twice-expressed concern that Isaac not be brought back to Haran (vv. 6, 8; not recalled in vv. 34-41): for Isaac to settle in the place from which Abraham migrated would be untrue to God’s call and the promise for the land. Abraham follows through faithfully on the implications of his own call and subjects Isaac to the same call. At the same time, Rebekah will follow exactly in Abraham’s footsteps (cf. v. 38 with 12:1) and will receive the same blessing (cf. v. 60 with 22:17). In all things, the servant will prove to be loyal to his commission, while unafraid to take appropriate initiatives.

Abraham, in his last words, does not know what will come of this venture. He makes his
servant swear (not) to do certain things (vv. 3-4, 6, 8), but his conduct and that of others are not predetermined. In fact, Abraham considers it possible that this venture might fail because “the woman” might refuse to cooperate (v. 8; in v. 41, the woman’s family can decide). Failure might result, even though God would “send his angel before you” (see 32:1; Exod 23:20; 32:34). The servant takes human behaviors into account when carrying out the task—what people customarily do counts (v. 11), and the numerous gifts (v. 10) are certainly an effort to persuade. These factors suggest that one should not say that “the success or failure of the commission depends on whether God grants success or not.”157 Although success may well depend on God, the activity of human beings may occasion failure even though God intends success.

24:10-27. The author encloses this episode with prayer and doxology. Having arrived at his destination, the servant prays that he will be successful in this venture, which would mean that God show kindness or steadfast love (dsj hesed) to Abraham—namely, manifest love in this particular way. Without God’s steadfast love there would be no success (cf. v. 21). The author presents no claim that lack of success would mean that God had withheld kindness; it could simply result from human decision making (vv. 8, 41). Divine providence does not mean that the future is somehow predetermined or that human decision making can never frustrate the divine designs. The servant refers to Yahweh as “God of my master Abraham,” an explicit reference to the language used in vv. 3, 7; only a God of heaven and earth, active throughout those spheres, could grant success in Aram-naharaim (v. 10).

Verse 13 does not constitute a naive effort to inform God; it states the servant’s present situation, in which he hopes success will be forthcoming. He then prays in a way that is less precise than it sounds (and may still be too precise for a good prayer) that the woman to whom he will speak in a certain way and who will respond in a certain way (the words of vv. 17-19 are not identical; cf. vv. 42-46) will be the one whom God has chosen to be Isaac’s wife. Note that this interchange will not necessarily signal the presence of the right woman (v. 21). He also hopes and prays that God will let her be the chosen one, which implies additional divine action. “By this” (v. 14) refers to the entire complex of events. The servant’s prayer to God correlates well with his own sense of what might take place at the well.

The narrator’s description of Rebekah (vv. 15-16) enables the reader to know she will be Isaac’s wife before the servant does; the focus thus falls on the servant’s faithful handling of the situation. When the anticipated conversation does occur (vv. 17-19; it is not represented as an answer to prayer), the servant does not immediately know that this is the woman. Rather, he gazes “at her in silence to learn whether or not the LORD had made his journey successful” (v. 21; not reported in vv. 46-47). In other words, he deems a period

"Page 510 Ends"<Page 511 Begins>
of reflection and observation necessary. We do not know how he gained this knowledge, but an inner certainty through God-given insight regarding the divine decision seems likely (and leads to the giving of gifts before he is absolutely certain, vv. 22-24).

When it becomes clear to the servant that Rebekah is the woman (and he had all the time it would take to water all those camels with a pitcher!), he immediately gives public thanks to the Lord, praising (i.e., blessing; see v. 48; Exod 18:10) God for his kindness (hesed), faithfulness (tme), and guiding presence. Rebekah’s hospitality mirrors that of Abraham in 18:2-8 (vv. 18-20; cf. also vv. 23, 25).

Relationships in Rebekah’s family are not easy to discern, but the following seems likely: Rebekah is the granddaughter of Nahor, Abraham’s brother; her father, Bethuel, and Isaac are cousins; her “mother’s household” (v. 28) refers naturally to a girl’s family (Cant 3:4). The leading role of her brother Laban and minor role of Bethuel (only v. 50) may reflect that culture (in 29:5 Laban is called the son [NIV “grandson”] of Nahor; in 24:48, the NIV has granddaughter-brother; the NRSV has daughter-kinsman).

24:28-61. Rebekah, having informed her family, leaves the official welcoming to her brother, Laban. His theological language, coming after he has observed the expensive gifts, may be more calculated than sincere (v. 31). Yet, his welcome testifies that such symbols of prosperity result from God’s work of blessing in the servant’s life, a perspective again voiced in v. 50.

The servant insists on telling his story to Rebekah’s family, the better to persuade them that Rebekah should marry Isaac (enclosing it with words of blessing, vv. 35, 48). In giving God such a prominent role, he testifies publicly to all the blessings God has wrought on Abraham’s behalf (cf. psalms of thanksgiving, e.g., Ps 66:16). He also lifts up Abraham, his “master” (ten times; twenty-four times in the chapter; “servant” fifteen times) rather than himself. He repeats in somewhat different language the conversation he had with Abraham prior to leaving (cf. vv. 37-41 with vv. 3-8); one difference occurs in v. 41, which places the onus of responsibility on the family, whereas v. 8 had spoken of Rebekah (the decisions of both prove to be important, vv. 51, 58). He also does not repeat Abraham’s charge (vv. 6, 8) to avoid taking Isaac back to the home country. Both of these shifts are politic deployments of Abraham’s directives.

The servant then recalls his prayer upon arriving at the well in basically the same words (vv. 42-44) and rehearses the events that followed (vv. 45-48), including his acts of worship. This fifteen-verse rehearsal of the story comes to a climax in v. 49: The servant asks Laban and Bethuel to give their daughter to become Isaac’s wife. The servant’s request includes language he had used of God—to show kindness and faithfulness to Abraham (cf. vv. 12, 27; the NIV retains this verbal link). In other words, Laban and Bethuel will be acting toward Abraham as God does if they allow Rebekah to go. Turning either “to the right hand or to the left” expresses an idiom captured well in the NIV’s paraphrase, “so I may know which way to turn.” What he does next depends on their response.
Laban and Bethuel respond directly; they believe the witness of the servant constitutes a word from Yahweh (vv. 50-51). As a consequence, “nothing one way or the other” (NIV; the NRSV’s “bad or good” is more literal, which the NIV retains in 31:24, 29) can contribute to the discussion, except to formalize the matter (v. 51). These statements testify to a rich and deep faith in Yahweh present in this family, about which we have not heard since Abraham left the home country (cf. 31:53).

Having heard their response, Abraham’s servant again worships God (v. 52). He does not respond verbally, but distributes gifts (a dowry?; cf. 34:12) and takes part in a meal. Note the reference to her mother in vv. 53, 55, whereas v. 50 speaks of Bethuel, her father. In vv. 59-60 they refer to Rebekah only as a sister.

In v. 55, Rebekah’s family seeks to delay her departure for a few days, as was the custom (cf. Tob 7:15). When the servant insists on leaving so the good news can be brought to Abraham, they call on Rebekah to make her own decision. When she agrees, they send her and her attendants (her nurse Deborah [35:8] anticipates later children) away with their blessing. This blessing takes a traditional form, focusing on victory over enemies and fertility (as in God’s word to Abraham in 22:17-18). It lacks explicitly religious language, as befits a narrative addressing everyday family concerns.

24:62-67. The author concludes the story in a brief and direct way. The servant identifies Isaac as the “master,” an indication of the transition from Abraham to Isaac. The servant’s retelling the story one more time (v. 66) becomes an occasion for the next stage of the story. Isaac and Rebekah are married, and what might have been just an arranged marriage grows into a loving relationship. The veil may be a signal from Rebekah that she accepts Isaac as her husband; her presence in Sarah’s tent signifies her new role as matriarch of this family.

REFLECTIONS

1. This novella highlights in an unusually expansive way the motif of divine guidance, especially in the servant’s prayers and in his rehearsal of earlier events (vv. 1-27) in vv. 34-48. This retelling constitutes a public testimony to the presence and activity of God, to which Laban and Bethuel respond with their own witness (v. 50). The repetition of vv. 12-14 in vv. 17-19 links prayer for divine guidance with daily life and highlights the place given to worship and prayer, both petition and thanksgiving, throughout the narrative (vv. 12-14, 26-27, 42-44, 48, 52). While these witnessing and worshiping actions of the servant in the story provide a model for the life of God’s servants in every age, the servant remains anonymous, subservient to the divine action in the life of this family. The servant illustrates what life is like for many servants of God. They enter into the service of their master and proceed faithfully in quite ordinary situations, remaining
anonymous in the overall scheme of things, but they are crucial vehicles for the leading and blessing work of God in daily affairs.

2. The narrator initially portrays God as one who has a history of blessing Abraham. Because blessing involves creation, this history testifies to God’s work as creator, which is consonant with the characterization of Yahweh as “the God of heaven and [the God of] earth” (v. 3) and more briefly as “the God of heaven” (v. 7 NRSV). Such universal claims for the God of Abraham match those of 14:19, 22. While these divine epithets are often considered late because of their use in post-exilic literature (e.g., Ezra 1:2; 5:12), the narrator thought that such universal understandings of God were necessary in order to speak adequately about God’s activity in this ancestral period.

The material content of these verses may further explain this usage. Abraham’s servant is to swear regarding matters that reach out into the wider world of Mesopotamia (vv. 4, 7). Such a universal understanding of God becomes necessary if matters relating to the larger world of this family are to make theological sense. In other words, the theological affirmations of Genesis 24 correlate with the opening chapter of Genesis and its claim about God as creator of heaven and earth.

In addition, we may discuss God’s work as creator in and through the ordinary, everyday workings of this family rather than in miraculous or extraordinary events. We do not have here a divine “management of events”;158 to the contrary, our exposition has shown that human activity can shape the future, though not finally stymie God’s purposes. We can speak of God’s highly effective work behind the scenes without resorting to such deterministic descriptions.

3. The story understands Abraham’s wealth to result from the blessing of God (vv. 1, 31, 35-36, 60). Moreover, the author emphasizes that God gives success (vv. 12, 21, 40, 56). Blessing and success involve tangible realities, from wealth and property to posterity. “The blessings of heaven come packaged for earth.”159 The author does not claim that wealth and success are always due to the blessing work of God. People can come by possessions and prosperity through evil means. Humans interpret whether or not one can ascribe such material well-being to the blessing work of God. The servant attempts to convince the family in Haran that the wealth they see is indeed due to God’s work in Abraham’s life, but finally they themselves must make an interpretive judgment in faith.

4. The variations in the servant’s retelling (vv. 34-49) say something important about the continuing use of this story in our own time. We use biblical texts properly not simply by quoting a biblical passage or providing an exact rendering of this or that biblical story. The biblical materials themselves provide the reteller sanction to play with the details of the story in view of the context in which the teller stands.
5. The God language of Laban and Bethuel (vv. 31, 50-51) invites speculation; certainly the narrator understands that the Yahwistic faith was established within Abraham’s family before Abraham left for Canaan (see 31:53). Such faith apparently continues outside of Abraham’s family and the specific promises that undergirded his relationship with God. Once again, this situation testifies to the work of God the Creator.

6. Many commentators have observed the importance of prayer in the life of the servant; it is spontaneous, personal, and focused on the individual’s relationship to God. Westermann puts its well: These prayers indicate that “spontaneous address to God in petition and thanks arising there from is the natural expression of life with God. . . . Just as the personal relationship of trust in God and his guidance remains the same throughout the Bible, so too does prayer as a response to this guidance when experienced in one’s personal life.”

7. Regarding v. 67, we must say more than that a new generation is appearing, or even that God’s promises of posterity through Isaac can now be realized. Isaac loves Rebekah! Life in God’s good creation involves more than divine promises and religious practice; it includes such creational gifts as the love between husband and wife. We should relate this theme to that of faithfulness and steadfast love. While these words depict God’s relation to this family (vv. 12, 14, 27), they also characterize human relationships (v. 49) and are integral to God’s purposes for all creation.


Link to:

<Page 513 Ends><Page 514 Begins>

COMMENTARY

The story of Abraham ends as it began, with genealogies (a mix of J and P). They link up with 22:20-24 and enclose the final segment of the Abraham story. Although commentators often view v. 18 as the break point, a better ending may come at 25:11, with its reference to the divine blessing of Isaac (cf. 24:1). Verses 12-18 would then be an interlude (vv. 12 and 19 are parallel). This pattern occurs also with Isaac; after his death and burial by his sons (35:29) comes an interlude with the genealogy of Esau (36:1-42), a secondary line parallel to Ishmael (25:19 could be considered parallel to 37:2 as well; cf. also 25:11 and 37:1). One may view Ishmael’s genealogy as a new beginning, much briefer than that of Isaac, naturally, but exactly parallel (the same might be said of Esau and Jacob). Generally, the narrator has so closely linked these genealogies and stories that no separation seems finally satisfactory.

An editor has placed the death and burial of Abraham (vv. 7-10) between genealogies, as if to suggest that Abraham’s life continues on in many children (cf. 17:5). These names may refer primarily to peoples with whom Israel as a nation was engaged over the
years.161 Most involve various Arabian groups, but the historical setting remains unclear; they do not seem to be sharply distinguished geographically, as might be expected of groups that are partly sedentary, partly nomadic.

The various peoples by whom Israel was surrounded were, ultimately, a part of their family.

25:1-6. In vv. 1-6, the narrator introduces us to a side of Abraham’s life hitherto completely unknown. Given all the divine and human activity necessary for Abraham to have a son, the reader may be surprised to read about Keturah, who bore him six more children. These names (developed in part to the third generation) are generally associated with the Syro-Arabian desert; we know most about the Midianites (see 37:28, 36). Keturah is closely related to the Hebrew word for “spice”; this and other biblical and extra-biblical evidence links these peoples to the lively commerce in these commodities.

We do not know when this marriage of Abraham’s occurred, though its place after the death of Sarah suggests that the narrator understood it to postdate that event; Abraham did live seventy-five years after the birth of Isaac and thirty-eight after Sarah died (17:17; 23:1). But, if so, the previous comments about having a son in his old age (cf. also 24:1) seem trivial. Perhaps the segment (vv. 1-6) provides nothing more than an addendum, a tradition that the narrator chose not to integrate into the major story itself. The apparent reference in v. 6 to the sons of both Hagar and Keturah (“concubines”; perhaps correlated with “wife” [v. 1; 16:3] to set them off from Sarah) draws Ishmael and the sons of Keturah together as those whom Abraham “sent away” (cf. 21:14). They are sent away to “the east” (as are Cain and Lot). This action settles the place of Isaac and issues of inheritance (cf. 21:10 with 25:5). Yet, they receive largess from Abraham, which attests to a relationship of concern and generosity.

25:7-11. Abraham died at the ripe old age of 175, a nice round 100 years after he had responded to the divine call (12:4). The writer describes his death in quite matter-of-fact ways. Death appears not as the enemy, but simply as the end of a good and full life (see 15:15; cf. 47:9). Being “gathered to his people” (vv. 8, 17; 35:29; 49:33; a phrase unique to the Pentateuch) does not refer to death or burial, but probably alludes to Sheol or some other form of afterlife. Isaac and Ishmael, with no sign of disharmony between them, see to his burial beside Sarah in the cave he had purchased (chap. 23). The return of Ishmael but not the sons by Keturah is striking, testifying to the special place of Ishmael as a child of promise (see 17:18; 21:11).

25:12-18. The author depicts Ishmael (v. 12) in terms identical to Isaac (v. 19); both are “sons of Abraham.” The reference to his life span is unique outside of the chosen line (v. 17). Moreover, the twelve princes (v. 16) mirror the twelve tribes of Israel. The many descendants of Ishmael testify to the fulfillment of God’s promises (17:20; 21:18). Ishmael has a future, too. Some of the names are unknown, but other identifications have been made with Arabian tribal groups to the east and south of Canaan. The translation of
v. 18 remains uncertain (see the footnotes), but may be linked to an earlier pronouncement about Ishmael’s future, anticipating intrafamilial difficulties (16:12).

REFLECTIONS

The story of Abraham ends by specifying his role as the father of a multitude of nations; his descendants are numerous, indeed. While the author does not recall the language of promise, it goes without saying that these descendants are a fulfillment of key divine promises to Abraham. At the same time, vv. 12-18 witness to the fulfillment of God’s promises to Ishmael (17:20; 21:13, 18). God has been faithful to those both within and without the chosen family.

The story of Abraham does not culminate with reference only to Isaac, an important theological affirmation. Given the variety of negative and positive relationships Israel will have with these peoples over the years, it is striking that, at the beginning of Israel’s history, stands this word about their place in the family of Abraham. The relationships among people in that part of the world ought to be conceived most fundamentally in familial rather than national or political or religious terms. Differences have emerged over the years that cannot be lightly set aside. But there are significant commonalities as well, to which very deep roots in Abraham’s family testify. These links should provide some continuing basis for working with differences among these peoples in a creative and peaceful way.

GENESIS 25:19–36:43

THE STORY OF JACOB

OVERVIEW

Jacob is Israel; that overriding consideration informs and propels these chapters. The biblical authors present a story about an individual, one whose character and personality emerge in ways both subtle and direct over the course of the story. Jacob remains very much a person in his own right, but in time he becomes Israel. Finally, Jacob is more than an individual.

In another sense, Jacob also becomes Israel during the development of these traditions. The experiences of later, corporate Israel have shaped the telling of this story. The narrative portrays the story of Jacob-Israel as both a story of the past—whatever the degree of historicity modern historians say the story may have—and a story of every contemporary Israelite. Israel understands itself as possessing characteristics that are often mirrored in the story of Jacob-Israel (one could make similar, but less fully developed, statements about Esau-Edom and Laban-Aram).
This portrayal presents self-critical realism. The traditions do not whitewash Jacob-Israel, as if to suggest an Eden-like origin for itself. The story possesses remarkably little pretense. Here Jacob stands with qualities negative and positive, clear and ambiguous, simple and complex. Take him or leave him. The most astounding claim of the story is that God takes him.

A writer introduces this section of Genesis with a summary reference to the story of Isaac (see the NIV), yet the reader quickly discovers that his sons, especially Jacob, overshadow him. The story of Isaac himself exists only in an abbreviated form (chap. 26), almost as an interlude in the larger family chronicle. It may be that few Isaac traditions actually existed or that one or more storytellers, for unknown reasons, chose to leave them aside; the obscure references to Isaac in 31:42 and Amos 7:9, 16 suggest that more was available at one time.

The stories of Jacob in chaps. 25–36 are presented in a somewhat episodic fashion, tied together by itineraries (primarily) or genealogical references, yet less so than with the Abraham stories. Chapters 29–31 provide a sustained narrative that bears similarities to the Joseph story. Moreover, a plot pervades most of the chapters and provides internal cohesion. Any attempt to depict the complex history of the story must come to terms with evidence for both compositeness and unity.

Scholars commonly agree that the story betrays diverse origins, pieced together from a variety of sources, though each part retains its character as a family narrative. These scholars think of J, E, P, and redactors, who used various Jacob traditions that had already been brought together from oral and written materials composed over an extensive period of time. More specific theories of origin remain quite uncertain, though special associations with the northern kingdom seem likely (e.g., the special interest in the northern cities Bethel and Shechem).

During the past two decades there has been increasing interest in reading the Jacob story as a unity. As a literary entity, the text has a life of its own, and we have to come to terms with its final form. This approach does not deny the need to consider issues of source and redaction, but the basic concern involves hearing the text as we now have it. That will be the perspective of this commentary.

We have already noted that the overriding theme is Jacob as Israel. Interpreters often suggest that family conflict provides the basic focus of the story. This may be so, but we must resist the temptation of reducing the text to a sociological phenomenon, to claim that the story fundamentally addresses dysfunctional family systems. Or we may reduce the discussion to moral issues,

regarding the ethical behavior of the characters. As important as these matters are, the story makes certain theological claims regarding this family’s relationship to God and to
God’s purposes in the world through them. Most basically, God’s choosing and speaking generates and propels the story of this family, yet without discounting the important role humans play.

1. The Divine Promise. As with the Abraham stories, promises function at two levels. (a) The basic ancestral promises continue—promises of land, descendants, and blessing on them and through them to the families of the earth (28:3-4, 13-14; 35:11-12). (b) Promises directed to Jacob’s particular situation also occur—promises of divine presence and care in his journeyings (28:15; 31:3). Without these promises, and God’s tending to them, there would be no story of Jacob. The promises for this family exist for the sake of God’s mission in the world. Election and promise involve, finally, the other “families” (12:3; 28:14) of the world, so that they too might receive the life that God intends for creation.

2. The Divine Blessing. The narratives treat blessing basically in creational terms, whether of fertility in the field (26:12; 27:27-28), among the animals (30:30), in the birth of children (29:31–30:24; 33:5), or more generally (26:13, 29; 30:27, 43; 33:11). The blessing extends through Isaac to Jacob (27:28-29; 28:1-4) and Esau (27:39-40), from God to Jacob (32:29; 35:9), and even from Laban to his family (31:55). It constitutes the central issue between Jacob and Esau (27:1-45). God’s promises as continuing blessings remain basic for this family and to others through them (26:3-4, 24; 28:4, 14). Blessings are conveyed through both the spoken word and God’s working in creational processes, both human and nonhuman. The divine purpose behind the blessings functions identically to that of the promises: to enable the fullest possible life for all the families in God’s good creation.

3. God. God speaks promises, brings blessing, and accompanies this family along its various journeys. Even more, God engages this conflicted family directly in the service of these promises. God not only puts these promises in verbal form, but also enters into the fray on their behalf, even if it means engaging Jacob himself in “hand-to-hand combat.”

As with Abraham, God appears in order to speak; this speaking defines the story. God speaks two times to Isaac, to command and to promise (26:3-4, 24), and six times to Jacob to promise (28:13-15; 31:3; 35:11-12), to command (31:3, 13; 35:1), to bless (32:29), to name (32:28; 35:10) and to advise (31:12). God also speaks to Rebekah (25:23) and to Laban (31:24). The response of the various principals to this divine speaking helps give shape to the development of the story.

Attention to God language helps us to understand the story. It appears most pervasively with the birth of the children (29:31–30:24), where Leah and Rachel witness powerfully to the gracious activity of God in responding to their laments. These women also interpret the Jacob-Laban conflict theologically (31:16). Other individuals offer theological interpretations of events: Isaac (26:22), Abimelech (26:28-29), Laban (30:27), and Jacob (30:30; 31:5-9, 42; 32:2, 30; 33:5, 11). These persons testify to a pervading divine presence working in and through people and events within and without the community of faith on behalf of the divine purposes. God language also appears in connection with
prayers and rituals by Isaac (27:28; 28:3-4), Jacob (32:9-12), and Laban (31:49-50, 53); though twice Jacob uses God language in less than appropriate ways (27:20; 30:2). We find God language when God speaks to Jacob (28:16-22; 31:11; 35:3) and Laban (31:29). Nonetheless, the narrator uses God talk relatively infrequently, aside from divine appearances (the birth of the children [29:31; 30:17, 22; 31:53; 33:20] and events in chap. 35 [vv. 5, 7, 15]). The narrator obviously prefers that the characters themselves give voice to the place of God in their lives.

4. Conflict. The conflict theme arises from within these theological matters. In the Abraham/Sarah stories, barrenness and childbearing, and their implications for the promise, constitute the prevailing motif; parents rather than sons stand at the center of the conflict. In the Isaac and Jacob stories, while issues of barrenness and birth continue, the narratives focus more on conflict between sons. At the same time, the intrafamilial conflict often extends beyond the brothers, and catches up parents, wives, children, more extended family members (e.g., Laban), the neighbors (from Abimelech to Shechem), and even

God. The vital and positive role that women—especially Rebekah, Leah, Rachel, and Dinah—play in these conflicts has only recently received significant attention.

The Jacob story begins with conflict (25:19-34), which sets the stage for much of what follows, issuing finally in a less than full reconciliation. Conflict begins with issues of kinship and inheritance, especially primogeniture, which in turn catches up the characters in acts of deception and all of their spiraling consequences. We might, today, call this a dysfunctional family, with all of its relational difficulties, complexities, and ambiguities. One of the difficulties in interpreting this conflict has to do with character depiction.

Commentators have tended to portray virtually every individual in extreme and unfortunate directions: Jacob is a cheat and rascal, Esau an idiot, Isaac a dottering old man, Rebekah a manipulator. To be sure, there are no gods or demons among these people, but the interpreter will be truer to the text by striving for as much balance as possible in sketching out the ways these characters work in and through the conflict.

At the same time, these texts witness to a God who engages this family in the very midst of its conflicted life from the start. In fact, God’s oracle to Rebekah (25:23) stands at the beginning. While the oracle presents a divine interpretation of already existing conditions, and the characters do inherit a way of being a family from their Abrahamic forebears, in some sense it becomes God’s own word that generates and intensifies the conflict. The entire story involves a divine decision to elect one person rather than another to carry on the Abrahamic line of promise. At its most profound level, the problems and possibilities created by the divine election constitute the essence of the conflict in the story of Jacob and Esau. We should understand the conflicted relationships in the story as a result of God’s decision to choose one family.
The way in which the principals involved respond to this divine election can, of course, intensify the conflict even further. They can complicate and frustrate the divine purpose, even place it in jeopardy. The story should not be seen as “the actualization of a predetermined fate.” God is, indeed, bound to this family, but they are to respond faithfully (see 26:5), and the way they work through the divine choices and promises shapes the future, including God’s future, in significant ways. Not least, the chosen ones themselves must come to see that election should not be understood in isolated terms. Such a perception could only lead to exclusivistic understandings, to an isolation from the world while basking in the glory of having been divinely chosen (an understanding not foreign to later Israel, cf. Amos 3:2; 9:7). Election always serves mission, the choice of one family for the sake of all other families (12:3; 28:14). This orientation outward helps to explain why these chapters “reveal an astounding degree of empathy with Israel’s antagonists.”

Structure. One may outline the Jacob story broadly as a journey: flight from Canaan to Haran and back to Canaan. To this we should add the journey through the land of promise in 33:18–35:27, after the return. This itinerary gives to the story a strong sense of movement, presenting a person and a family on the go, never staying in one spot for too long. The journeys both within and without the promised land mirror the life of later Israel, especially the experiences of exodus and exile. The most basic movement in the Jacob story is linear, climaxing in the settlement of Jacob and his family in the land of promise.

Others have observed a chiastic structure within the story (especially as refined by Fishbane and others). However, though certain patterns can indeed be observed, we must be highly cautious about forcing the material into complex and detailed chiasms. A number of structures overlap and help to prevent any easy reading of the story according to a single model.

In discerning structure (and content) one should note the prominent parallels between this story and that of Moses in Exod 2:1–4:31. The following brief observations may be helpful.

Genealogies, those of Ishmael (25:12-18) and Esau (36:1-43), bracket the Jacob story. The former provides a link with the Abraham story, as does the latter for the Joseph story. This bracketing of the chosen by the nonchosen may be a way in which these groups of people are held together, not least in the service of God’s mission of blessing all “families” (28:14).

One may discern a similar interest in the two chapters that occur at comparable points early and late in the story. They relate the Canaanite peoples to Isaac and Jacob (26; 34),
drawing out ways in which Israel’s relationship to outsiders takes both positive and negative (mostly) directions.

The centerpiece of the story may well be the birth of Jacob’s children (29:31–30:24). This judgment is supported by the sudden and pervasive use of God language, by the lament-deliverance-thanksgiving rhythm revealed in the responses of Leah and Rachel, and by the overriding concern for the birth of Israel. Different elements of the Jacob-Laban conflict enclose this birth narrative (29:1-30; 30:25–31:54).

Some scholars have suggested that two texts focusing on Jacob and Esau are also parallel (27:1-45; 33:1-17), moving from conflict to some sort of resolution. This judgment, however, tends to reduce the important conflict story in 25:23-34 to the status of an introduction.

The appearances of God constitute the “pillars” of the story. Here the structure becomes more complex than typical chiasms allow. Some interpreters view the dream at Bethel (28:10-22) and the struggle at the Jabbok (32:22-32; or encounters with angels of God, 32:1-2, 22-32) as parallel, enclosing the Jacob-Laban story. However, one may discern more significant levels of correspondence between the texts related to Bethel (28:10-22; 35:1-15). Moreover, the divine oracle to Rebekah (25:23) regarding “struggling” is linked to the struggle at the Jabbok, especially the text’s mirroring of the Jacob-Esau and the Jacob-God struggle (see 33:10). One should view these four instances of divine speaking as informing each other in complex ways and propelling the story along.

**GENESIS 25:19-34, JACOB AND ESAU**

Link to:

<Page 519 Ends><Page 520 Begins>

**COMMENTARY**

These verses introduce in almost snapshot fashion the leading figures of the chapters to follow: Isaac, Rebekah, Jacob, and Esau. Events associated with the birth of Jacob and Esau (vv. 21-26) and their early life (vv. 27-34), while presented in brief and episodic fashion, set the stage well for the conflicted family relationships that ensue. The oracle in v. 23 specifies that national issues are at stake (Edomite and Israelite relationships), but the text grounds those realities in the experiences of individuals. The two principals shape history both before and after birth, with not a little help from their parents.

25:19-26. The story begins with genealogical notes, wherein Abraham’s relationship to Isaac is stated twice (the NIV is probably correct in seeing v. 1a as a summary statement of the chapters that follow, cf. 37:2a). Verses 19b-20 recapitulate earlier material (cf. 24:67), though Isaac’s age is new information and Rebekah’s family roots are described in greater detail.

The story of Rebekah/Isaac parallels that of Sarah/Abraham. Isaac and Rebekah are
identified with some precision (cf. 11:27-32). Like Sarah, Rebekah is barren (cf. also 30:1-2), though that does not become a major motif in this story. Isaac, like Abraham, is old when he becomes a father (sixty years). Unlike Abraham, Isaac prays concerning the barrenness of Rebekah, and God, the narrator testifies, responds to (more precisely, is moved to answer) his prayer so that she conceives.

Rebekah’s prayer soon follows Isaac’s prayer. God responds differently to the two prayers, however. In the first, God enables conception; hence, one might speak of an “answer.” The second involves a more complicated issue. The pregnancy is difficult for Rebekah; the story dictates that the (fraternal) twins’ subsequent relationship has its roots in genetic rather than environmental factors. To suggest, however, that genetics equals destiny goes beyond the text, especially given the parental favoritism. She brings her lament to God in prayer (the language suggests a trip to a sanctuary), wondering whether life is worth all this suffering (the NRSV and the NIV differ on whether this has become a life-and-death matter for her; cf. 27:46).

God responds directly (an inner voice?) to her with an oracle. The oracle responds to an already existing situation; it does not start from “scratch.” God explains to her the reason for the painful pregnancy (twins) and interprets this as a sign of the future relationship between them and their descendants (v. 23); the struggle itself does not result from divine action. More specifically, the narrative moves beyond laws of primogeniture; either the older (Esau) will be the weaker of the two and will serve the younger (Jacob), or, more likely, the older will be the stronger but will serve the weaker and younger. If the latter, there would be a play on the word for “strength.” Either Esau is stronger physically—he wins the battle in the womb—and Jacob is stronger in other ways, or the one shall be stronger initially (Esau) but not finally (2 Sam 8:13-14). God is not described as an agent in these developments, which underscores the importance of human activity.

This oracle (consonant with Isaac’s later blessings on the sons, 27:29, 40; cf. also 49:8), as well as the plays on words, reflects later conflict between the two “nations” (i.e., peoples) of Israel and Edom and the hegemony of the former over the latter (see 2 Sam 8:13-14). They help to ground (perhaps even justify) that later reality in these ancient family events. At the same time, the move from present oracle to future reality was not necessary or inevitable. This oracle will inform Rebekah’s subsequent relationships to her sons in significant ways (see 25:28; 27:5-15, 42-46; 28:7).

When the twin boys are born, the narrator portrays them with features of their subsequent relationship: Esau, physical features; Jacob, action (this is reversed to some degree in v. 29). The Hebrew word for “red” (ynwmda `admnî, [or “ruddy”]; see 1 Sam 16:12) is a play on Edom, linked to the “red stuff” at v. 30 (see 36:1). The word for “hairy” (t[c Ze (Ar) is a play on Seir, the region where the Edomites lived, and is linked to the deception in 27:23. Why he is named Esau is uncertain. The meaning of Jacob (bq[y ya (aqob), also uncertain, plays on the word for “heel,” bq [((Aqeb), “grasp the heel,” or, less likely, the
verb (Aqab (“he supplants, deceives”; see Esau’s interpretation in 27:36; Hos. 12:4). The name Jacob is associated with a feature of his birth and implies a uterine struggle to be born first, a struggle that Esau wins.

25:27-34. The following two vignettes not only illustrate this birth relationship between the two brothers, but establish specific grounds for later conflict. The first (vv. 27-28) speaks to issues of life-style and intrafamilial relationships, the second (vv. 29-34) to economics and personal values.

The author describes the young men by referring to ways of life that often stood in tension: Esau with those who are at home in the wild, on the move with animals, and Jacob with those who live a more settled, pastoral way of life. The writer characterizes Jacob with the word !t (tAm), which both the NRSV and the NIV translate as “quiet” or mild-mannered; it normally means “innocent, upright” (see Job 1–2), which seems appropriate, at least at this point in his life. The writer juxtaposes the twins’ different interests and temperaments with the love of the parents (cf. 37:4), a realistic note, common among parents. Isaac’s love of Esau involves his ability to provide food (see Rebekah’s use of this knowledge in 27:7, 14), but also remains independent of the oracle, of which Isaac was unaware. The author offers no specific reason to explain Rebekah’s love for Jacob, but we may suppose it relates to what she knows about Jacob from the oracle.

How the second vignette is related to the oracle presents somewhat of a problem: Neither man was aware of the oracle or of the promise. Jacob does not act directly on the basis of the oracle, but Rebekah’s favoritism may have helped to shape the way he acts toward his brother. His “cooking” (an ambiguous word) scene may even

be contrived on the basis of his knowledge of Esau’s habits.

The birthright—namely, the conferral of rights and privileges on the eldest son (normally)—entails a leadership position in the family and establishes claims regarding inheritance, indeed a double share of it—no small matter in view of 25:5 (see Deut 21:15-17). This story (and ancient Near Eastern parallels) indicates that such rights could be forfeited by the one born into such a privileged position. Esau and Jacob relate to the birthright in different ways. Esau comes across as callous and uncaring, easily outwitted regarding what might “naturally” be his, desiring more a satisfied present than a secure future (though his reference to death may not be as hyperbolic as is usually thought). He sells or barters his birthright for Jacob’s lentil stew (i.e., “red stuff,” another play on his identity); that Esau initially identifies the “red stuff” as blood stew seems possible, but too uncertain to guide interpretation. Five verbs depict the moment: ate, drank, rose, departed, and despised. The last verb specifies the narrator’s judgment that more is at stake than a lapse in judgment. Although not justifying Jacob’s actions, that final verb demonstrates that Esau bears responsibility for what happens here. At the same time,
Esau continues to live, in the light of the oracle that he, like Jacob, will become a people or nation (v. 23).

The author, on the other hand, presents Jacob as a clever and opportunistic individual, who knows what he wants. He takes advantage of a brother in need (of which Esau is later rightfully critical, 27:36) and his hospitality to his brother contrasts with both Abraham and Lot (chaps. 18–19). He carefully covers the legal bases when the opening for advancement presents itself, having Esau swear an inviolable oath in the urgency of the moment regarding the transfer of the birthright.

**REFLECTIONS**

1. The story and Jacob and Esau begins with a struggle, which sets the stage for a complex and difficult journey for everyone within this conflicted family. At the same time, the texts witness to a God at work in and through this situation. The problems and possibilities created by the interaction between God and this family constitute the essence of the story of Jacob and Esau.

We should not cast struggle and conflict in totally negative terms. Hence, for God to subvert the law of primogeniture for the sake of the divine purposes opens the situation up to conflict; those who hold on for dear life to the way things are will not give up easily, not least because they have law and custom on their side. At the same time, we may have difficulty in discerning when and how change (and hence often conflict) stands in service of God’s purposes. The furtherance of God’s mission in the world would be one basic criterion.

2. We are not told what sort of divine action Rebekah’s conception was thought to entail. “Barrenness” means childlessness, but not necessarily infertility. We do not know the degree to which physiological or psychological factors, or some combination, faced these parents. They had been childless for twenty years. Rebekah’s conception witnesses to God’s work as Creator, enabling new life to emerge.

3. The role of prayer on the part of both Isaac and Rebekah continues an emphasis of chap. 24, and demonstrates its importance in the lives of these figures; they obviously believe God would be concerned about such matters and had resources to do something about them (see 18:22-33). Prayer occurs prominently in Genesis as an unself-conscious practice of nearly every major figure, attesting to the personal nature of their relationship with God.165

4. God’s oracle to Rebekah achieves a profound effect; it sets into motion a certain direction

   for the future. This oracle recognizes that what happens in one generation (especially a word from God) may have a profound influence on those that follow, particularly with
respect to certain formative periods in Israel’s (or any people’s) life. Later Israel understood the ancestral period to be such a time.

One might claim that the future of the two boys has been predetermined by this divine word. Yet, it shortly becomes clear that Rebekah does not understand that the oracle absolutely determines her sons’ futures. What she does or says assumes that she thinks she can shape that future. She enters into their lives in decisive, at times manipulative, fashion, acting in ways that she thinks will contribute toward the future of which God has spoken (the narrator passes no judgment on her activity). The oft-suggested idea that just by pursuing such activities one seeks to take the divine promises into one’s own hands constitutes a docetic view of the way in which God works in the world. God chooses to work in and through human activity in pursuing the divine purposes.

The future about which God speaks is not set in concrete. This is true of divine announcements about the future generally, particularly in prophetic material (see 2 Kgs 20:1-7; Jonah 3). These utterances express the future as God sees it (or would like to see it). God’s knowledge of future human behaviors is not absolute (evident in other texts; see 22:12). Moreover, the divine will can be frustrated by human behaviors (e.g., sin); though God’s way into the future cannot, finally, be stymied.

Why would God speak directly to Rebekah about such matters? God takes sharp risks in being misunderstood. Giving Rebekah (or any human being) such information will tend to predispose her to act in certain ways toward her sons. Although she could have ignored God’s word or actively worked against it, she chooses to tilt toward Jacob. God knows such behavior is likely, of course. The narrator has already reported Rebekah’s preference (25:28), where she is said to love Jacob, and she doubtless knows that this runs counter to Isaac’s “love.” So God apparently gives Rebekah this information because God wants her to speak and act in such a way that this oracle will have a greater likelihood of coming to pass! The oracle expresses the future that God desires, and he hereby enlists Rebekah to work with God toward that end. That God chooses Rebekah rather than Isaac seems remarkable, given this patriarchal society; it suggests that God has more confidence in Rebekah than in Isaac. The reader might ask: Is this fair? Not according to any known human standard. At this point we are smack up against the mysteries of the divine election of Jacob (or Abraham or Israel . . . ).

5. The narrator depicts the situation in such a way as to demonstrate that the inversion of priorities in the oracle does not derive from the boys’ behaviors. The decision occurred pre-birth. Both act in ignorance of the oracle. The writer portrays both Jacob and Esau in such a way that disinterested readers would probably disagree on who acted the most reprehensibly. Both are guilty of violating basic family relationships, and any effort to excuse either one cuts against the grain of the text. Jacob takes egregious advantage of another person in need and sets the stage for major family conflict. Esau comes off as the dullard, careless with family interests and despising of the birthright. We do not know why God would choose either one to carry out his purposes. From another angle, inasmuch as God typically chooses weak instruments, then both Esau and Jacob would
It would be precarious to talk about God’s choosing the weak to shame the strong on the basis of this passage (unless strength is defined in a very narrow way).

The narrator probably “sets up” the reader with this text. The temptation for later Israel (and all who consider themselves to be God’s elect) would certainly be to side with Jacob against Esau, to somehow justify his behaviors or even to suggest that whatever he did to obtain the birthright was appropriate to or congruent with God’s choice. At one level, such thinking is ethically dangerous, for it suggests that the elect are free to act as they please, without regard for the consequences. At another level, such thinking is theologically wrong-headed, for personal behaviors did not ground God’s choice to have the elder serve the younger.

Moreover, to note with Brueggemann, the pottage and the birthright ought not to be interpreted “as a contrast of spiritual and material . . . the birthright is fully as historical and material as is the pottage. It concerns security, prosperity, fertility and land.”

6. The reader must also use care in discussing primogeniture and the reversal of the rights of the firstborn. To be sure, the oracle overturns traditional customs and understandings and opens the future to possibilities not inherent in existing structures and institutions. But it is just as true that one can idolize the reversal of the traditional for its own sake. Even more, one can be tempted to understand election in terms comparable to primogeniture! Election, too, can be used as a vehicle to exclude others and exalt one’s rights and privileges. Against such an understanding the prophets will speak very sharply (Amos 3:2; 9:7).

7. Family conflicts have far-reaching consequences, extending into personal, political, economic, and religious spheres. The conflict within this family will become more and more sharply evident as the narrative moves on. What will this mean for the future of God’s people? Are seeds being sown in these dim recesses of history that will one day reap bitter fruit for the descendants of this family? What the people of God do with the conflicts with which they are inevitably presented will make a difference. And, amid all of this intrasfamilial difficulty, what will become of the promises of God? Will they transpire as God intends? Neither the oracles nor the promises of God give a precise shape to the future. God will be faithful, that will never be in doubt; but what the recipients of the promise do and say along the way will make a difference regarding the shape of fulfillment.

GENESIS 26:1-33, STORIES ABOUT ISAAC

Link to:
COMMENTARY

Isaac is the least well known of the ancestral figures. We are most familiar with Isaac as the boy portrayed in the stories of Abraham. Chapter 26 presents the only block of material devoted solely to Isaac. Even then, it occurs after the introduction of Jacob and Esau and their emerging conflict, so it has the feel of an interlude within that more comprehensive story. The fact that the two boys are not yet born seems evident from 26:7, so an editor has positioned this chapter in a nonlinear fashion.

Whatever the origins and history of these materials (scholars typically point to J), many interpreters now consider the chapter a unity. Isaac’s contacts with Abimelech provide episodes that highlight the promises to Isaac and the formation of peaceful relationships with “nonchosen” people of the land. There are numerous links between this chapter and the story of Abraham. In some basic sense, Isaac is a mirror of Abraham.

26:1-5. The chapter begins with the first of several links to the story of Abraham and the initial famine (12:10). Isaac also leaves his home in time of famine and heads for Egypt, but he gets only as far as Gerar, in Philistine country, when God appears to him. We have previously encountered Gerar, Abimelech, and the Philistines. (See chaps. 20–21. Some have questioned whether this can be the same king, given the expanse of some seventy-five years; yet, the ages of people in Genesis [Abraham died at 175] and the absence of any report to the contrary means the author thinks this Abimelech is probably the same person.)

God appears to Isaac twice (vv. 2, 24), probably in the form of a messenger (see 16:7). In both cases, the deity extends to Isaac the promises previously given to Abraham.

The first instance (vv. 2-5) contains both a command regarding a journey (which Isaac obeys) and a promise, mirroring Abraham’s word from God in 12:1-4a; both are also followed by famines and journeys during which the patriarchs place their wives in danger. God intends to stop Isaac from doing what Abraham did, going down to Egypt for relief from the famine (see 12:10). He should “sojourn” (be a resident alien) among the Philistines. Enduring the famine here would seem to entail more hardship for the family, but such does not happen. While the command may be intended to deter Isaac from repeating Abraham’s experience (that would be ironic in view of what happens), it also highlights God’s blessings even in the midst of famine. In another such time God approves Jacob’s journey to Egypt (46:3). Looking to Egypt for relief may be a difficult political question for later Israelites.

This divine word fulfills the promise to Abraham regarding the covenant with Isaac (17:19). God’s promises are confirmed to Isaac: (a) I will be with you. God offers this
word for the first time to Isaac, and then, later, to Jacob (28:15; 31:3); (b) I will bless you (see 12:2); this promise pertains to the goodness that comes to Isaac as well as to his descendants; (c) I will give “all these lands,” a collocation peculiar to this context and stated twice; it includes the lands of the various peoples noted earlier (15:18-19), but focuses on the land in which Isaac lives now as an alien; (d) the multiplication of descendants as the stars (see 15:5), i.e., too numerous to count; (e) the blessing upon the nations in and through Isaac and his descendants (see 12:3). This promise takes concrete form in this context in Isaac’s relationship to the Philistines.

On the difficult v. 5, see Reflections.

26:6-11. We have already encountered two similar episodes involving the endangering of a wife of a patriarch (12:10-20; 20:1-18). This story begins with language that links it to Abraham’s sojourn in the same city, Gerar (20:1-18). The juxtaposition of command/promise and the endangerment episode also occur in chap. 12 (vv. 1-9, 10-20). Moreover, all three versions are followed by texts concerned with land (13:1-18; 21:22-34; 26:12-33). This version of the story presents minimal complexity: little tension, no divine involvement, no actual contact with Rebekah by the king, and less disparagement of the patriarch, who responds only when confronted with interest in Rebekah (and apparently for good reason, v. 10).

Once again, an ancestor of Israel tries to pass off his beautiful wife as his sister in the presence of foreigners. Once again, fear for his own life (twice stated) leads him to do this. This guise had been successful for “a long time” when Abimelech (unlike chap. 20, he was not personally involved) quite by chance observes intimate behaviors between them that suggest a husband/wife relationship. He immediately challenges Isaac, insists on an explanation but ignores it, and berates him for endangering that community. If someone had thought Rebekah was unmarried and had had sexual relations with her, that would have brought “guilt” on his people. In the face of this threat, Abimelech warns all citizens to keep their hands off both Rebekah and Isaac. This edict assures a safe setting in which God’s blessings now flow to Isaac. Here, as in chaps. 12 and (especially) 20, the author portrays a foreign king in congenial terms, both personally and religiously.

26:12-22. As with Abraham in Egypt (12:16) and in Gerar (20:14-16), Isaac emerges from this potentially disastrous situation not only unscathed, but also immeasurably enriched. His material prosperity occurs quickly in the very midst of the famine and enfolds every aspect of his life. Unlike chaps. 12 and 20, Isaac’s wealth derives only indirectly from the king (the edict protected him, v. 11), whereas the author highlights God’s blessing activity. This prosperity attests to the promise in v. 3; the blessing comes in spite of the patriarch’s actions. This result qualifies Abimelech’s concern about guilt, at least if he thought the moral order functioned mechanically. If people always reaped the effects of their deeds, then Isaac (and Abraham) would have reaped disaster rather than blessing.
This picture of great wealth (mentioned three times in v. 13) has become important to these stories. God’s promise of blessing works itself out in every sphere of their life. The sojourning life experienced by Israel’s ancestors on that land gives a foretaste of what it will be like when Israel lives in the land of milk and honey.

However, not everyone receives well God’s work of blessing. Isaac’s wealth becomes the object of envy by the Philistines, who stop up some wells Abraham’s servants had dug (see 21:22-34; the NIV translation of v. 15 is clearer than the NRSV). Given this tension, Abimelech thinks that Isaac’s power endangers (again, cf. v. 10) the Philistine hegemony, and asks him to leave the area. This he does without hesitation, but he remains close by, in territory adjacent to Gerar (v. 17), where Abraham had spent some time (21:34) and had also dug wells.

Conflict over wells and water rights continues in this new territory (vv. 17-22). Isaac and his servants reopen other wells (opposed to those in v. 15) that Abraham had dug and that the Philistines had stopped up; he gave them their old names as a sign of renewed ownership (v. 18). Verses 19-22 speak of Isaac’s digging three new wells (finding fresh water in one); the Philistines in the area quarrel over the first two, but not the third (reasons are not given, but v. 16 suggests Isaac’s power). Isaac gives names to the wells that correspond to this life experience (see NRSV and NIV footnotes). The author explains the third name (Rehoboth) as a divine gift of land, in which they will be able to spread out and be fruitful. These incidents may reflect Israel’s later experience with the people of the land, but we should observe that Isaac does not use his stronger position to claim every well. Verse 22, with its reference to room and fruitfulness in the land of promise, leads into a fuller statement of the promise in v. 24.

26:23-33. The second divine appearance to Isaac (vv. 24-25) occurs after his return to Beersheba (22:19). The author presents a typical theophanic narrative, with self-identification, quelling of fear, and word of God. For the first time, God is identified as “the God of your father.” Abraham is the first such “father,” and the epithet now becomes common in referring to the continuity of God’s promise. The epithet (used as well for other gods in the ancient Near East) specifies the singularity of this deity from one generation to the next and the faithful response of each “father” to God. The link with persons rather than places emphasizes the personal character of the faith between God and these persons.

The God of Isaac’s own father reiterates the basic promises spoken in vv. 2-4 (except the land promise, just treated in v. 22). The promises may recur at this point because the conflicts seem to jeopardize Isaac’s relationship to the promises and because land that Abraham held has been reclaimed. The phrase “for the sake of [on account of] Abraham” refers to v. 5. Because of Abraham’s faithfulness, the promises are transmitted to Isaac. The designation of Abraham as a servant, an image with a focus on loyalty, stresses exactly this point. This does not involve a “fund of spiritual credit” upon which subsequent generations may draw. For the first time, Isaac responds with worship (v. 25), calling on God as Yahweh (see 4:25). This appearance also establishes Beersheba as
a cultic center (Jacob stops here in 46:1). The digging of a well by Isaac’s servants (v. 25b) may have prompted the visit from Abimelech. The well brackets his visit (vv. 25b, 32-33).

Verses 26-33 closely parallel 21:22-34. Abimelech and his top advisers leave their own area to initiate better relationships with the more powerful Isaac; Isaac exhibits caution in view of their history with each other. For all Abimelech’s concern about future relations with Isaac, however, he emphasizes another motivation. He observes that Yahweh has been with Isaac and has blessed him (vv. 28-29); these affirmations enclose his words and signal their import—they are more than flattery. Because of what God has done—and the reiteration of the promises in v. 24 reinforces this—Isaac draws Abimelech into a peaceful relationship.

The two men express some difference of opinion regarding their common past. Isaac speaks of

hostility and expulsion (cf. v. 16); Abimelech claims that no harm, indeed nothing but good, has been done—Isaac was sent away in peace (cf. v. 11). Isaac ignores the differences (no further words between them are reported) and takes a peaceful initiative by preparing a meal for all concerned (common in treaty making; cf. 31:46). The next day they formally enter into a covenant, a bilateral, nonaggression pact. It results in peace (!wlv sAlôm) between Isaac and Abimelech (cf. 31:44-54), less than idyllic but still peace.

The references to well digging and finding water (vv. 32-33), begun in v. 25, symbolize the newly won peace. Isaac’s servants dig a well and discover water, thereby supporting life, and no conflict ensues. Isaac gives essentially the same name to the place—Beersheba—reported in 21:31 (as was his practice, 26:18), testifying to the sworn oath that enables peace rather than conflict to prevail.

REFLECTIONS

1. This chapter as a whole testifies to the way Isaac, exhibiting both weakness and strength, yet repeatedly surrounded by the promises and blessings of God, works through relationships with outsiders and enables peace to prevail amid numerous possibilities for conflict.

2. Verse 5 provides two sorts of difficulties. (1) It seems to indicate that the continuance of the promise depended on Abraham’s obedience. (2) The various words for the law seem to presuppose the giving of the law at Sinai.

The initial “because” has been used before in 22:18 (cf. Deut 7:12; 8:20), though there associated only with obeying the “voice” of God. Westermann states that Abraham is “the exemplar of obedience to the law in return for which God bestowed the promises on
him.” Similarly, Coats states that obedience “offers the basis for the promise.”169 This should be stated differently. God gave the promise to Abraham independently of his obedience (12:1-3). Similarly, God repeats the promise twice to Isaac because of the obedience of Abraham (vv. 5, 24). Isaac’s obedience does not enable him to be the recipient of the promise. God announces the promise to him because of someone else’s faithfulness. The community of faith throughout the centuries has also received the promise because of someone else’s faithfulness.

The issue involves the transmission of the promise to the next generation. Genes, independent of the faithfulness of the one to whom the promise has been given, do not transmit the promise (see commentary on chap. 22). Isaac’s faithfulness will be as important for generational transmission as was Abraham’s. The reference to the “God of Isaac” in 28:13-15 covers the same point, as does 48:15, where Jacob confesses that Isaac walked before God. This chapter, in its various parallels to Abraham’s story, illustrates Isaac’s faithful response. Isaac responds to the initial command/promise of God as does Abraham (12:1-4a); he moves through comparable times of failure, but nevertheless remains blessed by God and receives anew the divine promises; and he responds in worship and peacemaking.

The language about the law certainly means that the author knows about the law given at Sinai. But this is no simple anachronism; it carries significance for understanding the place of law in the pre-Sinai period. God introduces law initially at creation (1:26-28; 2:16-17) and other divine commands emerge along the way (e.g., 9:1-7). The law given at Sinai does not emerge as a new reality; it stands in basic continuity with earlier articulations of God’s will for the creation.170 Abraham’s conforming to the will of God shows that his life is in tune with God’s creational purposes and models for later Israel the right response to law, which cannot be collapsed into that given at Sinai. The fivefold “my” shows that obedience to law is seen in terms of interpersonal response.

3. The author presents Abimelech as the only named outsider who extends across more than one generation. He must have grown weary encountering this family, who had a habit of passing off wives as sisters and with whom he had to negotiate about water and wells one more time. One more pre-Israelite, nonchosen inhabitant of the promised land receives remarkably good press, and acts with integrity that often matches the patriarch.

4. The story in vv. 6-11, as others in Genesis, assumes the idea of objective guilt. Even if a sinful act is unknowingly committed (in this case, sexual relations with a married woman), one incurs guilt. Whether the text also presumes corporate guilt (“us”) remains unclear. The word translated “guilt” (‘va )AsAm) may only refer more generally to negative communal consequences. Isaac, in protecting himself from danger, places an entire city under threat from the fallout of sins committed because he has not considered
fully the possible effects of his action. Yet, this was only a risk, for the moral order does not function in a mechanical fashion.

5. Verse 22 foreshadows settlement in the land, but it also describes a preliminary fulfillment of the promise of a “broad” land (cf. Exod 3:8) and their growth as a people (see 17:6; 47:27), which in turn fulfills God’s word in creation (1:28; 9:1, 7). Isaac’s utterance also provides a good word for people in exile, whose lives often parallel the ancestors. To have a home, a place one can call one’s own, means to “make room” (give space). The OT construes the experience of salvation in similar ways (see Pss. 4:1; 18:19, 36; 31:8 [“You have set my feet in a broad place,” NRSV]); the blessing that comes in the midst of famine attests to an experience of salvation.

6. Abimelech confirms that the divine promises (v. 3) have been fulfilled (vv. 28-29)! Even more, we see Isaac/Israel as one with whom the kings and nations of the world must come to terms. But this claim does not function simply at the political level; whatever greatness comes to Israel (see v. 13; 12:2) comes because of God’s blessing and not its own powers. Even more, if and when power or greatness comes, it does not necessarily involve establishing hegemony over others or undermining their reconciling efforts, perhaps in retaliation for past actions. Israel should be an instrument of peace among the nations (vv. 29, 31).

GENESIS 26:34–28:9, JACOB, ESAU, AND THE BLESSING

Link to:

<Page 530 Ends><Page 531 Begins>
<Page 531 Ends><Page 532 Begins>
<Page 532 Ends><Page 533 Begins>
<Page 533 Ends><Page 534 Begins>

COMMENTARY

The author has enclosed this major story of Isaac’s deception (27:1-45, assigned to J or JE) by reports associated with the wives of the two sons (26:34-35; 27:46–28:9; assigned to P). These reports intensify the conflicted character of the family. At the same time, Isaac’s freely given blessing of Jacob (28:3-4) softens the impact of Jacob’s deception in gaining the blessing. The origin of these texts remains obscure, but they may reflect later Israel/Edom alignments. Two old poetic pieces provide the focus for the chapter (vv. 27-29, 39-40).

26:34-35. Chapter 26 concludes on a negative note. Family relationships remain conflicted in spite of peace in the larger community. Esau’s act of marrying, without parental consent, two Hittite (Canaanite) women (cf. 24:3; 28:1, 6) first provides evidence of difficulties. Esau’s wives’ making life bitter for both parents involves more than their family lineage. Yet, placement of these verses before chap. 27 reinforces a negative sense about Esau and disposes the reader to be less critical of the moves made by Jacob and Rebekah. Moreover, Esau’s actions create sympathy for the dilemma Isaac
faces as a parent. However, one must be careful not to fall into the trap of placing Esau and Jacob on some kind of “fitness” scale, as if God’s choices were determined by measuring morality. Jacob is no plaster saint either.

27:1-40. Jacob and Esau never appear together in the four major scenes of this story, nor do Rebekah and Esau, which symbolizes a lack of communication within the family. The author uses vocabulary to create a sensuous story: seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and smelling make it a story one can almost feel. Also, repeated language of blessing (twenty-eight times) demonstrates its centrality in the story.

The relationship between the story of the birthright (hrkb bukorâ; 25:29-34) and this story of the blessing (hkrb burAkâ) appears problematic. They may be two different ways of thinking about the same reality, but that may be too simple. Esau distinguishes them but thinks they bear comparable importance (27:36); to lose both produces a double loss. The former relates basically to issues of inheritance; the latter to deathbed blessing (cf. 48:22 with 49:22-26). Both deal with issues raised by the oracle in 25:23, the overturning of primogeniture; both involve Jacob in an active role; his actions are duplicitous in both cases. The former reflects, initially, a private arrangement (of which Isaac is not aware until 27:36), the latter a more public matter.

27:1-4. Isaac, advanced in years, takes steps to prepare his family for the future (cf. 24:1; he does not die until 35:29). Isaac directs Esau to hunt for game and prepare his favorite food (cf. 25:28); then Isaac would give him a personal (yvpn napsî ) blessing. The provision of a meal constitutes an essential part of the blessing ritual (see below).

27:5-17. Overhearing Isaac’s request, Rebekah reports its essentials to Jacob, including Esau’s absence, but she adds “before Yahweh” (v. 7). This interpretation sets Isaac over against God’s speech (25:23) and establishes Rebekah’s theological motivation; she responds to the word of God, which Esau’s behaviors have reinforced (26:34-35). Blessing is not a justice issue for her. Taking the initiative, she devises a ruse by which Jacob can receive the blessing, and “commands” him to help out (v. 8; “obey” in v. 13). He should act in just the way Isaac commanded Esau, but before Esau returns.

Jacob does not immediately agree, not because he thinks it wrong, but because he doubts its feasibility. His participation becomes explicit when he raises a complicating issue; Esau is hairy and Jacob is not, and their nearly blind father can still feel (an ironic touch since “smooth” can also mean deceptive, Ps 55:21). Jacob worries that Isaac may pronounce a curse on him. Their mother’s willingness to bear the brunt of any response (note that the curse could be transferred!) reassures him, and he quickly (conveyed by three verbs in rapid sequence, v. 14) “obeys” her directives. Only then does Rebekah address her son’s concern by “clothing” him so that he feels and smells like Esau (cf.
Jacob’s being deceived by clothing in 37:31-33; 38:14). Jacob proceeds without hesitation. We cannot help wondering whether such crude disguises will do the trick.

27:18-29. Carrying out the ruse is now up to Jacob, and he executes it without hesitation. His verbal deception takes two forms: He lies about his identity (vv. 19, 24), and he sanctimoniously draws God into the deceit by claiming, with supreme irony, that Isaac’s God, Yahweh, has granted him success (v. 20). But from v. 20 on, Jacob utters only one word (v. 24); otherwise he only acts in response to Isaac’s queries and commands.

These verses are informed by a blessing ritual (though without magical allusions):171 the command of the father, here recalled by the son (vv. 18-19); identification of the son (vv. 19, 24); a shared meal—for communion, not strength (v. 25); approach and kiss—to seal the blessing, not to transfer life (vv. 26-27a); pronouncement of blessing (vv. 27b-29). The various elements of the ritual are essential for the transmission of blessing. At the same time, Isaac utilizes this ritual in remarkable ways to pursue his questions. Isaac may be an unknowing vehicle for Rebekah’s wishes, but he has not thereby turned into an automaton!

Interpreters often adjudge Isaac’s behavior to be naive, even bumbling, yet the repeated questions and ritual delays reveal that he pursues his deep suspicions carefully. He uses all the senses available to him (in this order: sound, touch, taste, smell) to discern the truth. He trusts hearing less than touching (vv. 22-23); his blindness and age create varying sensitivities. We should note especially his manipulation of the ritual. Rather than wait for full clarity before proceeding, he uses its various elements to test his suspicions. Twice he questions Jacob’s identity; in the meal and kiss rituals he probes with taste and smell. The smell (mentioned four times in v. 27!) seems finally to be sufficient, if not conclusive evidence. The smell

recalls a fertile field and then moves to the blessing of fertility!

In view of what follows, v. 23 proves startling. If it means what it says, then Isaac utters the blessing, but quickly has further doubts, the import of which would be that a blessing once spoken may not be final. But these words could also refer to Isaac’s decision to proceed with the blessing ritual even in the face of uncertainty. In either case, Isaac begins the ritual once again, still concerned with the issue of identity (v. 24).

Isaac never calls Jacob by the name Esau (contrast chap. 49) or concludes that he now knows this is Esau. The (sevenfold) “my son” remains constant from beginning (v. 18) to end (v. 27); in fact, its use in v. 25 seems unusual, since “your game” would have been more natural. The narrator claims nonrecognition only at the story’s mid-point (v. 23). Isaac probably gives the blessing with less than full certainty, and probably suspects he is dealing with Jacob (note his musings in v. 22).
Although Isaac reacts strongly when he finds he has been tricked (v. 33); and calls it deceit (v. 35), he never chides Jacob. In fact, the next time he speaks to him (28:1-4), Isaac proceeds as if all is well. He then reinforces the blessing, explicitly linking it with Abraham. Isaac’s acceptance seems to lie, not in a magical notion of blessing, but in a conviction that he acted properly (vv. 33, 37). After all, he has just learned about the birthright incident for the first time (v. 36); another factor may have been the parental pain Esau’s marriages caused (26:35).

The blessing centers on fertility (v. 28) and dominion (v. 29; cf. 24:60). The parallels between this blessing and those Jacob extends to both Judah and Joseph in 49:8-12, 22-26 are noteworthy. Verse 28 (cf. 49:25; Deut 33:13-16, 28) speaks of divine blessing as rain and mist (i.e., the dew of heaven), rich produce (i.e., fatness of the earth), and a plentiful harvest of grain and grapes. Progeny and land are assumed, but are not mentioned as part of the ancestral promises. Isaac calls upon God the Creator, who blesses in the agricultural sphere, to be active in the life of Jacob. Verse 29 (cf. 49:8)—with only an implicit reference to God—speaks of blessing as dominion over other nations/peoples, including his “brothers/mother’s sons” (cf. v. 37; the plural may refer to family members, so NIV). At this point, Isaac unknowingly echoes God’s word to Rebekah (25:23) and anticipates the blessing of Judah (49:8). Then, in the only explicit reference to 12:3a in Genesis (see Num 24:9), Isaac links his blessing with God’s promise: Whether people are cursed or blessed depends on their treatment of Jacob/Israel.

27:30-40. These verses begin as did vv. 18-19. Having obeyed his father’s directive, Esau approaches him with the prepared food and requests a blessing, to which Isaac responds with questions about his identity. His inquiry about the perpetrator is only rhetorical (v. 33), for he identifies him as “your brother” immediately (v. 35). Yet, Jacob remains blessed; Isaac refers not simply to the word of blessing but to the accompanying ritual meal as reasons why Jacob remains blessed (v. 33).

Crying out in exasperation and deep disappointment, Esau pleads that his father bless him also. Isaac replies that, even though his brother was deceitful, he has taken his blessing. Esau bitterly retorts that Jacob is rightly named (see 25:26), for he deceived him of both blessing and birthright—news for Isaac. Esau begs for his own blessing, believing it possible that Isaac might have “reserved” a blessing for him (see 49:1-28 on open and multiple blessings). Since Isaac’s blessing does, in principle, extend to him, Esau correctly pursues the matter.

Isaac summarizes the blessing given Jacob (v. 37); Isaac acts as the agent, not mentioning God. He has said “I do” to Jacob; in view of the prevailing convention regarding blessings, what can he do for Esau now that Jacob is his lord? Yet, when Esau insistently cries out, Isaac responds to his lament with a secondary blessing (vv. 39-40). Esau will dwell in an area without (or with, NRSV footnote; the Hebrew may be purposely ambiguous) rich land and adequate rainfall, and his life will be filled with violence. Although he will be subject to his brother, at times he will break free from that yoke (see 33:3-7; 2 Kgs 8:20-22). This statement qualifies Jacob’s blessing (v. 29) in response to
Esau’s plea; it becomes somewhat less comprehensive than it was. Esau’s deep lament proves to be potent, and Isaac responds. “Here is a clear theology of liberation—for Esau/Edom!”172 For all the negative correspondence to Jacob’s blessing, Esau will have a (fruitful?) land in which to dwell, life, progeny, and periods of freedom from his brother. Esau receives blessing—attenuated, compared to Jacob’s—but not a curse or even nonblessing.

27:41-45. We can understand why Esau hates Jacob, but Esau’s vow to kill him once Isaac has died (cf. 50:15) threatens the future of the promise. Once again Rebekah hears Esau’s plans (speaking “to himself” expresses his resolve), and her actions shape the next scene. She informs Jacob and directs him to flee to her home in Haran until Esau’s fury has passed (repeated for emphasis). When time has healed the wounds, she will send for him again. She remains hopeful; Esau will drop his threat, but Rebekah will not see Isaac again. Her lament shows a concern for Esau too (though she never speaks to him); if Esau were to kill Jacob, he would be executed. Once again she believes she must act, for the divine oracle of 25:23 will not inevitably protect Jacob. Nor will Isaac’s blessing.

27:46–28:9. This section relates to 26:34-35 with its concern about wives, and to the immediately preceding 27:41-45. Her differing motivations are true to the story; she remains anxious about both Jacob’s life and wife. Rebekah does not speak to Isaac about the threat to Jacob, perhaps to conceal her own involvement. She raises the issue of Esau’s marriages, which had “made life bitter” for both Isaac and Rebekah (26:35). If Jacob follows suit, her life will not be worth living; she may be thinking about the way she became Isaac’s wife (24:2-4). Her concern about wives gives Jacob’s departure a sense of legitimacy.

Isaac responds positively. Speaking with Jacob for the first time as Jacob in Genesis, Isaac enjoins him from marrying a Canaanite and directs him to go to Haran and marry a cousin, a daughter of Rebekah’s brother, Laban. Using language that derives from God’s covenant with Abraham in chap. 17, he blesses Jacob for the journey based on the promises he had received from God (26:3-4, 24). This blessing elaborates the blessing in 27:27-29, only Isaac knowingly and freely blesses Jacob this time and without reproach for his deceit; this softens Jacob’s deception in obtaining Esau’s blessing. Although similar in form (“May God . . .”), the language this time appears more specifically Abrahamic (the link is with v. 29c). Isaac conveys promise in the form of a blessing. Isaac does not transmit the promises formally, but anticipates God’s own speaking “the blessing of Abraham” to him, which occurs in 28:13-15. Jacob obeys without a word.

Meanwhile, Esau catches wind of what has happened to Jacob. Suppressing the hatred expressed in 27:41, Esau focuses on his father’s concern about wives for his sons and Jacob’s obedient response to both parents. In an effort to please his father (v. 8), he takes a (third) wife from within the family, the family of Ishmael, his father’s brother (25:12-
18). This favorable portrayal of Esau appears similar to that given to Ishmael (21:8-21). Yet, like Ishmael, he remains on the fringes of the family.

REFLECTIONS

1. This story has long been a favorite of Bible readers. It is well told and filled with intrigue. Some readers think it tells of a cheat and a rascal who, nonetheless, remains the chosen of God. That has occasioned both wonderment and hope on the part of the elect in every age: Why would God choose such a character? If God includes Jacob, who can be excluded? This may be an appropriate direction to take with this text, yet one cannot help wondering if such a negative picture of Jacob is justified.

2. How should one assess Jacob’s and Rebekah’s actions? They are motivated by an oracle from God (25:23), by Esau’s treatment of his parents (26:35; 28:8), and by the birthright (25:33). Jacob’s experience and self-understanding link up with Rebekah’s theological convictions and familial sensitivities; this is a formidable duo. But, while the end they achieve may be fitting in view of the oracle, do not the means lack integrity, even basic decency (cf. Deut 27:18)? While their actions can be explained, can they be justified? White claims that they may be justified in opening a closed system: “Deception and desire may now have positive roles to play so long as they are subservient to the contingency of the promissory Word and faith, rather than serving the interest of symbiotic personal behavior and structures of power.”173 One thinks of Tamar and the midwives, whose deception was not only tolerated but commended (38:26; Exod 1:20).

One often hears this attractive approach, but it is sometimes bought at the expense of “demonizing” Esau and even Isaac or “whitewashing” Jacob and Rebekah. Neither demons nor plaster saints are here, and the way the story pursues blessing for Jacob retains no little ambiguity. The way in which “what goes around comes around” for Jacob in 29:25-26 and 37:31-33 suggests that Jacob reaps the consequences of his deceptions of Esau and Isaac. At the same time, pursuance of the “right” often carries negative consequences, and with respect to Rebekah one must reckon with issues of patriarchy (see below). One must be careful not to become too defensive regarding Jacob’s actions, lest God’s choices be grounded in “righteousness” or “uprightness of heart” (cf. Deut 9:4-5). God chooses to work in and through what human beings make available. This reveals a deep divine vulnerability, for it links God with people whose reputations are not stellar and opens God’s ways in the world to sharp criticism.

3. Readers should note some additional features of Rebekah’s actions.174 Rebekah could have conceivably pursued other, less deceptive options, such as informing Isaac about God’s oracle. But, while we are not privy to her reflections, she doubtless thought this matter through carefully. She had to consider, above all, Isaac’s special relationship to Esau (25:28), even though 28:8 (cf. 26:35) indicates Isaac’s displeasure with him.
Another likely factor involves the prevailing patriarchy, which rendered her opinions on such matters of little import. She must rely on secondary means to discover what goes on in the family (vv. 5, 42), and must be careful in approaching Isaac about Jacob’s predicament (27:46; cf. also Isaac’s reaction in 27:33—because his authority has been undercut?). In the face of the powerlessness patriarchy engenders, manipulation often remains the only route open to the future. On another matter, her response to Jacob’s hesitance in 27:13 indicates a resolve to take upon herself any curse that Isaac might pronounce. She expresses an openness to suffering, even death, on behalf of both her son and the divine purposes she serves.

4. Blessing. This motif probably has its origins in the leave-taking of everyday life (24:60) or in the departure from life itself (see chap. 49). It is important to stress, however, that the word of blessing does not have a magical sense—either in terms of (a) the transmission of vitality from blesser to blessed, so that Isaac has no life left to give Esau; or (b) the speaking of a word that becomes an autonomous force, independent of Isaac or God.

Yet, the latter view especially has been popular. The blessing of the father “inexorably determined destiny: the father’s horror [v. 33] stands powerless before the unalterable.”175 So also the Oxford Annotated NRSV notes: “The blessing, like the curse, released a power that effectively determined the character and destiny of the recipient . . . the spoken blessing, like an arrow shot toward its goal, was believed to release a power which could not be retracted.”176

However, this understanding of the word is incorrect, both generally and in this text. Acts of blessing in the OT rest on accepted conventions. Such words produce effects because of certain social understandings about the function of these speech-acts. These words must be spoken in a particular situation by the appropriate person in the proper form to be effective.177 If the blessing could not be revoked by Isaac, it was because no convention was available for its revocation. If there were such a convention, Isaac chooses not to make use of it. Esau, in

asking for another blessing, appears to believe that no such convention exists. Even then, Isaac’s response to Esau (vv. 39-40) demonstrates that actions can be taken to qualify the impact of a blessing already spoken.

One basic reason cited by Isaac for not retracting the blessing involves the consumption of a meal (v. 33; cf. vv. 4, 7, 10, 19, 25, 31). The meal was an integral part of a conventional blessing ritual (see above), without which it would not have been valid. In this understanding of ritual, we are not far from certain realistic views of, say, the Christian sacraments, or liturgy more generally.

5. It would be too simple to suggest that the known histories of Israel and Edom are here retrojected into early times and thought to have been determined by these early oracles.
(see 25:23). Certainly the text recognizes that words and deeds do shape history, but not in some detailed, inevitable way. For example, Israel over the course of its history did not always have “plenty of grain and wine” (v. 28; see Deut 11:13-17), nor were the nations of the world, including Edom, always subservient. Esau has Jacob over the barrel not infrequently (see Psalm 137)! Moreover, Esau is not alone in living by the sword (see 34:25; 48:22).

6. It may be that the issue of marrying within one’s own community, so evident in this segment, arose at a time when this issue was a lively concern for readers during the exile and later. However, Genesis does not present a consistent picture regarding the matter. Judah and Joseph marry outside the family, with no censure or criticism. The same openness could be claimed for the relationship between Dinah and Shechem in chap. 34, where two of her brothers are rebuked for their actions against Shechem and his family. The issue involves, not a general principle regarding such marriages, but certain moments in the life of a community when a distinctive identity is deemed to be crucial to ensure the future. Such may be the case for the first two generations of Abraham’s family, but before the end of Genesis, the issue no longer seems so important.

7. The blessing extended to Esau by his father testifies to blessing as a reality outside the community of chosen ones. Esau’s blessing, though attenuated, should be linked with other Genesis narratives, where the “outsider” becomes the recipient of divine blessing (e.g., Ishmael; see chaps. 16; 21). God the Creator works among these peoples with blessings that take various forms, the most basic of which is life itself, often apart from contact with the community of faith (though such contact may produce special blessings, v. 29). The interests of the people of promise are not served well by finding ways of speaking negatively about those outside that community, or seeking to limit the blessing activity of God among them.

8. Jacob’s receiving the birthright and the blessing does not issue in a trouble-free life. In fact, they expose his life to more conflict than would probably otherwise have been the case, not least because of what he does with it. God’s choices are not always well received, by both the chosen and the not chosen. Certainly, God designs blessing for all the peoples of the world. But, because of the recalcitrance and deception of the chosen themselves, blessing sometimes has the effect of dividing as often as uniting. One should reflect deeply on this story from the perspective of those who believe themselves to be chosen and how they relate to those who are the “unchosen.” The degree to which religious convictions have provoked strife in the modern world should occasion deep shame on the part of members of the community of faith and a renewed sense of what it means to be a responsible recipient of divine blessing.

GENESIS 28:10–22, JACOB’S DREAM AT BETHEL
Link to:
COMMENTARY

This text stands as one of the pillars of the Jacob story. God transmits to him the ancestral promises, fulfilling the expressed wish of his father (28:3-4). This is the first time Jacob appears by himself; hence it represents a new beginning for the larger story. Jacob flees from the hatred and threats of his brother, seeming to reap the consequences of his own duplicity, and the future does not seem bright. At precisely this deeply vulnerable moment in his life, God appears, not in judgment, but to confirm him as the one chosen to carry on the promise.

Some readers think this story has its roots in a concern to ground the later Bethel sanctuary and worship life in the ancestral period (see 1 Kgs 12:26-33). Although possible, the episode has now been drawn into the larger orbit of stories about Jacob (often assigned to JE) and serves a more comprehensive purpose. It shares a basic structure with the fragment in 32:1-2 (cf. 32:22-33), an encounter with angels on his way back home. Together with another appearance of God to Jacob at Bethel on his return journey (35:1-15), this episode brackets the narrative. A note about setting (vv. 10-11) is followed by the dream (vv. 12-15) and Joseph’s response to it (vv. 16-22).

The author introduces Jacob en route. He is traveling from Beersheba to Haran, from which the Abrahamic family migrated and where he will find a temporary home and two wives. While still within Canaan, he spends the night out in the open, using an ordinary, if large, stone to support and protect his head. The text does not depict it as a holy site, but “place” anticipates vv. 11, 16, 17, and 19 and “stone” anticipates vv. 18 and 22; God transforms an ordinary stone and an ordinary place. It probably was a religious center for people in earlier times (cf. the name change in v. 19), but the text stakes a claim for Bethel’s religious importance on the basis of this event (and perhaps Abraham’s visit in 12:8; 13:3-4).

A remarkable dream fills Jacob’s night. He dreams that a ladder (better, a stairway or ramp) extends from earth to heaven. We may compare this stairway to those attached to temple towers (ziggurats) elsewhere in the ancient Near East; these were microcosms of the world, with the top of the tower representing heaven, the dwelling place of the gods. Such structures provided an avenue of approach from the human sphere to the divine realm. Priests or divine beings traversed up and down the stairway, providing communication between the two realms. This text polemicizes such an understanding.

Ascending and descending divine beings are a part of Jacob’s dream, but they have no specific function. In fact, their presence makes a negative point. While such beings may serve as messengers, here they do not serve as intermediaries for divine revelation. Rather, Yahweh stands beside Jacob and speaks directly to him (so NRSV; the NIV’s “above it” is possible but unlikely in view of the immediacy in the deity’s communication
to Jacob). The angels do not speak; God does. Jacob hears the divine promises directly from God, who in turn promises God’s very own presence rather than that of a surrogate. “Earth is not left to its own resources and heaven is not a remote self-contained realm for the gods. Heaven has to do with earth. And earth finally may count on the resources of heaven.” 178

God is identified in terms of Jacob’s family, referring to Abraham as father rather than Isaac. Jacob thus has the same relationship to Abraham and Abraham’s God as his father, Isaac, has had (see 26:3-4, 24). The use of the name Yahweh provides clearer continuity with Abraham (cf. 15:7) than the generic word for God.

God’s word to Jacob moves directly from self-identification to promise, which fulfills Isaac’s benedictory wish of 28:3-4 and constitutes God’s confirmation of Jacob’s gaining of birthright and blessing. God’s promises are unusually extensive (eight different elements), to which Jacob adds another (v. 20, food and clothing). The promises are: land; many descendants; dispersion of posterity throughout the land (not the world, cf. 13:14-17); the extension of blessing to others through him; presence; keeping; homecoming, and not leaving. All the promises spoken in the narrative to this point are gathered up and focused on Jacob. The last four (v. 15) relate directly to Jacob’s status as a traveler, extending the promise given to his father in comparable circumstances (26:3, 24).

Upon awakening, Jacob realizes the import of his dream, and he proceeds to interpret its significance. He recognizes that he has some new knowledge; he has moved from not knowing to knowing that God has been present with him. (Except for the ruse in 27:20, this is the first time he mentions God.) He also expresses awe that in this ordinary place he has been confronted by the God of whom his father spoke (28:3-4), indeed granted direct access to God’s promise-speaking (see Reflections). His “naming” of the place occurs in two stages. The first (v. 17) attests to his encounter with the divine presence: the “house of God” (i.e., Beth-el) and the “gate of heaven.” These building metaphors represent concretely his experience of direct divine access. The stairway and the angels have been reduced to props, metaphors now inadequate for depicting the dynamics of immediate divine-human communication. The second (v. 19), more formal, naming emphasizes the continuity between the immediate experience and the ongoing significance of this particular place.

Jacob’s response the next day takes more concrete forms. He sets up as a pillar the stone that had supported him as a “pillow.” What was quite ordinary now becomes a sacred symbol for his experience. (Such standing stones are often set up at Israelite sanctuaries and at other places of historical import; cf. 35:14, 20.) The stone has now become recognizable for use by others who may pass by this way. The anointing with oil consecrates or sets the stone apart from others (cf. 31:13; Exod 40:9-11). The oil also stains the stone so that it can be properly identified by those who follow. Although not
itself a sanctuary, the stone can become an integral part of a worship center; Jacob vows he will establish such a site (v. 22; Exodus 35:1-15). At the same time, the stone becomes a public witness to his own experience (on stones as witness, see Josh 24:27).

Finally, Jacob makes a vow (recalled by God in 31:13). Although vows are common in the OT (cf. Num 21:2; Judg 11:30-31; 1 Sam 1:11; 2 Sam 15:8, all spoken at sanctuaries), this vow seems unique since God has already unconditionally promised what Jacob states as a condition. By repeating God’s promises in the vow, Jacob claims them as his own. Hence, to see this as bargain language does not do justice to the vow; rather, Jacob wants to hold God to his promises (those associated with his journey, v. 15). If God does not do these things, of course, then God will not have been faithful, and Jacob’s relationship to such a God would be problematic, to say the least. If God keeps the promises, then Jacob will do certain things: Yahweh will be his God (namely, Jacob will remain loyal); he will construct a sanctuary (fulfilled in 35:7, 14-15) and offer a tithe (see 14:20; Deut 26:12-15), apparently a one-time gift, perhaps for the care of the sanctuary. In essence, if God acts faithfully, Jacob will be faithful.

From this point on, Jacob’s journeys are filled with a new sense of vocation, for he now bears the promise. At the same time, he remains Jacob and does not know immediately what this experience entails for his life.

REFLECTIONS

1. God’s relation to Jacob, through both his father and his grandfather, stresses not only a familial link, but divine continuity across the generations as well. The story involves God as well as Jacob’s ancestors. God’s own self is identified in the context of a divine journey, which God now promises to continue with Jacob. And this journey exists outside of the land of promise, “wherever you go” (see Josh 1:9; Psalm 23; Isa 43:1-2; Isa 46:3-4).

2. The dream (see 31:11-3; chaps. 37; 40–41). Dreams do not witness to the dreamer’s psychological state, working out stress or anxiety or subconscious fears; they are external forms of divine communication, in which actual encounters with God take place. They are one means by which God’s own self is revealed. When Jacob refers to this event, he speaks of divine appearance but never of dream (35:1-9; 48:3; cf. also 1 Kgs 11:9), apparently understanding God’s appearance in the dream to be comparable to other such appearances (cf. 35:9). When Jacob awakens, he does not speak of God’s presence in his dream; he speaks of God’s presence in this place! The dream reflects not simply a mental world, but an actual world that can be slept on, touched, and built on.

Jacob’s dream contains both symbolism and divine verbal communication. Jacob interprets

<Page 542 Ends><Page 543 Begins>
the significance of both dimensions in his response in vv. 16-22. In turn, he mirrors the
dream in responding both verbally and in more concrete terms. The visual and auditory
aspects of the dream belong together, not least because human beings are not simply
minds or “big ears,” and God chooses to address the whole person (e.g. Incarnation;
sacraments). The visual “speaks” in its own way, and the word gives “concreteness” to
the visual.

The dream comes entirely at the divine initiative; Jacob was asleep, not in control of what
happened within him (in contrast to the nocturnal wrestling of chap. 32). At the same
time, Jacob’s responses to God’s word of promise shape the future. It may be tempting to
explain away such dream experiences, though dreams are much less difficult for the
modern consciousness to accept than are direct divine appearances. The text helps us to
recognize that “the world is a place of such meetings,” and God can use such moments as
a vehicle for getting through to us, even today.179

3. The word of promise involves more than simply a word about a communal future;
God also particularizes the promise for Jacob as an individual, for the specific situation in
which he finds himself. God’s promises of being with and keeping/protecting Jacob (v.
15) are distinct, for God can also be present to judge, which Jacob may have expected.
Yet they are not separate, for God’s presence never means passivity. God’s “not leaving”
gathers up the three previous promises to Jacob, yet it constitutes a further promise
centering on the temporal unbrokenness of the divine presence.

4. In Jacob’s response to the dream, awesomeness and the themes of presence and access
come together. The transcendence of God is not compromised by closeness to humans.
The awe that Jacob expresses depends on the fact that God has come near. The
confession of God as transcendent and awesome correlates this text to God’s coming to
be present rather than God’s remaining afar off. Far from being a place forbidden to
human beings, this site becomes a place where humans can be assured of the divine
presence.

5. The importance of places of worship. Setting aside a place for a sanctuary does not
stand at odds with the God who is with Jacob wherever he goes. Both are significant
dimensions of God’s being present in the world. Specific places for worship are needed
because human beings are shaped by place as well as time. A sanctuary provides (a)
order, discipline, and focus to the worship of God; (b) a tangible aspect to worship; (c)
assurance that God is indeed present in this place because God has so promised. At the
same time, such understandings must guard against a “house of God” syndrome, as if the
divine presence could be fixed or localized, as if this were the only place where God
could be found. God’s being present at the sanctuary is not coextensive with God’s
presence in the world. Jacob can count on God’s being present at this place (hence he
returns in 35:1-15) and with him during his journey. The rhythms of the ancestors include
the rhythm of journeying and worship; their journeys are punctuated by moments of
worship at specific places. Yet the place never becomes a final objective, where one
settles in; it provides sustenance for the ongoing journey.
6. This text also says something about God. God can bind God’s own self with unconditional promises to tricksters and deceivers. Although Jacob leaves this moment with divine promises ringing in his ears, God leaves this moment with the divine options for the future more limited than before, because God will be faithful to these promises Jacob has just spoken. God’s promises may have come to Jacob as a surprise, but Jacob will not know them again as such. God can be counted on to be faithful. Jacob need no longer wonder about God; God is a promise-keeper, as Jacob must be also. There is a “must” for God in this text, and a “must” for Jacob as well.

7. To understand this vow, we would remember it as a word spoken by a person in dire straits, concerned about his safety and his future. Such vows are common in the lament psalms (e.g., 7:17; 13:6) and have been used by people in distress in every age!). Because of the context in which they are uttered, we should not press them for theological niceties. But we, as Jacob, should expect God to keep the promises unconditionally.


Link to:

COMMENTARY

These three chapters constitute a unified “novella” or short story (assigned to J or JE). They follow Jacob’s flight from Esau and lead the reader quickly through Jacob’s twenty years in Haran to the point of his return to Canaan. Family ties to “the old country” continue (chap. 24), but with Jacob there will now be a permanent break from this part of the family. The text maintains strong ties with Mesopotamian customs and culture; it may reflect Israelite/Aramaean relationships of a later era.

The narrator’s primary interest lies in the birth of eleven sons (all but Benjamin), progenitors of the tribes of Israel. The sudden and pervasive God talk (29:31–30:24), as well as structural considerations, underline the importance of these chapters. The story may be outlined as follows: Jacob’s arrival in Haran (29:1-14); Jacob’s struggles with Laban over Leah and Rachel (29:15-30); the birth of the sons (29:31–30:24); Jacob’s
struggle with Laban over the departure (30:25-43); preparations for the return to Canaan (31:1-54). The birth of the children stands as the central text, surrounded by parallel narratives arranged chiastically. The text begins and ends with Jacob’s arrival in and departure from Haran.

29:1-14. In a type-scene reminiscent of other well stories issuing in marriage (24:15-33; Exod 2:15-22), Jacob meets Rachel, who keeps sheep for her father, Laban. An emerging problem involves watering rights for shepherds. A stone covering the well is so large that only when all shepherds using the well are present can they remove it; this protects fair community access to the water (note the repetition in vv. 2-3, 8, 10; cf. the interest in stones in 28:10-22; 31:45-50). Jacob becomes impatient with waiting for all the shepherds and rolls the stone away so Rachel can water her flock. This becomes a feat of some consequence; it also violates community customs (v. 8). This act establishes Jacob as a person of both strength and authority within this unfamiliar community. Jacob, the father of Israel, is a man to be reckoned with.

Jacob’s inquiry about welfare (!wlv sAlôm, v. 6; cf. 28:21), the wordless and emotional recognition scene of kissing and weeping with Rachel (v. 11-12), and the warm welcome and acknowledgment of kinship by Laban (vv. 13-14) depict familial harmony. It contrasts sharply with the story of deception and conflict that follows. This sense of a developing relationship seems preferable to the idea that Laban was duplicitous and self-serving already in his welcome.

29:15-30. This scene begins on a harmonious note, with Laban expressing concern about Jacob’s welfare in view of what would certainly be a lengthy stay (v. 15). His use of “serve” language (and the aside introducing Leah and Rachel) signals the conflict to come; that Jacob “serves” anyone in view of prior oracles seems ironic (25:23; 27:29, 37, 40). Yet, Laban invites Jacob to name his own “salary,” and Jacob himself suggests that he “serve” Laban as a free man under contract for seven years for Rachel’s hand. This length of time, unreal to readers in a less family-oriented world, reveals both the depth of Jacob’s love for Rachel (v. 18) and what he deems to be the equivalent of a dowry for her (see 31:15; 24:53). Jacob considers it no burden at all (v. 20).

Laban’s warm welcome and open offer may have created an ironic, unsuspecting trust in Jacob; on the other hand, if Jacob told Laban everything (“all”) that had happened in Canaan (v. 13; cf. v. 26), Laban would have had good reason to be wary of Jacob. This combination of factors may bring out the worst in Laban. He thinks he can take advantage of Jacob, perhaps even that Jacob should “pay” for his deception of Isaac. The relationship quickly deteriorates as Laban, through deceit (concealing a local custom, v. 26), gets Rachel and Leah married off. The deceiver has been deceived (v. 25; 27:35).

At the end of seven years, Jacob not only must request payment of “my wife” (v. 21; betrothed women have the status of wives, Deut 20:7), but receives Leah rather than
Rachel (the NRSV and the NIV in v. 17 reflect the uncertainty as to whether Leah’s eyes were “weak” or “lovely”). The brief report of the surprise on the “morning after” is stunning (v. 25a); it seems ironic that Leah knows what Jacob does not know. One can sympathize with Jacob’s accusatory questioning, while realizing that what goes around comes around.

Laban’s appeal to tradition after the fact (v. 26) appears duplicitous, but by directly raising firstborn issues he establishes an explicit link with Jacob’s own deception on the same matter. His reference to “our country” functions similarly. In matching deception for deception, the narrator must have understood Jacob’s activity in chap. 27 as reprehensible. Jacob must now know something of how Esau felt. At the same time, he has met in Laban someone not unlike himself.

Jacob’s desire for Rachel and his reflection about deception result in his agreement—without a word!—to Laban’s terms: He can wed Rachel at the end of seven days, if he completes the bridal week with Leah and serves Laban for seven more years. Jacob thus gains two wives in a week (cf. Lev 18:18 on marrying sisters). Yet, the narrator makes clear that Jacob loves Rachel more than Leah (v. 30; the “unloved” of v. 31 may also refer to preference), which Leah interprets as no love at all (vv. 32-33). Laban’s devious orchestration could not force Jacob to love both women; love cannot be so manipulated. Once again, an appeal to custom (v. 26) fails to satisfy. The narrator gives love between a man and a woman a high role here, but it remains complicated by other issues that make for conflict and rivalry: between Laban and Jacob, Leah and Rachel, and Jacob with each wife.

Laban’s ruse, made possible through the use of veils (see 24:65) and heavy festival drinking, violates Rachel and Jacob and their love for each other. It violates Leah as well, whose feelings about the matter are not considered, but whose suffering in all of this will shortly be voiced (29:32-35). God responds to her laments first of all (29:31), while Rachel remains childless initially (29:31; 30:1). Neither woman speaks directly in vv. 1-30 (cf. v. 12); their lives are arranged for them. The same also obtains for Zilpah and Bilhah (vv. 24, 29), maids customarily given to a bride by her father. The fact that God responds in so many ways to Leah’s suffering in the next episode reveals the divine perspective on her mistreatment and an implicit judgment on her oppressors. She bears seven children, more than all the others. But in so doing, the Leah-Rachel conflict intensifies.

29:31–30:24. This section reads rather like a genealogy, but the conflict between Leah and Rachel and the divine response to the oppression of the women provide a basic storyline. While these elements may have had separate origins, the interweaving of a gracious divine action in and through a complex fabric of human love and conflict mirrors the story of Israel’s life.
The author has made this segment the centerpiece for chaps. 29–31. It narrates the birth of eleven sons and one daughter to Jacob and his wives, Leah and Rachel, and their maids, Bilhah and Zilpah (on Benjamin, see 35:16-18). Leah and Rachel name the children, including the children of their maids, usual Israelite practice. The word plays on the children’s names (see the NIV and NRSV footnotes) are not really etymologies, but reflections on the familial conflicts and God’s actions related thereto. While their tribal descendants may be in view, the text remains remarkably familial in its orientation, with the mothers playing the major role throughout. Jacob, in fact, appears remarkably passive (speaking only in 30:2).

The conflicting elements both recapitulate and anticipate other intrafamilial struggles. The friction between Leah and Rachel bears resemblances to both the Sarah/Hagar (16:1-6) and the Jacob/Esau conflicts (27:1-45); it anticipates the conflict between Joseph (a child of Rachel) and his brothers. Issues of succession bubble beneath the surface: Will just one of Jacob’s sons be the inheritor of the blessing (as has been the case up to this point)? If so, which one? At the same time, the conflict remains personal in its focus, as Leah struggles with her esteem in the eyes of Jacob (29:32, 33, 34; 30:15, 20; the issue for her moves from love to honor), and Rachel with the reproach of childlessness in the eyes of Jacob (30:1-2, 6, 23). While Laban’s deception set up the conflict in the first place, Jacob perpetuates it.

God is now mentioned for the first time in this story, and the interweaving of divine and human roles will shape the rest of our discussion of this section. God is invoked thirteen times by Leah (29:32, 33, 35; 30:18, 20), Rachel (30:6, 23, 24), Jacob (30:2), and the narrator (29:31; 30:17, 22)—the maids never speak—in connection with the birth of seven of the twelve children. These references to God underline the importance of this section for the larger story.

God serves as the subject of the following activities: God sees the affliction of the women, hears their cry, remembers them, takes away their disgrace, and vindicates/rewards them. God both opens the womb and withholds (cf. 16:2) and
gives/adds a son. The God language occurs as a gracious response to the women’s laments (a common OT rhythm, cf. Exod 2:24-25; 3:7). The eight references to God by the women are always in the spirit of praise and gratitude for the gift of a child; the only reference by Jacob—surely an important statistic—is negative and in the form of an angry question.

The narrator does not mention God at the births of Levi, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, or Dinah. Combined with other factors, this suggests that the author did not think God to be the sole, or even the initiating, agent in conception. For the narrator (29:31; 30:17, 22), God responds to concrete human situations, but does not initiate a process. For example, God acts with a specific view to the women’s cries. Even when God is not mentioned, the mother’s response normally assumes the human need (the author offers no explanation of Dinah in 30:21). From another angle, when both the narrator and the women do mention God, it occurs only in connection with the births of Reuben, Joseph, and Issachar (the firstborn of Leah and Rachel and the first child born to Leah after she had “ceased bearing”). The narrator apparently thinks God’s agency to be decisive, even if not initiatory, in connection with the firstborn or in problematic cases (see 16:2).

We should note other important factors regarding divine and human involvement:

In 30:1-2, Rachel blames Jacob for her childlessness (see 11:30). Her reference to death may reflect concerns about security and inheritance. Jacob’s response could be a theological corrective (but can he speak for God?), yet the deep anger suggests otherwise. It probably constitutes a blatant attempt to lay the blame elsewhere (the narrator makes no such claim for God).

First-person references (e.g., “I have borne”; 29:34; 30:20) highlight the importance of human activity. God and the women are brought together in the blessing of Ruth 4:11: “May the LORD make . . . like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel” (NRSV). The author specifically mentions Jacob in connection with only six sons (the four sons by the maids and Leah’s last two).

Leah and Rachel—in the tradition of Sarah (16:2)—give their maids to Jacob to bear children for them; even God approves (30:18). Why Leah did this after bearing four children stems from issues of equality in her conflict with Rachel (v. 8). She may have “ceased bearing” (29:35; 30:9) because Jacob avoided her (see 30:15). The reference to bearing on “my knees” (v. 3) legitimates the maids’ children (cf. 48:12; 50:23). The reference to good fortune (30:11; text uncertain) may suggest an element of chance in issues of birthing.

Conflict between the two women emerges explicitly in 30:1. It consists of envy (30:1) and “wrestling” (30:8; cf. 32:28), climaxing in the discussion over the use of mandrakes (a wild fruit used as an aphrodisiac, v. 14) provided by Reuben, Leah’s oldest. This exchange indicates that the women—for all their theological conversation—thought that nondivine factors might be effective in enhancing potency. The narrator makes clear (vv.
17-19, 22) that God enables Leah and Rachel to conceive, and probably, though not necessarily, independently of the mandrakes (but certainly not Jacob!). Rachel—who had access to Jacob in a way that Leah did not—makes a deal with Leah—who still desired Jacob’s love—so as to improve her chances of having children: Leah’s mandrakes for one night with Jacob (“lie” has negative associations, v. 15)! This hiring/bartering results in a fifth child for Leah. Verses 19-21 show that it turned into more than one night, but we see no sign of Jacob’s love for Leah—ever. The conflict between Leah and Rachel may be resolved, given their concerted action in 31:14. It finally works itself out at the familial level, however, only when all of their children become the children of promise (50:24).

30:25-43. This story of the rivalry between Jacob and Laban no doubt has complex origins, not least because the progression of thought remains unclear. The unit may have been glossed by an editor with agricultural or other interests.

With the birth of Joseph, Jacob decides that the time has come to return home (this now becomes a key theme for the remainder of the story). He asks that, in view of his service, Laban give him his wives and children and “let him go” (echoing Moses’ word to Pharaoh). This constitutes a request for a separation of families. Laban is reluctant to do so, for God has prospered him because of Jacob’s labor, and Laban would like that to continue (v. 27; the NIV captures the sense with its “please stay”; cf. 39:2-5, 21-23). Laban even

offers to renegotiate Jacob’s wages if he will stay (v. 28; cf. 29:15). Laban’s reference to divination (v. 27), however, is theological hocus-pocus. Jacob tells it straight: Laban knows that God has blessed him through Jacob from his own experience (without divine revelation); he can see for himself what has happened. As for wages, Jacob needs to make provisions for his family, and he wonders when he can be about that responsibility (v. 30). Once again, Laban asks Jacob to set his own “salary” (v. 31a).

Jacob realizes that Laban will not let him go easily, and so he devises a cunning plan that will get him out of the country and provide for his family’s future (vv. 31b-33). In all of this, the deceiver who has been deceived turns the tables one more time. Jacob refuses any wages, but agrees to work for Laban if, at the end of the work period, he can take his “wages” in multicolored animals and black sheep from the flock he tends. He suggests an onsite inspection plan to demonstrate his honesty (hqdx zudAqâ)—that is, his loyalty to the relationship.

Since animals with such markings are uncommon, Laban thinks he has a deal, but to be on the safe side he deceitfully puts all such colored animals he presently has under his sons’ care (three days journey away!) so they would not breed stock for Jacob (vv. 34-36). Jacob responds by devising a plan that produces such animals (vv. 37-43). While difficult to understand, it may assume an ancient belief that what animals look toward when breeding (either striped rods for multicolored animals, vv. 37-39, or the flock
tended by Laban’s sons for the black or partly black animals, v. 40) determines the coloration of their offspring. In this process, Jacob separates the weaker animals from the others and breeds only the strong animals for his purposes (vv. 41-42; cf. modern efforts at genetic manipulation). Hence, over time, Laban ends up with feeble animals and Jacob has the strong ones (ironically mirroring Laban’s manipulation of “weak” Leah).

At the same time, it becomes clear (31:7b-12) that God has been involved in and through this process (see below). Jacob’s means—through which God works—are effective; he manipulates the flocks to outwit Laban, free himself from dependence on him, and become a wealthy man (over a six-year period, 31:41).

31:1-55. An editor or author has united various traditions here in order to maintain the narrative tension of 30:25-43. The text centers on the continuing dispute both Jacob and God have with the oppressive behaviors of Laban and the difficulties associated with Jacob’s flight. The narrative reaches its climax in Jacob’s speech (vv. 36-42), especially his witness to a God who sides with him in his affliction. It concludes with a covenant of peace between Jacob and Laban (vv. 43-54).

Jacob’s successful breeding practices raise suspicions in the minds of Laban’s sons, and conflict with Laban intensifies. In the face of these developments, God tells Jacob to return home (in effect, reinforcing Jacob’s own decision, v. 25); God will make good on his promise of presence (v. 3). Jacob consults with Leah and Rachel—a high tribute to them and to the importance of their opinion—about leaving (vv. 4-13) and fills in the details of the story, to which they respond positively (vv. 14-16). The differing agendas of Laban’s sons and daughters brackets the central episode. The daughters prove to be stronger and more independent than their brothers.

Jacob testifies that their father has cheated him and changed his wages many times (given Laban’s invitations to Jacob, this seems hyperbolic). God, on the other hand, has been working behind the scenes against Laban’s arbitrary decisions regarding wages so that whatever changes Laban made actually worked to Jacob’s advantage (v. 8); God’s activity in vv. 7b and 9 encloses Laban’s deceit. God has transferred the animals from their father to him. Jacob then recalls a dream in which God revealed how it was that the multicolored animals were the active ones in the breeding process. (Verses 11-12 report the actual dream introduced in v. 10—"once had"; the author telescopes the command to leave the land with the directions about breeding the animals.) God has been so involved because Jacob has been oppressed (v. 12).

Verses 7b-12 provide a theological interpretation of the events reported in 30:35-43. God as Creator has been involved in the natural order, in the actual breeding behaviors of animals, resulting in the increase of Jacob’s multicolored flock. But God did not give full instructions; Jacob took this divine word and used it to develop effective procedures with the animals. Although
Jacob’s techniques were important, Jacob gives all the credit to God in this report to his wives.

God’s involvement in Jacob’s life correlates to promises made at Bethel (28:10-22): “I am the God of Bethel” (v. 13; the angel in v. 11 is identified as God). God has been faithful to the promises made to Jacob (28:13-15), witnessed to in 31:3b, 5b, 7b, 9, 12b, and 13. The divine command to return can be trusted in view of Jacob’s own experience. These verses also reveal a faithful Jacob, whose witness to God’s faithfulness in the presence of his wives remains pervasive and without equivocation.

Jacob’s wives—acting in concert!—respond with comparable trust: “Do whatever God has told you” (see vv. 14-16). But they base their case on their father’s abuse of them rather than on Jacob’s experience. In a rhetorical question they use legal language to renounce their father (v. 14; see 1 Kgs. 12:16). He has engaged in false dealings, misappropriating their dowry (money Laban did not have available to give to Jacob; 29:15) and regarding them as aliens; Laban has treated them as property. Such a strong, public stand on the part of these women against the abuse of their father seems remarkable. When Jacob gained wealth, God acted on their behalf as well! In the face of such oppression, God and Jacob have acted justly and properly. The implication: They will accompany Jacob back to Canaan. Their comments put the lie to Laban’s later claims (vv. 26, 43).

Upon hearing Rachel and Leah, but without telling Laban, Jacob gathers his family and possessions and begins to flee (vv. 17-21). Unbeknownst to Jacob (v. 32), and after Laban had left the area, Rachel steals Laban’s household gods—human-shaped images of gods that were symbols of Laban’s authority over his household, perhaps tokens of inheritance. This mirrors Jacob’s action of “stealing” Laban’s heart (vv. 20, 26)—namely, deceiving him. Because Laban never discovers what Rachel did, her act functions symbolically (see v. 35).

When Laban hears of the flight, he and his men pursue the family for seven days, to the hills of Gilead where Jacob was encamped (east of the Jordan). At this point, God speaks to Laban in a dream in order to protect the fleeing family (cf. 20:3), commanding him not to speak good or bad to Jacob (vv. 22-24)—namely, to do Jacob no harm (v. 29). The question now is whether Laban will obey the word of God. When Laban overtakes Jacob, he adheres to God’s word, but his emotional language appears designed to turn Rachel and Leah against Jacob.

Laban has a list of complaints against Jacob (vv. 25-30). He begins by accusing Jacob of deception and handling his daughters like prisoners. He also berates Jacob by appealing—once again—to custom: Jacob fled in secret; hence, Laban could not give his own flesh and blood a proper send-off. His charge of foolishness (v. 28) seeks to shame Jacob in the presence of his daughters. Self-righteously he appeals to the word from God as a reason for his kindness, but he still could ignore it. He continues in this vein; by suggesting that they have fled out of a desire to see Jacob’s family (v. 30), he dissociates himself as a factor in the flight. Then, he concludes with a question designed to turn the
entire situation to his own advantage: Why did you steal my gods? Why would he even need them if he was returning to Canaan?

Again, Jacob does not equivocate (vv. 31-32); he fled out of fear of what Laban might do. But he heightens the tension when he unwittingly condemns to death anyone caught stealing Laban’s gods (cf. 44:9). Laban pokes around for the gods in the tents (vv. 33-35). But the gods are nowhere to be found, primarily because of Rachel’s cleverness; Rachel had put the gods in the camel’s saddle, sat on them, and then used menstruation (see NIV) as an excuse for remaining seated. This interchange symbolizes Rachel’s defeat of her abusive father and, should the occasion ever arise, provides evidence that he has no claim to their possessions (see vv. 14-16).

Jacob now takes the initiative and angrily makes countercharges. He presents a legal defense of his rights (vv. 36-42), calls on witnesses, and challenges Laban to find cause to prevent him from proceeding to Canaan with his possessions and wives. There is no evidence that anything has been stolen, and he has worked very hard and long (twenty years is stressed, vv. 38, 41) for what he has, going beyond what he was obligated to do. He brings his defense to its high point by claiming that the God of his father has been with him in all of this. (The Fear [or Refuge] of Isaac is an epithet for the God of Israel’s ancestors, appropriated for Yahweh.) This God has sided with him, the oppressed one, rather than with Laban; God has sent him away rich rather than empty-handed (see Deut 24:14-15; 1 Sam 2:1-10; Psalm 124). In fact, God spoke to Laban in order to rebuke him, not simply to protect Jacob.

Laban, refusing to admit defeat publicly, claims that everyone and everything really belongs to him (he views all in terms of property), but that he will be magnanimous and conclude a nonaggression pact with Jacob (vv. 43-44). Laban no doubt realizes that he has been had and seeks to protect his own future from further maneuvers by Jacob. Although Jacob appears as an equal partner in what follows, the author gives Laban alone direct speech, specifying the terms of what appear to be two forms of the treaty: (1) interfamilial relationships (vv. 49-50); in effect, they ask God to keep watch over them when they are unable personally to keep track of one another (this “Mizpah Benediction” is not all that positive!); (2) land boundaries (vv. 51-52), which both are to recognize as inviolate.

In connection with each are (a) two sets of stones (vv. 45-46, 51), only the first of which is named (vv. 47-49, cf. NRSV and NIV for different attempts to resolve a textual difficulty), which function as continuing witnesses to the treaty; (b) two communal meals (vv. 46, 54), in which only Jacob’s kin appear to participate; (c) two invocations of God (vv. 50, 53; Nahor is Abraham’s brother). Isaac adds the Fear of Isaac to replace Laban’s second name, not to designate a different God, but to replace Laban’s epithet in view of his own experience. This act effectively cuts off Jacob and his family from this particular strand of religious tradition. Jacob’s relationship to the family in Haran now ends.
The fact that these two individuals, after deception upon deception, could part in peace, however strained the relationship (note that Laban does not speak to Jacob in v. 55), testifies to the work of God. They go their separate ways; Laban is not heard from again.

**REFLECTIONS**

1. The story reports a watershed period in the life of this family. We find a thoroughgoing break between the family in Haran and the family in Canaan. Although 27:46–28:9 lifted up the importance of Jacob’s marrying within the family, resulting in his journey to Haran, that concern now ends. Marital relationships outside the family now become a part of their reality (34:1-24; 38:1-11; 41:45; 46:10). Indeed, a number of texts suggest that Jacob’s family are aliens in Haran (31:15; 32:4); the families are distinct from one another (30:30; 31:37, although Laban claims otherwise, 31:43), and even their deities are distinct (31:53). God stresses the importance of Jacob’s returning to his own homeland (30:25; 31:3, 13, 18).

This text witnesses to profound changes, even with respect to family structures and human relationships, to which God often calls the community of faith. As those changes develop, however, they may well entail considerable anxiety and conflict. Discerning God’s call into a different future may prove difficult and take considerable time and effort.

2. These chapters continue the theme of sharp and deep levels of intrafamilial conflict and deception, with focus now on the family in the “old country.” The family in Haran more than matches the family in Canaan. They are chips off the same block; such familial tendencies run deep. At the same time, this picture derives in many ways from Jacob’s own duplicity in chap. 27; Jacob is the only link between chaps. 25–28 and chaps. 29–31. Jacob reaps the fruits of his own deception of Esau and in the process intensifies the problems in another community.

The author creates this central text, highlighting the birth of the tribes of Israel, permeated with negative realities. How easy it would have been to paint a rosy, idyllic picture of Israel’s origins, a Garden of Eden sort of beginning. But the narrator, with a realistic understanding of the human condition, knew that this would not be realistic. The more deeply the probe

<Page 558 Ends><Page 559 Begins>

into Israel’s own past, the more the present looks like more of the same. Yet, precisely because of this continuity, at the level of both human and divine action, readers can see themselves as if in a mirror, gaining new levels of self-understanding and being assured of God’s continuing involvement in their troubled lives.

3. At the same time, human love (stressed in 29:18, 20; cf. 24:67) and human service (forms of db[ (Abad occur thirteen times) can counter human deception. And we ought
not to overlook the humor sprinkled throughout (e.g., 31:33-35). Moreover, as we shall see, God makes use of human wisdom and ingenuity in effecting the divine purposes in and through this family. Both human beings and God act with favorable consequences, from the women (29:31–30:24) to Jacob (30:27, 30). Even people like Laban listen to God’s voice and participate in the divine purposes (31:24, 29). Jacob may not be entirely free of arrogance (30:30; 31:42), but God extends abundant blessings through Jacob’s service. God’s blessings are always mediated, whether through created orders (e.g., the fertility of animals) or human activity or a combination thereof.

4. The author emphasizes the role of the women as mediators of the divine blessing in and through their bearing of children. Jacob, though indispensable, remains deeply in the background, as the voices and actions of the women fill these verses (remembered in Ruth 4:11). In the midst of a patriarchal culture, the tradition gives these women a central place in the story of the birth of the people of Israel. “‘Israel’ has emerged out of the intense struggle between Rachel and Leah, just as ‘Israel’ will emerge from the struggle between Jacob and God.”180 These mothers order the Jacob genealogy (46:8-26).

At the same time, the important role that Leah and Rachel play in the story is not limited to their role as mothers. The text recognizes their abuse at their father’s hand and that they give this abuse public voice (31:14-16); such action is of no little importance for a community of faith that has all too often engaged in a cover-up regarding such abusive familial situations. Their sharp critique of their father and renunciation of his authority in their lives witnesses to a possible avenue of approach to abusive situations. Their renunciation takes not only verbal form but also courageous, concrete action in Rachel’s theft of the gods and her defiance of him when he comes looking for them. When Leah also voices her abuse at the hands of her husband, Jacob (29:31-34; 30:20), she adds an additional positive dimension to the way in which these women confront tragic situations in their lives.

In addition, the use of God language by the women, both in connection with the birth of their children and with Jacob (31:16), testifies not only to their personal faith, but also to their ability to engage in theological formulation and discussion. The women make confessions, not on the basis of some special revelation, but by the deep-down links they see between their experience and what they know their God to be about in the world.

5. The community of faith is fortunate in having a God who does not insist on perfection before choosing to work in and through it. Israel has a God who blesses this family in the very midst of its conflicts (29:31–30:24; 30:27, 30; 31:3, 5, 7, 9, 42), making life possible even within a dysfunctional system. God does not work in isolation, but within a complex context to bring about the birth of Israel’s children and enable goodness to emerge.

In the births of these children we may see God at work on behalf of new life and families. This creative work of God remains indispensable for the history of the promise, for it enables the coming into being of persons to whom promises can be given and for whom they can be realized. God’s promises are given on behalf of “families” (12:3b; 28:14). God’s most fundamental objective in giving the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—
and Leah and Rachel—is the blessing of families. In all of this, of course, God is at work in quite unobtrusive ways, hidden from public view (in this respect, these chapters are similar to the Joseph story).

The author places the birth of Israel as a community of faith within an admixture of familial conflict, human love and service, and ongoing divine blessing in the midst of failure. As such, the story is not simply about origins; it reveals the fundamental character of Israel’s continuing life with God through the generations. And it shapes the very heart of Israel’s understanding of God as one who works on behalf of families like this one. Indeed, it speaks about and to the community of faith in every age.

6. This mirroring function of the text occurs at another level. Jacob’s journey to a foreign land and his return reflect Israel’s later journey to Egypt and back. For example, Israel’s founding family, though virtually in place in 30:25-43, resides in a foreign land. The situation appears similar to that faced by the adult “children of Israel” in Egypt (Exod 1:1-8). They are not free to leave. Jacob’s request of Laban to let his family go echoes Moses’ request of Pharaoh (30:25-26; the verbs בָּאָל [sālah, “send”] and בָּאָל [hālak, “go”] are used by Moses with Pharaoh, e.g., Exod 5:1-3; cf. also [ābad, “serve”] used twice here and often in Exodus). We may compare Moses and Jacob in the ways they gain freedom from Pharaoh and Laban. They begin with relationships in good order, but end with angry exchanges, threats, involvement of women and children, pursuit and interrupted flight, and carrying the wealth of the land with them as they go (cf., 31:18 with Exod 12:35-38). We have seen this mirroring before in Genesis, e.g., Abraham’s journey to Egypt (12:10-20). These parallels suggest that the great rhythms of life are usually not unique to any historical period. Human life has a way of returning ever again to face problems and possibilities that are comparable to those of their predecessors in the faith. When we study carefully these texts, we receive a potential source for a word from God to address our own problems and possibilities.

7. The identity of the oppressor and oppressed varies. Jacob, for example, can be both. Initially Laban and Jacob oppress Leah. Her own father uses her for his deceptive purposes (29:23; 31:15), forcing her into a marital situation that he knows will bring trouble. Jacob, in turn, accepts the marriage and relates to her sexually (four children in quick succession), but treats her as nothing compared to Rachel. Leah’s cries of affliction (יָנָה [Ani]) are heard (יָמָה [sAma]) by God (29:32-33; 30:17). Rachel’s cries concerning the distress of her childlessness are also heard (30:6, 22) and remembered (רַקְז [zAkar; v. 22] by God. This pattern is later matched by Jacob’s affliction (31:42), which is seen (הָרָא [ra]) by God (31:12). Such language reflects the Exodus events (Exod 2:24-25; 3:7, 17; 4:31), as well as psalms of lament and thanksgiving (see 29:35; 30:23).

This divine commitment to the oppressed is already central to the biblical narrative. This is not a theme that surfaces for the first time in Egypt; God’s remembrance of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob grounds the divine response in the exodus (Exod 2:24; 3:6, 16; 6:2-8).
And the OT includes Leah and Rachel in this remembrance; they “built up the house of Israel” (Ruth 4:11) and Rachel becomes a metaphor for those who lament the death and dying of the children of Israel; indeed, she even becomes a metaphor for the suffering of God (Jer 31:15-20; cf. Matt 2:18).

GENESIS 32:1-21, JACOB PREPARES TO MEET ESAU

COMMENTARY

This text, a unified composition (mostly J), prepares the reader for Jacob’s encounters with God (32:22-32) and with Esau (33:1-20). These verses center on the prayer of Jacob (vv. 9-12), the interpretation of which shapes the approach to the narratives that follow. The prayer is framed by encounters with God (vv. 1-2, 22-32) and, within that, by the dispatch of messengers to Esau (vv. 3-8, 13-21). At the same time, the tension in the narrative sharply increases after the prayer, to such an extent that the encounter with God in vv. 22-32 becomes, in turn, the centerpiece of chaps. 32–33. These verses thus combine with 33:1-20 to enclose the encounter with God in 32:22-32. Jacob’s “facing” both Esau and God are important to keep together.

Chapters 29–31 have demonstrated that Haran cannot be home for Jacob. Hence, he must return to Canaan, where a hornet’s nest may well await him. Nonetheless, he returns under God’s command.

32:1-2. The author structures this section similarly to 28:10-22. Jacob experienced angels when he left Canaan (28:12), when he was in Haran (31:11), and now when he returns (32:1). The angels may be God in human form (on the plural, see 18:2). The angels are associated with revelation in the two prior texts, but in this text no word from God is heard. The angels may be linked to the promise of divine presence (28:15) and, less directly, to 31:42, 49. They also point forward to the dangers of the meeting with Esau and his militia-sized group of 400 men, hence the reference to angels in terms of an entire company or encampment, probably with military connotations (see Josh 5:13-15; 1 Chr 12:22), is fitting. The coalescence of some of these themes in Ps 34:7 (“The angel of the LORD encamps/ around those who fear him, and delivers them” [NRSV]) supports their role as protectors.

The name Jacob gives to the place, Mahanaim (its location is uncertain; it must have had some link with Jacob), “two camps [or companies],” refers to God’s company and his own or to the two divisions of his own people (vv. 7-8). The exclamation appears similar
to 28:16-17 and conveys Jacob’s clear sense of ongoing divine presence and protection. It may embolden Jacob for

> the dangerous journey ahead; his response suggests that it does.

32:3-8. In conventional language, Jacob sends messengers (the same word as “angels”) on ahead to discern from Esau himself the nature of the situation. His actions reflect the memory of Esau’s intentions to kill him (v. 11; 27:41-42). Esau is already settled in Seir (i.e., Edom; though see 36:6-8), to the southeast of Canaan. Jacob tells the messengers what to say: where he has been, about his wealth, and his interest in reconciliation. Indeed, Jacob’s use of lord/servant language (vv. 4, 6, 18, 20) in the message itself suggests his willingness to reverse the blessing gained by deceiving Esau. The return to this language in chap. 33 shows that Jacob is serious about such reconciliation. The author does not describe the encounter of the messengers with Esau (though note the “brother” language), only that Esau comes to meet Jacob, accompanied by 400 men (v. 6). Jacob appears distressed and uncertain about the meaning of the report, but he prepares for the worst. He divides his company into two parts so that, should Esau attack, at least one group might be saved.

32:9-12. In the midst of this fearful moment, Jacob prays. Scholars are divided about the sincerity of this prayer. A judgment that Jacob is attempting to deceive God depends not on the prayer itself, but on a negative assessment of Jacob in the larger narrative. Such an interpretation seems unlikely.181

The structure of the prayer is similar to the individual lament for deliverance from an enemy (cf. Pss 31:15-16; 40:11-13; 69:13-14; 86:13-15): (1) An invocation, with a threefold naming of God, linking him with the God of his fathers; (2) A recollection of God’s command to return to Canaan and what God has done for him. The language recalls God’s command to Abraham (12:1) and suggests again a break from the family in Haran. Jacob’s use of the terms dsj (hesed, “steadfast love”) and tma (jemet, “faithfulness”) recalls the use of these terms in 24:27 and links Jacob with basic creedal language for God in the OT (cf. the psalms noted above). (3) A confession of his unworthiness for even a modicum (“least”) of God’s love. The request does not depend on what he brings to this moment. (4) A request for deliverance; Jacob fears not only for his own life, but for his wives and children; (5) A claiming of the divine promises. This grounds Jacob’s plea in God’s loyalty to promises made. He appropriately claims God’s promises (eight in number; cf. 28:13-15) for this moment.

Jacob quotes God two times in his prayer, referring to the command to return to Canaan (31:3) and the promises regarding divine presence and numerous progeny (28:13-15). The word “do you good” (repeated in vv. 9 and 12, stressed in the latter) summarizes the divine promises and frames the prayer. The reference to posterity derives from this specific situation.
32:13-21. After the prayer, Jacob begins to move his retinue toward confrontation with Esau. In an effort to cover his guilt for past behaviors (rpk kApar) and to effect acceptance (acn nAZA)) by Esau (v. 20), Jacob sends his servants on ahead in stages with a major gift: over 550 animals! He cleverly designs the threefold staging of the gift in droves to break down any initial resistance that Esau might exhibit. Jacob instructs his servants carefully concerning their response to Esau’s questions. He stresses that the animals are a gift to “my lord [Esau]” from “your servant Jacob” (vv. 18, 20, cf. vv. 4, 6), who is coming along behind. The fourfold mention of gift (hjnm minhâ, vv. 14, 19, 21-22, a play on Mahanaim) may suggest tribute from a vassal to his lord (cf. 2 Sam 8:2, 6; 1 Kgs 4:21 for this combination).

Prior to the encounter between Jacob and Esau, the narrative pauses for a description of an encounter between Jacob and God. How they are to be related will not be easy to resolve (see 33:1-20).

REFLECTIONS

1. The presence of divine messengers (v. 1) does not obviate the need for human messengers (v. 3). This juxtaposition suggests that, in situations of danger and interpersonal difficulty, the coalition of divine presence and human initiative and planning is important. God’s presence does not control so much that what human beings think, do, and say in such moments is irrelevant. At the same time, the struggle with the “messenger” (God) in vv. 22-32 makes clear that God may enter anew into human plans.

2. Jacob does not blame God for the problem he now faces (v. 9); he simply states the truth and claims a coherent relationship between the God who commands and the God who promises. The one who promises can be trusted not to subvert the promises in issuing commands; the one who commands will see somehow to the promises (cf. 22:1). Jacob has been faithful to God and in this dangerous moment claims God’s promises; hence the appeal to divine steadfastness and faithfulness. The text does not report that Jacob is delivered from Esau until after the struggle with God (32:30). Given that experience, the confrontation with Esau seems anticlimactic. God answers the prayer for deliverance in a way somewhat different from what Jacob imagined.

3. The language the messengers are to speak to Esau implies Jacob’s willingness to reverse his earlier deception and return the blessing to Esau (not the blessing in 28:3-4, and nothing is said of the birthright). The reversal in the use of lord/servant language from 25:23 and 29:29, 37, 40, where Esau became Jacob’s servant, demonstrates this interest. Also, the word used for Jacob’s “gift” in 33:11 is hkrb (burAkâ, “blessing”; see 27:36-41). The word !ynp (pAnîm, “face”) occurs seven times (vv. 16, 17, 20-21); this anticipates its prominence in the next sections (32:30; 33:3, 10). Seeing the face of God
before seeing the face of Esau turns the meeting with Esau into a less dangerous moment, though seeing the face of God presents its own dangers.

GENESIS 32:22-32, JACOB WRESTLING WITH GOD

Link to:

<Page 564 Ends><Page 565 Begins>

COMMENTARY

This text has long fascinated commentators. Its meaning is so elusive that a variety of interpretations is credible. The “breaks and joints . . . and the looseness in the inner connection of the statements to one another [make] room for many ideas” and give it an “essential spaciousness.”

Although the story has been edited in the course of its transmission (e.g., v. 32), most scholars assign the present passage to J. An early pre-Yahwistic story of a supernatural encounter at a river crossing may have informed the narrative; yet, the relatively sophisticated image of God and the centrality of the name Israel make any such links remote. Hosea 12:3-4 may attest to a somewhat different form of the passage. The text also differs from typical stories of attacks to prevent the completion of a mission; in this case, the one who commanded the return (31:3, 13) becomes the assailant.

This text stands between God’s two appearances at Bethel (28:10-22; 35:9-13), one of the primary pillars in the story of Jacob. It presents special parallels to the first story. Just as God encountered Jacob when he fled the promised land because of his brother’s anger, so also God now encounters him at the point of reentry, with his brother’s anger once again focusing his energies. In both cases, Jacob appears deeply vulnerable and alone, in need of divine care. This time, however, God approaches him in a much more ambiguous manner. God’s second appearance at Bethel brings Jacob’s return home full circle and clarifies the shape of his future. In another sense, this text has its closest relationship to 33:1-17, Jacob’s meeting with Esau, which constitutes a mirror image of this episode (see chap. 33). This confrontation with God shapes Jacob’s final encounter with Esau.

Among its literary features, the story plays on various words, especially the names Jacob (qby [yabboq, Jabbok]; qba [ ]Abaq, “wrestle’’)) and Israel (hrc [ZArâ, “struggle”]), and the word face (!ynp pAnîm), especially in 32:21, 30 and 33:10. Also, the author delays identifying the assailant. Initially, he appears only as a “man” (vya )îZ, v. 24); the reader gradually comes to realize that this is no ordinary assailant; it is God in human form (the ^alm mal )Ak, cf. 16:7). Ancient and modern readers familiar with the story would hear it with this identification in mind from the beginning, as I will in the exposition.

Having sent his gift to Esau on ahead, later that same night Jacob sends his entire caravan across the Jabbok (an eastern tributary of the Jordan about twenty miles north of the Dead Sea), a frontier point for the promised land (Deut 3:16). Jacob stays behind at the border for reasons unknown.
He remains filled with fear and distress (32:7, 11); for all he knows, Esau still plans to kill him (27:41-42). The narrative stresses that Jacob is alone. He will not be able to call for help should trouble come.

And come it does. During the night and in a surprise attack, God wrestles him to the ground. Jacob may well have thought it was Esau. God and Jacob struggle for a considerable period of time. When God sees that daybreak is near and that he has not been able to prevail in straightforward wrestling, God strikes Jacob in the hollow of the thigh (the exact spot is uncertain). The NRSV’s “struck” is truer to the context than the NIV’s “touched,” though both translations are possible.

This blow has a crippling effect and brings the struggle to its climactic moment, but it does not dictate the terms of the outcome. Jacob retains such a hold that God cannot escape from it; Jacob alone has the power to grant God’s request for release. At the same time, God alone has the power to grant a blessing. Jacob’s insistence that release be contingent upon blessing results in God’s giving the name Israel to Jacob (though both names are retained in the narratives that follow) and the gift of blessing. Jacob is forever marked by the struggle, as he limps away toward the promised land. His mark attests to success and not to defeat.

Rather than move through the text verse by verse, we approach it through some questions it raises. God takes Jacob seriously enough to engage him in a struggle, but God seems also concerned not to be revealed fully to Jacob. Why is this the case?

First, it was a commonplace that God’s face would not be seen: “no one shall see me and live” (Exod 33:20 NRSV). This reflects a concern not for God, but for the life of the one seeing. In this story, God is not the one endangered by the daylight, it is Jacob! To see God in the full light of day would have meant death for Jacob. If Jacob holds on until daybreak, he is a dead man! At the same time, the continued grasping of God on Jacob’s part in the near-dawn light also says something about Jacob. He is willing to risk death for the sake of the divine blessing. Jacob’s action suggests that he will risk seeing the face of Esau, too.

Second, Jacob’s request to know the name of God is respectful: “Please.” Not unlike Moses (Exod 3:13), Jacob knows that he is dealing with God, seen in the request for blessing (v. 26) and from God (v. 28). He wants neither the generic name God (la )el ) nor the names God has already given him (28:13). As with Moses, Jacob requests a divine name commensurate with this new development in his relationship with God, a new name for God to go with the new name for Jacob (cf. 16:13; 21:33; 31:13).

God replies to the question with a question (as in Judg 13:18): Why do (hz hml lAmmâ zeh) you ask my name? The Jacob-Esau meeting will also end abruptly with such a question (33:15). God does not seek information from Jacob. At the least, God thereby
signals the intent to close off the conversation and move on, while leaving Jacob with a question rather than a refusal. The fact that the question is followed by a blessing suggests the latter as an indirect answer; God is a God of blessing, a deity positively disposed toward Jacob.

In what sense does God not prevail (v. 25) and Jacob prevail (v. 28)? Neither emerges as the unqualified winner; God’s blow moves the struggle to a new level, yet Jacob is able to prevent God from leaving (v. 26). One could say that Jacob’s struggling and holding his own has helped turn a potentially negative situation into a positive, blessing-filled one.

Who is changed because of this struggle? God? Jacob? Both? Certainly their relationship has changed. They hold fast to each other; neither will turn away. Certainly Jacob is not so changed that he loses his identity. We find no evidence of a purging of his sin or his negative character traits. Yet, we can discern important changes.

Jacob has a new name. Although Israel may actually mean something like “God rules,” the narrator claims otherwise. The NRSV footnotes suggest a purposeful ambiguity in the name: “God strives” (God initiates and engages in the wrestling) and “the one who strives with God” (Jacob responds in kind). Jacob cannot struggle with God if God refuses to be so engaged. God’s giving this name, then, has implications for God as well as for Jacob. It affirms a divine commitment to stay with Jacob in the struggle. God will be caught up in this relationship. God’s promise (28:15) involves

not a passive presence, but an active, engaged relationship.

From Jacob’s side, the new name attests to and affirms the strength he has exhibited in this encounter with God and throughout his lifetime. It is important to note that name changes do not, necessarily, signal a change in character (cf. 17:5); here God gives the name to Jacob in recognition of who he has been and presently is, not what he becomes in this moment. The name change immediately follows Jacob’s refusal to let God go and his demand for a blessing from God; these responses prompt God’s response. God explains the name only in positive terms: It represents Jacob’s strength and capacity for struggling well. If Jacob had not struggled and prevailed, there would have been no new name, at least not the name Israel.

This change significantly assures Jacob. If he can hold his own even with God, certainly he should be able to live up to his name with Esau. Although the name Israel describes part of Jacob, yet he also exhibits Jacob-like characteristics in this encounter by grasping God. Unlike Abram/Abraham, both names continue to be used in the subsequent narrative, suggesting that both aptly describe this individual. (The repetition of the name change in 35:10 reflects a different origin for the name Israel.)

Jacob is blessed. Jacob will not let God go until he receives a blessing (v. 26). God
responds positively (v. 29), but not until the exchange over names. What is the content of the blessing? Blessings are normally not gained through struggle. However, Jacob here holds God to the freely given promises (see 28:13-15); Jacob claims what God has promised. Intercession occurs here in physical terms, not unlike Exod 32:10-14. Through such blessings (cf. 35:9) God continues the blessing put in place by Isaac, and the strength for life and well-being it implies (27:27-29). In other words, the blessing spoken here by God enables the promises to be realized in Jacob’s life.

Just as Jacob enters the promised land, God seals the promise with him (28:15)—at just the point where Jacob’s life appears most in danger. At the moment of deepest vulnerability for Jacob, God enters into the very depths of the struggle, binding God’s own self to Jacob at that level. In fulfillment of the promise, God will go with Jacob into future dangerous moments. God helps to make Jacob ready for the encounter ahead, arming him with continuing blessings for the journey. Jacob can now face any foe, no matter how hostile (cf. Moses). Jacob is about to embark on a life-and-death struggle, and he now knows that God the wrestler will be at his side.

Jacob sees God face to face. Jacob names the place Peniel (“the face of God”; usually spelled Penuel, v. 31). Unlike at Bethel, no altar is built nor are issues of holiness raised. He gives it this name not because of any later historical significance (cf. 1 Kgs 12:25), but because he has had a particular experience—namely, seeing God face to face and living to tell the tale (as Moses does in Num 12:8; cf. Judg 13:22). The references to dawn (vv. 24, 26, 31) make clear that God and Jacob parted company before the full light of day. Hence, seeing God’s face was for Jacob at best a twilight experience.

Jacob sustains an injury. The author presents a poignant portrayal of Jacob limping down the road toward the promised land as the sun’s first rays peek over the horizon. Jacob may now move on toward his goal. At the same time, Jacob has been sharply, and perhaps permanently, marked by this struggle with God (the exact nature of the injury remains unclear). What is the significance of the mark? On the one hand, it signifies Jacob’s success, not his failure or defeat; he has struggled and prevailed. As such, Jacob does not become a victim of God, reduced to groveling or to nothing before the power of the Almighty. On the other hand, it attests to God’s graciousness; Jacob has wrestled with God to the break of day, yet his life is preserved. So the mark symbolizes both who Jacob is and who God is.

By means of a dietary regulation (not mentioned elsewhere in the OT) Israel’s memory will be continually jogged regarding this struggle between Jacob and God. This regulation institutionalizes the memory. It provides an ongoing mark of self-identification for Jacob’s descendants. This memory, associated with bodily ritual, draws attention to Jacob/Israel’s self-identity, involving not simply a spiritual reality, but all of Israel’s life as well. An animal—part of God’s creation—focuses this human memory.

The author does not report that Jacob let go of God or even that God has left him. The story
moves immediately into the confrontation with Esau. In some sense this means that God and Jacob remain bound to each other, facing this future.

REFLECTIONS

1. Both God and Jacob identify the “man” as God (יְהוָה ייְהוָה; vv. 28, 30). His assailant speaks of Jacob as having striven with God. Jacob understands this to mean that he confronted God: “I have seen God face to face” (v. 30). Other texts connect “man” and “God” in a comparable way (see 18:1-8; Judg 13:6, 21-22). The OT links the human figure with the divine messenger ( מלאך אל), understanding that God is present and active in human form (see 16:7; Hos 12:3-4 identifies the ייְהוָה figure with the מלאך, messenger).

Some interpreters view this story as involving only an inner struggle between God and Jacob. But the stress on the blow to the body and the resultant limp (vv. 25, 31) indicate that Jacob’s physical self is affected. The fact that the struggle involves a figure in human form, rather than a disembodied God, also shows that the author describes more than a dark night of the soul, as does the lack of reference to dreaming or sleeping (cf. 28:10-22). This is no nightmare; Jacob remains fully awake. Jacob struggles with more than his own conscience or fears; his entire person is engaged. The dietary etiology also keeps the story grounded in a physical encounter, as does the parallel drawn with Esau’s face (33:10).

2. Why does God wrestle with Jacob? Many suggest that God responds to Jacob’s history of deception; the story constitutes a disciplinary move on God’s part to teach Jacob that he cannot proceed into the future relying on his own devices. Hence, some claim the story presents Jacob’s conversion to a life more attuned to the ways of God. Yet, we find no evidence of that in the narrative—no negative judgment of Jacob’s behaviors, no repentance on Jacob’s part, and no fundamental change in Jacob’s subsequent life pattern. Indeed, in giving Jacob a new name, God commends Jacob for struggling and names him in view of who he has been in the past and, given his response to the divine challenge, still is.

God will act in ways that are in the best interests of the life of the chosen one, however undeserving. At the same time, God sharply challenges Jacob in a “let’s-see-what-this-guy’s-made-of-when-the-going-really-gets-rough” sense. We may compare how Jacob will respond when faced with such a challenge to God’s test of Abraham in chap. 22. The way in which Jacob responds to the divine challenge is as relevant as that of Abraham for the future of this family. Just as God’s tests of Abraham and Jacob are attuned to their particular way of being and doing (Abraham is no wrestler!), so also is Jacob’s response (like Abraham’s) true to who he is. And God’s commendation responds directly to the strengths they exhibit in this challenge (cf. 22:16 with 32:28).

Others have compared this text with Exod 4:24-26, a divine attack on Moses. The goal there is more explicit (“seek to kill”); here it is, at least, an act of bodily coercion, a
challenging of Jacob at the deepest levels of his being. We do not know the motivation of
the assailant in either text, but both texts are associated with a dangerous moment of
transition in their lives.

Such struggles might be viewed as divinely initiated exercises in human becoming, of
shaping and sharpening the faithfulness of the human beings involved for the deep
challenges to be faced. God’s engagement in such moments in people’s lives is always a
gracious move, informed most basically by faithfulness to promises made, and in the
interests of health, peace, and well-being.

3. How could Jacob even stay in the ring with God? First, this text does not speak of God

in all of God’s glory; God has taken on human form and stooped to encounter Jacob at
his own level. Second, contrary to most commentators, we find no hint that God could
have overwhelmed Jacob at any moment God chose. God does not play games with
Jacob; God actually struggles with him. With human beings such as Jacob (cf. Abraham;
Moses), God commits to a genuine encounter, entering deeply into the struggle with
Jacob with a kind of power that doesn’t simply overpower him. The power God has
available appears commensurate with the nondivine power present in the situation. The
divine power differs from the human by the way in which it is exercised. We see a divine
restlessness and relentlessness in this moment of encounter, and an indomitable divine
will at work on behalf of Jacob. God watches for openings, for opportunities to enhance
the divine purpose in Jacob’s life. Further, God retains certain kinds of power; God is
able to do with Jacob’s name what Jacob is not able to do with God’s. The blessing
comes from God; Jacob does not generate blessings for himself. For all of Jacob’s
powers, he recognizes the need of a blessing that he can finally only receive from God.

4. The confrontation with Esau mirrors the encounter with God. In some sense, God
functions as a substitute for Esau, yet the “man” does not equal Esau. Jacob moves from
seeing the face of God to seeing the face of Esau, and he testifies that seeing Esau’s face
is like seeing God’s face (33:10). The obverse also seems true in retrospect: Seeing God’s
face is like seeing Esau’s face. What Jacob had expected from Esau was hostility; he got
graciousness. What Jacob might have expected from God was graciousness (in view of
the prayer in vv. 9-12); he did get that, but only on the far side of an attack. The actual
encounter between Jacob and Esau proves to be different from the experience Jacob has
with God, but there are still a number of similarities (see commentary on chap. 33).

At the same time, the victory appears ambiguous, for Jacob recognizes that, if he had
truly seen God, he would have died. Hence Jacob confesses that God has been his
deliverer, and he experiences graciousness at God’s (and Esau’s) hand. God puts him
through the encounter in advance.

The prayer for deliverance (lxn nAzal) from Esau (32:11) is realized initially in being
preserved (nAzal, 32:30) in the struggle with God. Jacob prays for deliverance from
Esau; God delivers Jacob from God. This prior deliverance does not resolve the conflict with Esau, however. Jacob still must face that. But the deliverance from God symbolizes Jacob’s future deliverance from Esau. Jacob does not say he has prevailed; only God says that. Jacob understands the event, rather, in terms of his own deliverance.

5. God may encounter people in conflictual times by taking the very form of the anticipated difficulty. “In the night, the divine antagonist tends to take on the features of others with whom we struggle in the day.”184 Having been through such a time with God provides a gracious rehearsal for the actual life circumstance. To refuse to engage with God in that struggling moment denies oneself a God-given resource. To go through it with God before we go through it with others provides resources of strength and blessing for whatever lies in the wings of life.

Israel knows that wrestling with God can have both internal and external effects, even though God has not been seen and no blows to the body have been felt. Other texts about a verbal wrestling between God and key figures function similarly to this one (one thinks of Abraham in chap. 18 or Moses).

6. While we might conclude that the members of the community of faith ought to learn from Jacob to struggle with God, we should remember that God takes the initiative here. The issue is how Israel will respond to God’s initiative. At the least, this means that Israel’s response to God ought not to be passive or submissive, acquiescent in the face of God’s engagement with us. Moses appears as a new Jacob in this regard. An individual may hang on to God, claiming the promises, persisting in the relationship.

When it comes to struggles in daily life, we can count on God’s mixing it up with us, challenging us, convicting us, evaluating us, judging us. We may have to place our life at risk, knowing that the one who loses life will find it. God honors the relationship both by engaging in the struggle in the first place and by persisting in that struggle through thick and thin. The most meticulous of preparations cannot guarantee a certain shape for the future. God may break into life and force a new direction for thought and action.

7. This text belongs to a larger story about the experience of two communities (Israel and Edom). Jacob’s descendants know that this wrestler with God symbolizes their own experience with their neighbors as well as with God and that, somehow, these relationships are interrelated. Conflicts at the interpersonal level have an effect on the God-human relationship, and vice versa. Hence we should understand this text not only in terms of the dynamics of the relationship between individuals or between an individual and God, but in communal terms. “This event did not simply occur at a definite biographical point in Jacob’s life, but as it is now related it is clearly transparent as a type of that which Israel experienced from time to time with God. Israel has here presented its
entire history with God almost prophetically as such a struggle until the breaking of the day.”

GENESIS 33:1-17, JACOB’S MEETING WITH ESAU

Link to:

<Commentary>

This chapter (mostly J) concludes the Jacob-Esau segment of the story of Jacob (except for the burial of their father, 35:29). While a reconciliation of integrity does take place between Jacob and Esau, they will not share a future together. They address past offenses (vv. 1-11), but they spar over the shape the future should take, and, finally, part ways (vv. 12-17). Such is the relationship between Jacob and Esau, Israel and Edom.

33:1-11. The opening verse is filled with tension. The gifts of 32:13-21 have arrived (v. 8), but we have not yet heard Esau’s response. Jacob sees Esau coming with four hundred men and the reader expects to hear about a fearful Jacob (as in 32:7, 11). But such will not be the case; moreover, the two companies’ strategy has disappeared. Rather, Jacob arranges the women and children (only) in such a way that the most esteemed (Rachel and Joseph) come last, and hence will be introduced last (v. 7). Jacob himself goes ahead of them, bowing seven times like a vassal before his lord (perhaps an acceptance of wrongdoing). The author repeatedly notes that the women and children behave in comparable ways toward Esau (vv. 5-7).

This behavior suggests that Jacob’s basic stance

toward Esau involves submission and stands as a fulfillment of the oracle in 27:40, a (temporary?) reversal of the oracle of 25:23 and the blessing of 27:29, 37. Key repetitions support this assessment: “lord” for Esau five times (33:8, 13-15; cf. 32:4-5, 18), his self-reference as “servant” of Esau (33:5, 14; cf. 32:4, 18, 20), and his concern to find favor in Esau’s eyes (33:8, 10, 15; cf. 32:5). This language continues with that used by Jacob before Jabbok; the struggle at Jabbok introduces no changes in this language.

Yet, there are also points of discontinuity in Jacob from before Jabbok: (1) The encounter with God appears to have stayed his fear of Esau and eliminated fear-based strategies; Jacob makes himself vulnerable by moving toward Esau alone, unaccompanied by any of his company. (2) The gift remains intact, but the reason for it changes from appeasement (32:20) to gratitude (33:10). Although this development takes place after the encounter (see below), the encounter with God makes it possible. (3) The submissive language appears genuine. (4) Yet, Jacob does not grovel; he seeks to demonstrate through word and deed the change, indeed the reversal in the relationship between the brothers. (5)
Jacob now functions more clearly as the progenitor of a people rather than as just an individual.

Jacob’s solitary limping toward Esau and bowing to the ground constitutes clearly the vulnerable move that makes possible what happens next. But Esau, too, takes an important initiative: He runs to meet Jacob, embraces him, throws his arms around him, kisses him, and weeps with him. This impressive list of welcoming activities is unparalleled elsewhere in Genesis (the closest is 45:14-15, where Joseph makes himself known to his brothers; see also 29:11-13; 46:29; 48:10; 50:1; Luke 15:20). Hence, one should interpret Esau’s moves positively; in fact, in that culture they may well have entailed forgiveness. Then, at Esau’s initiative, Jacob’s wives and children are introduced (vv. 5-7). Jacob witnesses publicly to God’s graciousness (@jen, “undeserved favor”) concerning his family’s growth (cf. with v. 11 below), language most closely related to his prayer (32:10; cf. 31:5, 7, 42). Previously, Jacob had never done this. Here he attests to the theological role played previously by his wives, Leah and Rachel (29:31–30:24). They have shown him the way.

Esau also asks about the “company” (hnjm mahaneh) he has encountered (v. 8). This query plays on the word hjnm minhâ (32:13, 18, 20-21), meaning the gift or tribute that Jacob sent on before him. Esau wants to know the meaning of this gift. Jacob’s response repeats the earlier message to Esau (32:5): “to find favor [@jen] in his eyes” (v. 8). Jacob thereby links God’s favor (v. 5) with Esau’s, but in a wrong-headed manner. God’s graciousness had come to him in a quite undeserved way, but now he would seek, in essence, to buy Esau’s favor with all this property.

Esau’s refusal of the gift on these grounds (v. 9) brings Jacob’s response to a new level. Jacob realizes from Esau’s reply (e.g., “my brother”) that he has already found favor with Esau (v. 10): “If I have found favor in your eyes . . . now that you have received me favorably” (italics added). Verse 10 proceeds from this new ground: Jacob now gives a new reason for extending the gift—namely, gratitude; because you have received me as God received me, accept my gift. The gift that was originally offered for purposes of appeasement (32:20) is, in fact, not necessary for reconciliation. Esau has forgiven Jacob quite apart from such an “offering.” The “sacrifice” can now function as a “gift.”

Jacob, once again, experiences the graciousness of God, this time extended through the face of his brother. Verse 11 testifies to this experience: Jacob now offers the gift not simply in gratitude to Esau, but in gratitude to God.

Verse 11 extends this discussion along other lines. The “gift” becomes “my blessing” (hkrb burAkâ), a clear reference to 27:35-37 (note the lord/servant language), but not to 28:3-4. It may be that Esau also accepts the gift because of the language of blessing that Jacob now uses for the first time. God’s blessing has been at work in Jacob’s life, and he now has all he needs. He now wants to give that blessing to Esau. He does not give the blessing “back” to Esau,186 but the blessing that he has received has been so bountiful that it can flow through him to Esau as well (he does not give everything he has to Esau, vv. 13-14, 17). Hence, God’s word to Jacob (28:14)
is specifically fulfilled with Esau: “All the families of the earth shall be blessed through you.”

33:12-17. Esau accepts Jacob’s offer. Even more, he offers to accompany Jacob on his journey. Surprisingly, Jacob deflects Esau’s offer, asking him to pass on ahead to Seir; Jacob will follow with his company, but at a slower pace. Two observations are in order: (1) Jacob uses language that continues to defer to Esau—though not deceptive, it betrays that theirs has not become a truly brotherly relationship; (2) the reason Jacob gives (vv. 13-14) remains somewhat obscure, but it may mean that Jacob’s family needs some independence to develop properly. Now separated from the family in Haran, Jacob’s family must establish its own identity (see 30:30). Jacob’s response may have been prompted by a perception that Esau’s offer (v. 12) suggested a merger of their families. Yet, Jacob does offer to come along to Seir in due time. The fact that he doesn’t (v. 17) must have something to do with the next exchange between them.

Esau takes Jacob’s hesitation at face value and offers some of his people to help with the journey, thereby insisting on a close, ongoing relationship (v. 15). In response, Jacob puts an end to the conversation rather abruptly, but what he says is puzzling (compare NIV and NRSV). In view of the parallel expression in 32:29 (hz hml lAmmâ zeh), the NIV seems best 187: “But why do that? . . . Just let me find favor in the eyes of my lord” (v. 15)—i.e., “This is all the further our relationship should go; it ought not to result in the merging of our families. I trust that we are reconciled, but our families and our futures should remain separate.” Jacob’s decision not to go to Seir comes in the wake of Esau’s continuing to press against this matter (unwittingly?). We should also note that going back to Seir would have delayed fulfilling God’s command to return to Canaan (31:3, 13).

Jacob and Esau separate, coming together again only at their father’s funeral (35:29). But this shared responsibility, as well as the economic factors cited for Esau’s return to Seir (see 36:6-8) make it clear that theirs is a separate relationship, but not without conversation and cooperation. Jacob goes to Succoth, on the east side of the Jordan, and settles his company there for an unknown period of time (v. 17).

REFLECTIONS

1. The narrative concludes in reconciliation with separation and an open-ended future. In view of what happens over time between their descendants (Edom and Israel; see Obadiah), this text seems remarkably evenhanded in its treatment of the relationship, even drawing an analogy between the graciousness of Esau and the graciousness of God (v. 10)! Overall, the narrator claims that continued conflict between the two is not a necessary future, set for all eternity by some word of the distant past. Even more, it claims that no matter how severe the conflict, or how deeply rooted in past history, reconciliation among brothers remains a possibility, even if that does not finally eventuate in a close relationship. The oracles in 25:23 and 27:27-29 stand in continuing
tension with 27:40 (see 33:11), and that tension, in fact, describes their history with each other.

2. Seeing Esau’s face so graciously turned toward him works not only parallel to, but as an extension of God’s face, which Jacob finally saw (32:30). In metaphorical terms, Esau’s face is the face of God for Jacob one more time: (a) their confrontation begins on a note of danger, with the potential of death; (b) they confront each other face to face, not simply at the psychological level, and engage in bodily struggle, involving the whole person; (c) they are both struggles or wrestlings; in fact, for Esau and Jacob it goes back into their mother’s womb (25:22, 26). Struggle so characterizes Jacob that it will shape his relationship with everyone; (d) they both end on a gracious note, though only on the far side of the struggle; Jacob does not die—“my life is preserved.” (e) Jacob does not deserve the kindness shown by both God and Esau. (f) They both end up on a “crippling” note: Jacob comes up lame in the encounter with God, and Jacob’s encounter with Esau ends short of full reconciliation. (g) They both issue in new corporate realities. Jacob becomes Israel, and the families of Jacob and Esau proceed on to their lives in separate lands. “It is hard to identify the players. In the holy God, there is something of the estranged brother. And in the forgiving brother, there is something of the blessing God.”188

The life one lives with God and the life one lives with other human beings are two sides of the same coin. They affect each other in deep and profound ways; what happens in one relationship has effects for good or evil on the other. Life with God cannot somehow be lived in isolation from one’s sisters and brothers without harming both relationships (see Matt 5:22-24; 1 John 3:17; 4:20-21). Life with other humans cannot truly be lived out in isolation from God if we are to be what the Creator intended us to be. In either case, God will find a way to engage in such lives on behalf of the gracious divine purposes.

3. In and through Esau, God works to fulfill the promises of life and goodness on behalf of Jacob, not simply through salvation-historical (“churchly”) events, but through the way in which individuals—even former enemies, whether within the family or without—respond to one another. This involves God’s creational activity, at work beyond the borders of churchly properties and promised lands. But such creational activity remains fundamentally related to God’s promissory work, not simply with Jacob but with nonchosen ones like Esau. God fulfills the promises through creative activity as well as through redemptive acts. The result for these related types of divine activity is the same: salvation, in this case, reconciliation between former enemies and the extension of blessings that have the potential of shaping families for the good.

GENESIS 33:18–34:31, THE RAPE OF DINAH

Link to:
COMMENTARY

Many scholars have thought this chapter to be an isolated narrative, inserted haphazardly into the story of Jacob. Newer literary-critical work, on the other hand, tends to view the chapter as an integral part of Jacob’s story. Moreover, one may discern continuities with other Genesis narratives—e.g., the interrelationship of this family with outsiders, or the way the narrative helps to fill in the story of the children of Jacob (especially Dinah, Simeon, and Levi). In addition, there are continuities regarding issues of marriage with those outside the family, circumcision, deception, and family conflict and violence. Perhaps most important, the sharp and unambiguous judgment (indeed, a curse!) by Jacob on the violence of Simeon and Levi must stand as the primary clue about how we should interpret this chapter (49:5-7).

Although the narrative may reflect early tribal history, including issues of land settlement in the Shechem area (see Joshua 24), ethnological considerations should play a minimal role in interpreting the chapter in its present context. Simeon, Levi, and the other sons of Jacob do attack a city (vv. 25-29), but they are not presented as tribes in this text. Moreover, given the basically positive assessment of the Canaanites here and elsewhere in Genesis, later Canaanite issues are probably not mirrored in this chapter, except to suggest that the roots of those later troubles may stem from this ancestral time.

The story consists of six scenes: Jacob’s settlement in the Shechem area (33:18-20); Shechem’s rape of Dinah and his request to make Dinah his wife (34:1-4); the negotiations between the two families regarding this request (34:5-18); the fulfillment of the agreement by Hamor’s family (34:19-24); the rape of the city of Shechem by Simeon and Levi (34:25-29); the exchange between Jacob and his sons (34:30-31). Moreover, since 35:1 appears as God’s response to the question broached in 34:31, chaps. 34 and 35 are drawn more closely together.

33:18-20. The transition to vv. 18-20 seems abrupt, introducing a new stage in Jacob’s life. No longer associated with the land of Laban, he enters the land of promise, safely or “whole” (!lv sAlem), fulfilling the divine command (31:3, 13). His purchase of a plot near Shechem parallels the action of Abraham in chap. 23 and signals another claim to the promised land (as a burial ground, see Josh 24:32). Shechem is both the name of the city in which Jacob settles (33:18)—later, a significant Israelite center (Joshua 24)—and the name of the son of Hamor, from whom Jacob buys the land (33:19).

At this auspicious moment of entering the land of promise, Jacob erects an altar and calls it El Elohe Israel (“God, the God of Israel”; cf. 35:7). Inasmuch as El was the name of the Creator God worshiped at pre-Israelite Shechem, this act signals yet another claim: The God of this land is the God of Israel. The “Israel” in God’s name has a dual reference: to
Jacob, whose name is Israel (32:29), and to his “household” (34:30), for whom this moment is an important point in their historical journey.

34:1-4. Dinah is the first child of Jacob to whom the narrator devotes attention (30:21). She pays a visit to other (Canaanite) women in the Shechem area; such openness to outsiders is not unusual for Genesis. The author depicts this visit as entirely natural. The reference to Leah alludes to Dinah’s full brothers, Simeon and Levi (vv. 25, 31; Judah is also a full brother), and ought not to be viewed negatively. The journey proves to be unsafe. Suddenly, a Hivite (i.e., Canaanite) named Shechem, the “most honored” (v. 19) member of the ruling family of the city-state, rapes her (see below). The narrator may assume that they know each other (see 33:19); he immediately moves to Shechem’s next action.

In the narrator’s words, Shechem proceeds to act in a way atypical of rapists: He clings to Dinah (as in 2:24), loves her (as Isaac and Jacob love Rebekah and Rachel— 24:67; 29:18, 30), and speaks to her heart (as Joseph does to his brothers, 50:21). The latter phrase may cause Dinah’s positive response. As revolting as the rape of Dinah is, this turn of events shifts the reader’s response to Shechem in more positive directions. Moreover, the presence of love language for Dinah on the part of both Hamor and the narrator (vv. 8, 19, words also used of God’s love and delight) reinforces Shechem’s sincerity. Sympathy for Shechem continues to develop based on his generous statement in vv. 11-12. At the same time, this language predisposes the reader to be alert to the sons of Jacob.

In asking his father to make arrangements for Dinah to become his wife (“get” is typical language for this; cf. 24:3-7, 37-40), Shechem conforms to Israel’s own legal tradition (Exod 22:16-17; Deut 22:28-29). If a man rapes an unbetrothed virgin, he has to pay the father, marry the woman, and is “not permitted to divorce her as long as he lives.” This law sought to preserve as much honor in the situation as possible, including the honor of the raped woman, who would live in disgrace if she remained unmarried in her father’s house. In that world, Shechem’s offer was in Dinah’s best interests (cf. 2 Sam 13:16). All indications are that Dinah had been drawn into the house of Shechem and the two had fallen in love. Hence, when the brothers murder Shechem and “take” Dinah (jql lAqah, v. 26, the word also used for the rape, v. 2) without consulting her, they ignore this legal tradition.

34:5-18. When Jacob first hears of the rape of Dinah (by means unknown), he holds his peace (used in 24:21 to buy time for learning); he waits to consult with his sons before taking action. The author understands this reticence positively (cf. v. 30). In the verses enclosing chap. 34 (33:20; 35:1-4), Jacob focuses properly on the God who has made promises to him. One can best assess Jacob’s attitude in chap. 34 as one of prudence and care, informed by the worship of God and in view of a future in the land of promise that is in some jeopardy.
Hamor consults with Jacob (vv. 6-8); the sons’ entry in v. 7 interrupts the fathers. When they heard what had happened, but without benefit of consultation with Jacob (as he had hoped, v. 5), the sons were upset and angry, expressed in the phrase “an outrage in [or, against] Israel” (v. 7), which clearly has later Israel in view (cf. Deut 22:21; Judg 20:6, 10; 1 Sam 13:12). At this point, they seem to have the interests of the larger community at heart. Yet, the “outrage” focuses, not on Dinah’s rape, but on her having been “lain with,” something that “ought not to be done.” Their response focuses on the past; without apparent concern for the future (vv. 13, 27).

Both Shechem and his father enter into negotiations with Jacob and (now) his sons for Dinah’s hand. The rapist and lover of Dinah, as well as the head of his family, seek to make things right; indeed, they go beyond Israel’s own law in doing so. Hamor speaks first (vv. 8-10). His proposal is expansive, piling up verbs denoting generosity (cf. Abimelech’s offer in 20:15; cf. 13:9). He moves beyond Shechem’s marriage to Dinah to include openness to other marriages and an invitation for Jacob’s family to live freely among them and to own property. Verses 20-23 make clear that this is sincere, with mutual benefits—theirs will be ours, and ours theirs. Whereupon Shechem enters the negotiations; he is even more generous and open to the future, offering to give any gift (cf. Exod 22:16-17) and to pay any price, perhaps to Dinah, for her hand in marriage. The language of “taking” has turned into the language of “giving.” In fact, he opens himself to being cheated by Jacob’s sons. Such generosity was certainly not necessary on his part, given the numerical advantage (v. 30).

The sons of Jacob (all of them!), without their father, resume the negotiations (vv. 13-17), even though Jacob had been addressed earlier (vv. 6, 8, and 11). A possible explanation for his absence is the word deceitfully in v. 13 (cf. 27:35); that word does not describe Jacob, though apparently he is not opposed to the form of the negotiations. Hamor would not have made the move he does in vv. 20-24 if Jacob had not been included. The fact that the phrase “because he had defiled their sister Dinah” immediately follows the word deceitfully—such evaluations are rare for the narrator in Genesis—is instructive. They believe that what Shechem has done justifies a deceitful response. Thus the reader finds no ambiguity regarding their motivation; this is a trick, pure and simple; they intend to exact vengeance. And they use religion as a vehicle for their deception!

What Shechem did to Dinah, “the outrage in Israel,” has dropped from view altogether; the uncircumcised status has become the “disgrace”—a disgrace to the brothers. Somehow their honor, rather than Dinah’s, has become the issue. In effect, Jacob’s sons are promising that Shechem and his family will be incorporated into the family of Abraham: “You will become as we are”; “we will . . . become one people” (repeated in vv. 21-22). If they do not agree, the parties will go their separate ways (the NRSV’s “daughter” and the NIV’s “sister” are both possible, but see NIV in v. 8). We find no sign of the violence that is to come.

34:19-24. Hamor and Shechem consider the proposal “good,” though the reader knows (v. 13) what they consider good will destroy them. But the author presents them as trusting, even naive, persons who deeply want to bring Dinah and Shechem together.
Shechem apparently immediately moves to be circumcised (v. 19). The writer places the phrase “most honored of all his family” strategically; it accents the integrity with which he responds. His honor will bring honor to Dinah, precisely what Israel’s law called for in such a situation. The fifth (!) reference to his love for Dinah reinforces the sincerity of his desire for this marriage.

In vv. 20–24, Hamor and Shechem take the negotiated terms to their “city council” for ratification (cf. chap. 23). Their speech is marked by hortatory language designed to persuade an understandably reluctant group, hence the emphasis on economic advantage; no deceit appears, for they could simply have confiscated Jacob’s goods if they had wanted. They do not mention the rape, but given the extent to which the word had spread (vv. 5, 7), we may presume the council knew about it. Hamor’s and Shechem’s words about friendship (sAlem is translated “safely” in 33:18) stand in ironic contrast with the “deceit” of v. 13. By disclosing what Hamor says in the privacy of his own council, the narrator emphasizes that Hamor negotiates in good faith. This integrity intensifies when the entire council agrees to submit to this painful and identity-establishing ritual. In other words, they recognize Israel’s peculiar chosenness and make the necessary overtures to join them; hence Israel has made no compromise at this point.

Circumcision as an identity-establishing rite makes it an even greater gesture on the part of the Shechemite community. (Does not their circumcision in fact incorporate them?) Certainly, for the reader, this would in effect mean—in view of chap. 17 and the repetition of 17:10 in 34:15—the Shechemites have agreed to be integrated into the Abrahamic family. The repetition in v. 24 (the threefold use of l[ol, “all,” “every”]) stresses the unanimity of the city council.

34:25-29. Simeon and Levi (two of Dinah’s full brothers) take the initiative in following through on the deceit they and their brothers have schemed; they break faith with their new blood brothers, weakened by the circumcision. (Note that the noun for “pain” is also used for Israel in Egypt, Exod 3:7!) Entering the city by stealth (necessary for two people to kill so many), they murder Hamor, Shechem, and all the males of the city in cold blood. The “sons of Jacob” (v. 27; the NRSV inserts “other,” but 49:5-7 assumes that Simeon and Levi are also involved) take advantage of the situation and pillage the city, taking all of the women (lAqah must include rape, v. 2), children, animals, indeed, everything they could lay their hands on. The text specifically identifies this wholesale action against the city as revenge for what had been done to Dinah (v. 27; the NIV expresses not cause but place, “where”). Yet, the extensive detail (the accusative particle is used nine times!) yields an “overkill,” a blood feud mentality. Even more, the fact that the brothers kept their “spoil” for themselves is highly problematic. In addition, they “take” (lAqah, cf. v. 2!) Dinah out of Shechem’s house without consulting her. The narrative implies that Dinah was not being detained against her will, so this was probably not a happy occasion for her.
34:30-31. In this concluding exchange, Jacob opposes the violent actions of Simeon and Levi because of what it may mean for the future of the family (i.e., Israel); this verse must be read in the canonical context provided by 49:5-7, with its reference to the sons’ violence, murder, anger, and cruelty against people and animals. Israel’s reputation has been besmirched and the trust gained has been violated, with developing good relationships between the families, once so promising, now deeply compromised. If the Canaanites should decide to seek revenge, Jacob’s family in its minority status would certainly be destroyed. The future may well have been put at risk.

Ignoring Jacob’s perspective on the matter, Simeon and Levi voice an opinion: “Should our sister be treated like a whore?” Note that the brothers introduce a new thought—harlotry. What actually happened to Dinah is thereby blurred; what happens to harlots is not usually called rape. The focus thereby shifts from the violent abuse of Dinah and her rights (appropriate legal restitution) to the brothers’ own reputation or honor. The brothers may be accusing their father of mistreating Dinah by his comment, “selling” her for “peace at all costs.” If so, that would be ironic, for they have just used Dinah and her situation and taken her without her consent in order to gain for themselves honor and great wealth (cf. God’s response to Achan’s comparable actions in Josh 7:11, where the language of “trouble” also appears, 6:18; 7:25). By leaving the reader with the sons’ question, standing over against the word of the head of the family oriented toward life and promise, the narrator shows how narrow and self-serving their perspective and actions have been. The question also leaves the reader with an agenda to consider: How would they respond?

God responds to the question with a word about settling elsewhere and worshiping God (35:1). Jacob’s response exhibits faithfulness, commanding his household (cf. 34:30), including his sons, to put away foreign gods and to purify themselves. The earlier distress Jacob recalls (35:3) may be parallel to this moment; he is in special need of divine protection (forthcoming in 35:5).

REFLECTIONS

1. The literary brackets provided by vv. 1-2 and v. 31 raise the issue of Dinah’s abusive treatment. Two types of references to Dinah stand in counterpoint: (1) the many-faceted love that Shechem has for her (vv. 3, 8, 19); it is no small tribute to Dinah that her rapist goes to the lengths he does (finally giving his life!) to obey the law and arrange for marriage with her; (2) the violence against her: seized and raped (v. 2); defiled (vv. 5, 13, 27); suffered an outrage (v. 7); “taken” by her own brothers (v. 26); treated like a whore (v. 31). The same verb (hn[ (Anâ) for what Dinah suffered (v. 2) describes Israel’s oppression in Egypt (15:13; Exod 3:7); it was also used for Sarah’s treatment of Hagar
Dinah, an oppressed one, prefigures Israel’s own violation at the hands of other outsiders (cf. Isa 53:4).

Why is Dinah, the only daughter of Israel, made the victim of rape and then silenced? One could simply decry the patriarchy involved, but this text gives Bible readers permission to talk openly about rape and the sorry history of society’s response, including the silencing of victims. Has this text contributed to that silence?

2. The text raises another issue: the role of the family of Hamor and their interaction with Jacob’s family. The larger Genesis context helps in assessing the role of this Canaanite family. While outsiders are almost always viewed in a positive light, the relationship of Abraham’s family to them has often stood in sharp contrast to the divine intention (12:3b). This chapter offers another instance in which the community of faith fails to serve as a channel for the blessing of God to outsiders. Rather than treat the rape of Dinah according to the law, as Hamor’s family was openly willing to do, Israel takes the way of anarchy and violence. Rather than honor a genuine change on the part of Dinah’s victimizers, the brothers ignore it and take a sharply overdrawn retributive form of behavior that serves to alienate the outsider. Dinah certainly suffered injustice at the hands of outsiders, but her brothers respond in kind. The deep suffering that Dinah had to undergo could have served as a vehicle for a greater good, but the violent response deepens her suffering. Israel loses the opportunity to bring good out of suffering, and Dinah becomes even more of a victim.

The temptation for the oppressed to become oppressors themselves offers an all too prevalent possibility, a turning-the-tables kind of mentality that places them precisely in the position of those who perpetrated the violence in the first place. The frequently used motif that Israelites should treat the stranger as God would treat them reminds them of this temptation (Exod 23:9).

3. The claim that the text expresses concern about intermarriage with Canaanites, or exogamy generally, appears unlikely (Deut 7:2-3 reflects a later concern shaped by particular contextual realities). The generations following Jacob, now cut off from the family in Haran, must necessarily take wives outside the family; witness Judah (and his sons; chap. 38) and Joseph (41:45; cf. Moses). Some may have deemed intermarriage with the Shechemites a positive development, but Dinah’s brothers subvert it by their violent behaviors. Issues of the “politics of sex,” sexual hospitality for purposes of political advantage, may have informed an earlier version of this story, but not in its present form.

4. Jacob’s concern (v. 30) sharply raises the issue of the future of the chosen family. In fact, Jacob envisions the possibility that his family will be “destroyed.” Jacob obviously desired a
positive relationship with the inhabitants of the land. But how will the promises of God to this family be fulfilled in view of this changed relationship to the people of the land? The relationship between Israel and these peoples, two of whom are mentioned (Canaanites and Perizzites), reaches back to 13:7 and 15:18-21. In the latter text God promises Abraham the land of these peoples. But the fulfillment of the promise does not necessarily entail violence. The divine intention may have included a less violent relationship with the present inhabitants (15:16 lifts up a note of judgment). This chapter may seek to explain one reason for the violent shape of the later conflict between Israel and these peoples. The behaviors of Jacob’s family subverted divine intentions and promoted violence in relationship to the Canaanites (again, see 49:5-7). Is it possible that these actions set up the situation in the land in such a way that only violence could bring about the fulfillment of the promise? This would lead to formulations such as those found in Exod 23:23; 33:2; 34:11; and Deut 7:1-5.

5. Jacob’s response (v. 30) focuses on the effects of the violence for the larger issues of life and well-being for the community (“I and my household”); this implies a judgment on the violence (made explicit in 49:5-7). Communal well-being remains a key issue. How the family relates to its neighbors becomes relevant for the shape that its life takes, both internally (for Israel) and externally (for the fulfillment of 12:3b). The brothers have sacrificed long-range objectives for the sake of short-term advantage, using their sister’s predicament as an excuse to perpetrate violence. Such settling of accounts sounds suspiciously like modern governments or individuals that use a wrong done at one level to justify a long-contemplated action that seeks to defend “honor.”

The author presents issues of violence at multiple levels. The violence against Dinah and the violence against the Canaanites both come in for criticism. The story illustrates how violence begets violence; a response of violence sets in motion even deeper levels of violence and in the end places the future of the chosen family in jeopardy. This makes it necessary for God to enter into a much more compromised situation in order to answer the divine promises. This way of violence on the part of Jacob’s sons continues in the story of Joseph. Violence against the outsider leads to violence within the family (cf. Matt 26:52 [NRSV]: “All who take the sword will perish by the sword”).

This development would be congruent with Jacob’s evaluation in 49:5-7; their violence results in the families of Simeon and Levi being divided and scattered. Simeon does not survive as a tribe, being absorbed into other groups; members of the tribe of Levi do become a priestly class, but with no tribal land.

6. The brothers’ use of circumcision in their deception doubtless constituted an effort to make the Shechemites “pay” in the bodily organ that was the instrument of Dinah’s rape. Yet, the inclusion of “every male” goes way beyond any measure-for-measure understanding; adding the rape of all the women of Shechem extends the irresponsible character of the brothers’ response. Moreover, the use of circumcision for such a purpose appears highly questionable. They use circumcision as a vehicle for death rather than life, for separating people rather than uniting them in a single community. This will not be the
first time that the people of God have used religious practice as a vehicle for deception and violence!

7. We find no explicit God language in this chapter. The persons involved are entrusted with decision making that matters, and they will reap the effects of their own behaviors. At the same time, the chapter is bracketed by God language (33:20; 35:1); God is engaged behind the scenes, working in and through even these levels of violence on behalf of the divine purposes. Yet, the actions of Jacob’s sons have drawn their God into a highly compromised situation; God now must work in and through the violence in order to move toward the fulfillment of the divine purposes. Explicitly religious concerns are evident in references to defilement and circumcision, implying that theological issues are close to the surface.

GENESIS 35:1-29, THE JOURNEYS OF JACOB

COMMENTARY

Few biblical chapters give such clear evidence of their composite character as this one (all major sources are probably represented). Apparently, bits and pieces of tradition regarding Jacob’s journeys and family have been placed at the end of his story, not unlike the way texts have been woven into the seams of the stories of Abraham (chap. 25) and Joseph (chap. 50). Some linkages occur within the chapter. We should note especially the portrayal of Jacob journeying through the promised land from north to south. Jacob’s journey basically recapitulates the journey of Abraham. It begins with a similar command of God (12:1). They both journey from Haran to Shechem to Bethel toward the Negeb (12:6-9), include a promise of land (12:7), and travel in stages to Mamre (13:18), with references to oaks and altars all along the way. In addition, the separation of the families of Jacob and Esau because “their possessions were too great for them to live together” (36:7) parallels exactly the land division between Abraham and Lot (13:6). Verses 9-13 parallel significantly the covenant with Abraham in chap. 17 (see below), including a name change, with a focus on circumcision (as in chap. 34). All of these parallels may mean that Jacob has now arrived at that point in his life where he is a true successor in the line of Abraham.

The links with chap. 34 are somewhat indirect, but important. (a) The purification rites
may be tied to the defilement of Dinah (34:5, 13, 27) and more generally to what was done to Shechem. (b) The inclusion of people beyond Jacob’s own family (v. 2) may refer to the captives of Shechem (34:29), which may in turn explain the presence of “foreign gods.” (c) The “terror” (v. 5) may be a divine response to Jacob’s fear of revenge at the hands of the Canaanites in 34:30. (d) Reuben’s sexual/political act (v. 22) has parallels with the actions of Simeon and Levi in chap. 34. Both are criticized by Jacob in chap. 49 and lose their place in the family. (e) The focus on Jacob’s family as a community occurs in both.

Bethel receives some attention in this chapter, which, with 28:10-22, encloses the story of the adult Jacob.

35:1-15. These verses combine segments revolving around events at Bethel (see 28:10-22). God commands Jacob to go from Shechem to Bethel and build an altar; later God appears there, and Jacob again responds with worship. Worship issues frame the section.

The fact that God tells Jacob to make an altar is unusual (cf. Exod 27:1); elsewhere in Genesis this occurs as a human response. God appeared to Jacob (v. 1) and made promises to him there (v. 7). God has fulfilled those promises, answering him in distress and accompanying him (v. 3). These references suggest that God, who has been faithful, now holds Jacob to his own vow at Bethel (28:10-22; 31:13).

In response to God, Jacob commands his household and “all who were with him” (see 34:29) to put away foreign gods, purify themselves (see Exod 19:10; Deut 27:15), and accompany him to Bethel. The presence of persons in his retinue who are not members of Jacob’s family explains the reference to “foreign” gods; Rachel’s household gods (31:19) may also still be in view. Such a double reference to the “gods” corresponds to the similar command in Josh 24:14-15, 23. This action of Joshua also occurred at Shechem and was associated with entry into the land (cf. Judg 10:16; 1 Sam 7:3-4). This element of the text may also be related to the issues of defilement raised in chap. 34:5, 13, 27 (cf. Lev 11:47; 16:19). These texts support the idea that this ritual involved an internal renunciation, the shaping of thought and life toward what pleases God. The ritual implies an in-depth reading of the divine command relevant to the new family situation in the land. Jacob’s action may be understood as a paradigm for worship practices in later Israel.

Everybody responds positively to Jacob’s request (not all of Jacob’s directives are reported in v. 4, and earrings are added). They give Jacob their idols and their golden earrings, a potential resource for making idols (cf. Exod 32:3-4; Judg 8:24-27). Jacob buries them under the oak at Shechem, another link with Abraham (see 12:6). The immediate reference to God’s protection implies that God’s action responds to these worship activities.

Jacob and his family undertake the journey from Shechem to Bethel (about thirty miles). God’s protection on the way may refer to 34:30 and Jacob’s fear of the local inhabitants; the “terror” probably refers to a God-inspired fear instilled in those who may have
threatened Jacob (see Exod 23:27; Josh 10:10). They arrive at Bethel unharmed and fulfill the command of God, which, in turn, fulfills Jacob’s vow (28:22). The name El-Bethel is given to the altar site and not to the city. On Deborah, see Reflections.

God appears to Jacob “again” (v. 9; see 28:10-22). The word God speaks alludes to a number of previous promises, especially 17:2-8, which also includes Abraham’s name change. It provides a second realization of Isaac’s benediction in 28:3-4 (the first, 28:13-15), but this time it has a community-oriented focus (as in Jacob’s recollection of this appearance in 48:3-4). The presence of his entire family and others (see vv. 2, 5-6, 16) makes this more of a corporate experience than the others. God gives a promise (vv. 10-12) to a community that has just renounced other gods. This new, corporate setting in the land of promise may have led to the repetition of Jacob’s name change.

One senses that all previous appearances of God in Genesis are caught up in this one, especially the promises to Abraham, and are applied directly to one who gives his name to the people as a whole. God gives these promises to Jacob—that is, Israel. (1) The language and form of appearance are similar to those used with Abraham (17:1); God’s “going up” (v. 13; see 17:22) no doubt means the appearance of the messenger in human form (see 16:7). (2) The repetition of the promises of the land (17:8; 26:3; 28:13), a nation, indeed a community of nations and kings (cf. 17:4-6), maintains the continuity between Jacob and Abraham/Isaac. (3) It bridges God’s earlier appearance to Jacob at Bethel (28:10-22), including parallels to appearance, promise, and Jacob’s response. (4) It parallels the Peniel story: being blessed by God (32:29); the change of his name to Israel (32:28). (5) The command to be fruitful and multiply occurs as a command for the first time since chaps. 1–11 (1:28; 9:1, 6); it took the form of a promise to Abraham (17:6) and is recalled as promise in 48:4 (cf. 28:3).

Jacob’s response (vv. 14-15) also repeats earlier actions; he names Bethel again (28:19), and he erects another pillar and anoints it (28:18-19). Verses 14-15 have as much to do with the fulfillment of the vow as does 35:7 (e.g., the pillar and the name Bethel, the house of God, cf. 28:22). These texts establish the authority of the sanctuary at Bethel for a later generation. Jacob pours the drink (wine) offering, unique to Genesis, on the pillar rather than the altar. These cross-references testify to continuities in Jacob’s relationship with God and bracket his life from the point of leaving home until his return. They also establish continuities with Israel’s later, more elaborate ritual activities.

35:16-20. These verses portray the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel on the way from Bethel near Ephrath/Bethlehem (see 48:5-7); Rachel’s grave lies near Ramah in Benjaminite territory in 1 Sam 10:2 and Jer 31:15, however. There were two Ephraths in Israel, Bethlehem and near Ramah, hence the confusion. The immediate family of Jacob is now complete. The comforting words of the midwife about a son inform Rachel that her desires for a second son (30:24) have been fulfilled. Rachel’s naming of her son
(Ben-oni, “son of my sorrow”) is partially changed by Jacob (Benjamin, “son of the right hand”—i.e., power—or “son of the south” or “son of days,” see 44:20), to link the child less closely to the sorrowful past.

35:21-26. Only here, in chaps. 25–36, does the author refer to Jacob by his new name, Israel, but it may well have a corporate reference. Eder is near Jerusalem; it constitutes one more point in Israel’s journey through the promised land (“Israel journeyed on”). The shocking note about Reuben’s cohabiting with Rachel’s maid (and mother of Dan and Naphtali) probably explains why Reuben lost his status as the firstborn son (cf. 48:5; 49:3-4; 1 Chr 5:1). His act appears more a political move than a sexual one. The death of Rachel occasions an effort on Reuben’s part to assume the role of the family leader (see Absalom’s efforts with his father’s concubines in 2 Sam 16:20-22; cf. 2 Sam 3:7; 12:8) and illustrates again the conflict in this family.192

Since a list of Jacob’s sons follows this note about Reuben, the author may be addressing the transition in leadership from Jacob to his sons; Reuben makes the first move. He also remains on the list in spite of his deed. The point finally would be that, unlike the previous generations, the blessing and the promise will be shared by the sons as a group, rather than be assumed by any one of them (see 49:1-28; 50:24). The fact that Benjamin is included among those born in Paddan-aram may refer to the home of the mother. Dinah’s omission from the list indicates that tribal considerations are at stake here. The list is followed closely by a list of Esau’s descendants (chap. 36).

35:27-29. Jacob finally returns to the place from which he left in 28:1-5 (see 31:18), another piece of evidence for the bracketing function of this chapter. The writer reports Isaac’s death in terms almost exactly the same as those used for Abraham (25:7-9), being buried by his two sons (from 49:31) in the grave at Machpelah.

REFLECTIONS

1. One best interprets this chapter as a series of snapshots from a Jacob scrapbook that provided an episodic look at his later life. The references to 28:10-22 and the notices of various journeys that take him the length of the promised land in a manner parallel to Abraham (see above) provide linear coherence. The journeys are punctuated by one birth (Benjamin), three deaths (Deborah, Rachel, Isaac), and continuing family trouble (v. 22). God continues to be with Jacob, with appearances to command (v. 1), to panic (v. 5), to name (v. 10), and to promise (vv. 11-12). Jacob always responds in positive ways, by putting away gods (vv. 2-4), building altars (vv. 3, 7), and worshiping God (vv. 14-15). Amid this amazing variety, the author lists the twelve sons of Jacob according to their mothers (vv. 22c-26).

The author seems to say: “Your lives as Israel will be as complex and varied as was that of your father, Israel, but you will be undergirded by the presence of God catching you up in creation-wide purposes.” Such a picture is typical of communities of faith; the surface
image resembles more a scrapbook than a harmonious, logical presentation. There are the ongoing rhythms of life and death, joy and sorrow, family conflict and unity. Yet, beneath the surface of these apparently incoherent details, the journey moves toward a divinely established goal.

2. The author appends a curious note about the death of Rebekah’s nurse, Deborah (see 24:59), to this story; the narrative does not report the death of Rebekah (cf. 49:31). That a name (“oak of tears”) is attached to the place where Deborah is buried may be associated with the oak of v. 4. This text provides striking testimony to the memory of a faithful servant that lives on in the community of faith. Amid all the great movements of these major ancestral figures, the author includes a note about “little” people, who are more important in the larger story than one typically appreciates.

3. The renunciation of other gods embeds the first commandment in the heart of the ancestral story. More broadly, it sets the community of faith apart from certain values and commitments of the surrounding cultures. It lifts up the importance of ritual activity for life in the land, as a way of responding to the problems faced by the community of faith, and as a vehicle in and through which God acts on behalf of the community.

The task of “putting away” whatever is harmful to the community moves beyond just “gods” in other texts, incorporating more specific directives for the shape of a faithful life—putting away crooked speech (Prov 4:24), violence and oppression (Ezek 45:9), and sin (2 Sam. 12:13). Israel should move beyond specific ritual activities and speak of daily commitments and responsibilities. The NT picks up this same language, speaking of putting away “your former way of life, your old self” (Eph 4:22-32 NRSV) and, more specifically, putting off anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language (Col 3:8; cf. 1 Pet 2:1). Putting away foreign gods has been translated into the Christian tradition by referring to the renunciation of sinfulness or “devil and all his works and all his ways.”

Changing clothes also works as a symbol of moving from the old to the new. Clothing plays an important role in Genesis, symbolizing significant changes in the narrative (from 3:21 to 41:14). The washing of clothes is a symbol of removing defilement (cf. Lev 15:5-27); all of our own deeds are like a polluted garment (Isa 64:6). Yet, because of what God has done, we are clothed “with the garments of salvation,” covered with “the robe of righteousness” (Isa 61:10 NRSV; 52:1). The NT also uses the image of clothing to symbolize this change (cf. Mark 2:21), and persons of faith are called upon to clothe themselves in the characteristics of the new life in Christ (Eph 4:24; 6:13-17; 1 Pet 5:5). “The new community is found by renunciation, renaming, reclothing, and finally, receiving a promise.”

4. Rachel’s weeping lives on in Israel’s memory, noted not least in the reference to Jacob’s pillar, “which is there to this day” (v. 20). This image works powerfully in Jer
31:15-17 to express the deep effects of suffering on Israel and in Matt 2:17-18, in reference to the slaughter of the innocents in and around Bethlehem at Jesus’ birth. In Jeremiah, Rachel is used to express feminine and suffering images for God (31:15-20). This devastating moment for both Rachel and Jacob does not slip into the past or remain only a negative memory; it continues to generate fresh theological reflections. It (along with much else in this chapter) witnesses to the generative power of even “scraps” of the tradition for the ongoing life of the people of God.

GENESIS 36:1-43, THE FUTURE OF ESAU

Link to:

COMMENTARY

These highly composite lists (cf. 1 Chr 1:35-54) include Esau’s descendants (vv. 1-19); those of Seir the Horite, whose name is given to the region (vv. 20-30); the Edomite king list (vv. 31-39); and an appendix (vv. 40-43). The king list carries the story of Esau and Edom well beyond the narrative in which it is embedded, down to the time of David and Solomon (2 Sam 8:13-14; 1 Kgs 11:14), probably the time of the narrator. This chapter thus constitutes a projection of Edomite peoples and leaders into the future.

These lists were probably gathered by the Davidic monarchy after its subjugation of Edom. Over half of these names are not otherwise identifiable, having no connection with an existing narrative; many of the known names have a close relationship with Judah; some are both personal and place names; some have been taken over from other lists; others are used in more than one way in this text; and still others are not in full agreement with the surrounding story (e.g., Esau’s wives in 26:34; cf. 28:9 to 36:1-3, 10, 14).

The lists document stages in the history of the people involved, from family (vv. 1-14) to tribal units (vv. 15-30) to more national entities (vv. 31-39). They probably reveal comparable developments in the life of Israel. Generally, the relationships in the list reflect historical developments among tribal groups (e.g., the intermarriage of Canaanites and Edomites, 36:2).

This list parallels that of Ishmael (25:12-18) in both structure and concern for the nonchosen brother. As with Ishmael, Esau’s genealogy relates to previous oracles of blessing (25:23; 27:39-40); God attends to their realization in the development of this people. The move from Esau to Edom in this chapter (vv. 8-9, 43) also leads into chaps. 37–50, where the most basic subject is the movement from Jacob to Israel (36:31; see Josh 24:4).

36:1-19. The lists begin with a genealogy of the five sons of Esau and his three wives.
Verses 1-5 focus on Esau’s family, vv. 9-14 on that of his sons. The parenthetical reference to Amalek (v. 12) reflects antipathetic relationships between the Amalekites and the Israelites (Exod 17:8-16; Deut 25:17-19). In vv. 15-19 the sons are listed in their political role as chiefs (NIV, or as clans, NRSV) over Edomite territories.

Verses 6-8 constitute the major narrative piece within the chapter (cf. vv. 24, 35); they relate back to relationships between Jacob and Esau, established earlier (33:1-17; 35:29); both have been highly successful. The division between the families of Jacob and Esau are here grounded in socioeconomic reality (cf. Abraham and Lot, 13:5-7), with no sign of previous personal conflict evident. Earlier links in the text between Esau and Seir (32:4; 33:14-16; cf. 14:6) are difficult to justify with these verses; some have suggested this text speaks of a permanent settlement of a nomadic people having a sometime relationship to Seir.

The author presents Esau’s family positively, highlighting stability, growth, and continuity. The fact that Esau moves, rather than Jacob, says something about their historical relationships as well as the divine promise regarding Canaan; at the same time, the tradition speaks of the land of Seir as a divine gift for Esau (Deut 2:5; Josh 24:4), and the oracle in 27:39-40 assumes a land.

36:20-30. These verses present a genealogy of the seven sons of Seir the Horite (vv. 20-28), also listed as chiefs (NIV) or clans (NRSV), vv. 29-30. The Horites are also known as Hurrians, a non-Semitic people in origin (but here having Semitic names). These people occupied Seir before the sons of Esau subjugated them (described in Deut 2:12, 22; cf. Gen 14:6). We do not know whether individuals or tribes are primarily in view here, but probably the latter.

36:31-39. This list (not a genealogy) of eight nondynastic kings of Edom (vv. 31-39) may be best understood as chiefs similar to Israelite judges; they probably do not always reign successively or over the same territory. They pre-date Israel’s entry into Canaan (see Num 20:14; Judg 11:17) and continue down to the time of the United Monarchy, at which time David conquered the Edomites (2 Sam 8:13-14; 1 Kgs 11:14-17). The last of the kings (Hadar [Hadad]) may be a contemporary of Saul, whose son or grandson may be the Hadad mentioned in 1 Kgs 11:14. Reference to the kings of Israel (v. 31) reflects the oracle (25:23) that Esau was the older son who came to serve the younger. One of these groups, the Midianites, descend from Abraham (25:2).194

36:40-43. This appendix probably specifies eleven Edomite chiefs (or clans) in terms of their localities at the time of the last-named king. Redactionally, they balance the twelve sons of Jacob in 35:22-26.

REFLECTIONS
To the average reader of Genesis, these lists (with over 200 names!) are to be read quickly while getting on with the story of Joseph. Moreover, it may be thought that because this chapter focuses on those who are “not chosen,” whose history seemingly goes nowhere, it need not delay the reader. Yet, the inclusion of the stories of these peoples (known only from Israelite sources) is significant, for it makes the reader pause over the place of nonchosen ones and ponder their relationship to the chosen. Their story is not expunged or reduced to something of no account by the narrators of the story of the chosen people.

The testimony of this chapter, with its references to Esau’s land, material blessings, and the succession of generations is that God the Creator is indeed at work outside Israel, giving life and blessing to the nonchosen. The blessings given to Esau (27:39-40) continue to be realized down through the centuries. In fact, the promises to Abraham and Sarah include a promise of kings and nations (17:5, 16), so that the very existence of Edom depends on divine promises. In these respects we may compare Esau’s story to the story and genealogy of Ishmael (see chaps. 16–17; 21; 25).

While Esau is not the “chosen,” these texts do not forget that the story is about brothers. This is made clear in other texts, where Esau is a “brother” of Israel (Num 20:14), who is not to be “abhorred” by Israel, “because [the Edomites] are your kin” and are even to be welcomed into the “assembly” of Israel (Deut 23:7-8). It is thereby recognized that, though the division between chosen and nonchosen may slice down the middle of a family, that does not nullify the continuing familial relationship and the obligations the chosen ones have for the welfare of the other. Their responsibility to be a blessing to all the “families” of earth (12:3b; 28:14) includes those within the family as well as those who stand without. Election is for the purposes of mission.

It is clear from the historical record that severe conflicts between Edom and Israel took place from time to time, from David to the post-exilic period, issuing in some harsh judgments on Edom (2 Sam 8:13-14; Psalm 137; Obadiah; Mal 1:2-5; cf. Rom 9:12-13). Since these basically positive stories of Esau in Genesis continued to be transmitted through difficult times, they demonstrate that family ties cannot finally be subverted by the behaviors of one or more generations of brothers and sisters. This perspective may attest to a countercultural origin and transmission for these texts, not uncommon for Israel’s literature. These texts witness to bonds of family that reach across the centuries. They should inform the continuing relationships among all peoples, no matter how difficult they may be at any given moment.

We may observe links between the two excluded sons, Ishmael and Esau, not only in the promises spoken to them, but also in their roles as progenitors of the Arab peoples, many of whom claim adherence to Islam (see chaps. 16–17; 21; 25). These texts may be especially important as the chosen in the modern world seek to relate to these “others” in as positive a way as possible; they demonstrate that we have common roots in the faith of Abraham and Sarah and that heritage may enhance our conversations with each other.
GENESIS 37:1–50:26

JOSEPH, JUDAH AND JACOB’S FAMILY

OVERVIEW

We know this last major section of the book of Genesis as the story of Joseph; and for good reason, since it involves, primarily, the fortunes and misfortunes of Joseph, Jacob’s son. At the same time, the text announces that “this is the story of the family of Jacob” (37:2), and concludes with reference to the promises God “swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (50:24). At the least this means that, despite all the focus on Joseph, the reader must think fundamentally in corporate terms; this story narrates the emergence of Israel’s family as Israel, the people of God.

The reader must also seek to come to terms with chaps. 37–50 as a unified whole. Modern scholarship has usually regarded the story as a composite work (J, E, P, and redactors), a view prompted in particular by so-called doublets. There has been a decisive move away from this approach over the past generation, however, with renewed efforts to understand the story as a unity. Hence, for example, we now may read the repetitions as a deliberate literary device, perhaps reflecting an oral culture. This usually does not entail a denial of the composite character of these chapters in some respects (or the need to probe redactional issues).

Yet, for all the talk about unity, many still regard certain sections as intrusive, especially chaps. 38 and 49 (and often portions of chaps. 46–48; 50). Such an approach seems guided especially by a concern to isolate those segments that focus on Joseph or reflect a particular literary style. However, such claims diminish the corporate perspective of the present redaction. For example, chaps. 48–49 have the emergent tribal groups of Israel in view. Chapter 38 highlights Judah, who has a key role in the larger story (43:3-10; 44:18-34) and whose descendants are of central importance in later Israel. These chapters coordinate the pervasive role that the “brothers” play in the story, but because they are so often mentioned as a collective body, they tend to be less visible. Whatever place the story may have had as an independent piece of literature (of whatever length), it now focuses on the move from Israel as an individual to Israel as a family, to Israel as a people.

Chapters 12–36 are basically individual stories, presented in episodic fashion and tied together by genealogies and itineraries. This story, though episodic at some points (38; 46–50), is more a single narrative. As such, we may designate it a short story or novella, with a plot moving from crisis to resolution (similar to books like Ruth and Esther). At the same time, its self-designation as the “story of a family” (37:2) accents continuities with the previous family narratives. Yet, the differences from chaps. 12–36 suggest that the story emanates from different circles than the earlier stories.
What, then, can be said about its origins? Scholars have often pointed to the influence of the wisdom movement on the book. Wisdom influence may be evident at some points, as in the portrayal of Joseph as an ideal young man or a model administrator. Yet, such ideas were widespread in Israel’s world and should not be used to support a specific intellectual matrix for its origins. A royal setting is likely, given leading themes; and the Solomonic era (with its positive relationship with Egypt; see 1 Kgs 9:16) affords a probable background. We must remain agnostic about the story’s history, except to say that the Priestly writer probably integrated it into its present ancestral context (Priestly influence can be discerned at a few points [e.g., 37:1-2; 47:27-28; 48:3-6]).

Function. The Joseph story functions in several ways within Genesis and the Pentateuch.

1. The story follows the genealogy of Esau, Jacob’s brother. The reason for this juxtaposition seems clear: Both present the movement from individual to people. Chapter 36 announces that “Esau is Edom” (vv. 1, 8-9, 43) and assumes a comparable movement for Jacob (36:31; cf. Josh 24:4). Chapters 37–50 trace this movement, depicting the journey from individual Israel to people Israel (from 37:1 to 47:27 to 50:25), which is recapitulated in Exod 1:1-7.

2. The story leads into the book of Exodus. At one level, the story has a narrow geographical purpose, moving the family from Canaan to Egypt, the setting for Exodus events. References to “settling” (bvy yAsab) signals this motif. The story begins with Jacob’s settling in the land of Canaan (37:1), moves to his settling in Egypt (47:27; cf. vv. 4, 6, 11), and finally shifts to Joseph’s “settling” there with his father’s household (50:22), with a not unimportant aside about the Canaanites as “settlers” in Canaan (50:11). The journeys of this family back and forth between Canaan and Egypt anticipate Exodus journeys.

At another level, the story “sets up” issues for the book of Exodus—for example, the Egyptian context. The story acquaints the reader with a remarkable range of life in Egypt, particularly the court of Pharaoh. Generally, a highly positive portrayal of Pharaoh and the Egyptians emerges, from the pharaonic treatment of Joseph, to the welcome of Jacob’s family, to the significant participation in Jacob’s funeral (including prolonged and “grievous mourning,” 50:3, 11). One should also note the Egyptians’ openness to Israel’s God (e.g., 39:3; 41:38-39; 43:23). This material provides essential background for events in Exodus 1–15, so 1:8, “A new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph.” Genesis prevents us from “demonizing” the Egyptians of Exodus, suggests potentially positive relationships, and may well prepare for such prophetic words as Isa 19:18-25: “Blessed be Egypt my people” (Isa 19:25 NRSV)!

“Servant/slave” (db[ (ebed) appears as an important theme. The nearly 100 uses of this root in Exodus should make one attentive to its use in Genesis 37–50. Just as Exodus
insists that Israel is the servant of God, not Pharaoh, so also Genesis claims that Israel is not the servant of Joseph (read any Israelite leader). Life, growth, and blessing are another significant theme. Lifted up in a prominent way in chaps. 37–50 (esp. 45:5-8), it becomes a creational issue around which Exodus revolves (beginning in 1:7), which also relates to the theme of promise. While this theme appears more muted in chaps. 37–50 (except for blessing), it occurs at key junctures (46:3-4; 48:3-4, 21-22), ends on this note (50:24), and grounds God’s activity in the Exodus events (2:24; 3:16-17; 6:2-8).

3. The story continues and develops the story of Jacob and his forebears in chaps. 12–36. The story of the family of Abraham/Isaac/Jacob moves on, rampant with conflicting relationships, yet chosen by God to be the recipient of promises and responsibilities. Significant developments occur:

Family and promise. Family issues continue to play a primary role, particularly tensions created by intrafamilial conflict. They create a major movement in the story, resulting in brotherly reconciliation, not an end in itself, however; it happens for the sake of the future, particularly as seen in the promises. The families of Abraham and Isaac had been divided over the issue of the promises (Isaac/Ishmael; Jacob/Esaui). Will this “tradition” continue in Jacob’s family? The story begins that way; Joseph seems to be eliminated (chap. 37), then Judah (chap. 38). But in time, when Jacob first speaks God’s promise to Joseph, he refers to all of his offspring (48:3-4; cf. 35:12); Joseph follows through on this by speaking the promise to all his brothers (50:24). Family conflicts are resolved for the sake of a unified family moving toward those promises.

Individual, family, and nation. The story integrates family history with national and political history. At times the author focuses on the family (chaps. 37; 42–45), at times on the broader political arena (chaps. 39–41; 47). Yet, because there is no interest in foreign affairs (e.g., wars), the focus throughout remains on issues that affect interhuman relationships.

This integration may speak to a conflictual reality in Israel’s history. Put generally, the evolution of Israel’s history from a family/clan orientation to monarchy occasioned numerous conflicts.

This story conveys the importance of a symbiotic relationship between government and family, embodied in the figure of Joseph, who remains both brother and national leader. Government, in its effect on citizens, should function like a good family system. Yet, if the family is conflicted or natural disaster strikes—as with Jacob—it takes wise governmental leaders—as with Joseph—to bring the good order needed for life and well-being. Because his leadership in social and economic spheres and his rise to power are ascribed to the work of God, the story views national structures in a positive light. They, in effect, mirror God in valuing and preserving life in families. Yet, the potential for the misuse of authority appears evident as well (see Exod 1:8). The story could be interpreted as an essay on the use and abuse of power (from Jacob as a father, to the brothers’
treatment of Joseph, to the role of the pharaoh and Potiphar’s wife, to Joseph in various roles).

In Joseph, especially, the story highlights the importance of the individual; what he says and does has considerable positive impact. Once placed in a leadership position, Joseph is no passive member of the community, but rather becomes deeply engaged on behalf of the public good. He rejects violence and revenge, and hence brings some closure to the snowballing effects of dysfunctionality. Although no angel—himself the product of such a family—Joseph chooses an approach that, however justifiable, causes no little discomfort among the brothers; finally he does not return in kind, though it is within his power to do so. The one who has ample reason to retaliate chooses reconciliation instead of retribution.

God. The action of God and the relationship to God are seen as central, enabling life and well-being for individual, family, and nation. God, not human heroes, provides the unity in the story; the deity works toward the divine purposes in and through these spheres of society and their deep and pervasive levels of sin and evil. Thereby the family is preserved alive and unified, and enabled to move on as the bearer of God’s promises to the world. The story highlights God’s presence with Joseph (chap. 39), blessing him at every turn; but God has a larger canvas in view. Joseph’s relationship with God, accented at key junctures, affects his personal life, but moves beyond him to affect wide ranges of public life. The move from his encounter with Potiphar’s wife to his wise leadership in community affairs suggests that personal and public life are to be linked for maximum effectiveness as a leader.

This story depicts God in ways quite different from chaps. 12–36. Although not mentioned less often (some fifty times), God is portrayed differently. Never obvious, God acts unobtrusively, behind the scenes. God does not overpower or offer oracles and miracles; God’s presence weaves the threads of goodness, mercy, and judgment into the texture of ordinary life, working toward the best possible end.

Moreover, God never appears to Joseph; unlike his forebears in the faith, he receives no word from God. God appears only in 46:1-4 (48:3-4 recalls an appearance), but to Jacob, not to Joseph. The promises seem hidden to ordinary view. Joseph builds no altars and associates with no centers of worship. Yet God is with him, and he is imbued with God’s spirit (41:38). Joseph hears the promises for the first time from Jacob in 48:3-4, 21-22. Such differences may help to explain why the text never includes Joseph in the common formula: the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Yet, another important dynamic operates in this way of conveying the knowledge of God. Jacob, not God, passes the promise on to Joseph, who in turn passes it on to his brothers (50:24); also, the word of Joseph to the brothers in 45:3-8 is formally similar to a typical theophany. The human community now becomes responsible for the transmission of the word of God. The former mode of revelation will return almost immediately (Exod 3:1-10), but a new method for transmitting the word of God across the generations has developed.

Why does the author present God differently in this story? This story may have been produced in a more secular time, when human thought and action seemed to carry the
day, and God was experienced in less direct ways. Or God’s actions correlate with the
new reality of a people; God relates to the entire people of Israel, not just to individuals.
Or it may be an introduction to the opening chapters of Exodus, where God acts in much
the same way (cf. 2:23-25). Whatever the case, Genesis does portray the different ways in
which God conveys the divine word to the community of faith.

4. The story picks up on key themes from Genesis 1–11 and, together, they enclose the
unity of that book. God appears as one who works on behalf of not only the chosen
family, but also the Egyptians; indeed the entire world serves as the divine horizon. The
primary issues throughout the story are creational, from issues of family order to natural
disaster, from socioeconomic crisis to national structures. God’s purposes throughout are
to preserve life and well-being, which in 45:5-8 includes the world community. The
author focuses on divine blessing, blessings of the land, of wise leadership, of family
growth, fulfilling the creational words of 1:28 (47:27), which are in turn extended to
Pharaoh (47:7-10), the Egyptians (47:13-26), and the world (41:53-57) through this
blessed family (cf. 12:3). God’s choosing to work through this weak, conflicted family
constitutes a divine irony, using the weak to bless the strong, which leads into important
themes in Exodus.

Structure. The story begins with a conflicted family situation; two brothers, Joseph (37:1-
36) and Judah (38:1-30), seem to be eliminated from the line of promise. It ends with the
inclusion of all of Jacob’s offspring within the orbit of the promise (47:29–50:26),
grounded in God’s word (48:4). Their futures are marked out in chaps. 48–49; chap. 50
depicts the reconciliation that enables their reception of the promise as a corporate entity
(50:24).

Chapters 45:1-9 and 46:1-4 stand parallel and establish the divinely ordered creational
setting of life and well-being in Egypt that enables the events of chaps. 48–50. The author
describes the family’s growth in Egypt, summarized in 47:27 and detailed in the
genealogy (46:8-27). The setting makes this possible—filled with the blessings
associated with Pharaoh (45:16-20; 47:7-10) and the Egyptians (47:13-26), interwoven
with reports about their settlement and provision in that land (45:9-15, 21-28; 46:28–
47:6, 11-12)

Chapters 39–44 develop both the Egyptian context and the family relationships in such a
way that the events of chaps. 46–50 become possible; chaps. 39–41 focus on the public,
Egyptian setting, with Joseph’s rise to power; chaps. 42–44 develop the family issues.

GENESIS 37:1-36, JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

Link to:
COMMENTARY

The author/editor juxtaposes chaps. 36 and 37–50 because they involve the movement from individual to people. The announcement that “Esau is Edom” (36:1, 8-9, 43) assumes a comparable movement for Jacob (36:31; cf. Josh 24:4). Chapters 37–50 trace this journey from individual Israel to people Israel (cf. 37:1; 47:27; 50:25). Jacob will also migrate from Canaan, as does Esau (36:6-8); unlike Esau, Jacob claims God’s promise of an eventual return.

This story begins in a familiar way: Jacob as an inept father; the deception of the father by sons; the conflict among brothers. Will only one brother receive the promise this time, too? Much of chaps. 37–50 addresses this question. Joseph begins the chapter as the leading candidate to succeed Isaac and Jacob, but he seems to be out of the picture at the end.

Scholars have commonly thought that two sources are interwoven in this chapter, suggested by the roles of Reuben/Judah and the Midianites/Ishmaelites, as well as various geographical and familial details. Yet, other explanations are possible. The use of the names Jacob and Israel also suggests such a theory. However, the emergence of the name Israel for a people (e.g., 47:27; 48:20) may mean that later Israel sees itself mirrored in the story. The fact that Rachel remains alive (v. 10; see 35:19) may also create some confusion; yet, Genesis does not always present events in a precisely linear orientation.

Verses 1-4 set the stage for this episode, indeed for the story as a whole. The remainder of the chapter quickly moves through three scenes to a preliminary climax, the exclusion of Joseph; Joseph’s dreams intensify intrafamilial conflict (vv. 5-11); the isolation of Joseph and the violence he experiences at the hands of his brothers (vv. 12-28); Jacob’s grieving reaction (vv. 29-36).

37:1-4. Jacob settles in the land of promise (v. 1), which is linked with 47:27 and 50:22, where “Israel” and Joseph settle in Egypt. This sets up two themes for the story: the movement from Canaan to Egypt and the development from individual to people.

The reference to Jacob’s genealogy (37:2) indicates that the story of Joseph unfolds from within the story of Jacob’s family. Indeed, Jacob himself remains a central character in this story until his death and burial at the end (49:33).

The author introduces Joseph as a teenager and as a shepherd, helping four older brothers (Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher). He first acts as an interpreter, a key role he will play in the story; he brings a criticism of his brothers back to Jacob (which they may or may not have deserved).

Joseph evidently now has a relationship with his father that the others do not have. It suggests that Joseph becomes the chosen son of the promise; the eleven are “Esau.” This
perception has been fostered by Jacob himself, who “loves” Joseph more than his other children (see 33:2, 7); Joseph was a child of Jacob’s old age (see 30:22-24). Although not a problem in itself, it takes public form, specifically the gift of a costly robe, long and sleeved, perhaps with royal connotations (see 2 Sam 13:18; the traditional translation “a coat of many colors” is based on the Greek and Latin). Once again, an article of clothing plays an important role in a Genesis story.

As it became obvious that Joseph was his father’s pet, the brothers grew to hate him (rather than Jacob!) and could not speak to him peaceably (!lvb busAlôm; see 45:15; 50:21). Communication breaks down. The stage is set for deep intrafamilial conflict. “In a few short sentences the narrator has sketched out an unusually complex world of fateful familial stratification, relations, and emotions: youth versus old age, intra-familial social hierarchy, concealed realms of discourse, rivalry, betrayal, obsessive love, ill-considered gifts of passion, hatred, shunning. The balance with which this system is presented leaves no heroes and no villains.”197

37:5-11. Joseph, like his father, is a dreamer, and also an interpreter of dreams. The narrator heightens the importance of interpretation by offering no words (cf. 28:12-15; 31:10-13), only symbols. Dreams play a key role in the story, with three scenes of two dreams each (see chaps. 40–41). Yet, too much can be made of them as well.198 They do introduce an important external reality into the family situation, but basically they serve a provisional function. They intensify the conflict through Joseph’s telling of them and enable Joseph’s testing of his brothers (42:9); but Joseph will finally deny the dreams’ continuing applicability for shaping the future.

The meaning of Joseph’s two dreams may be transparent, but interpretations, implied in their questions, are made only by the brothers and the father (cf. 40:8!): Joseph stands in a position of authority over them. That Joseph chooses to share uninterpreted dreams with those most affected makes for deeper misunderstanding; his silence regarding their interpretations intensifies the difficulties. He could have talked about what “rule” might mean (a key issue in the larger narrative); he could have responded to Jacob’s comment about “bowing to the ground” before him (which never happens!). Joseph may be seeking to gain an advantage in the intrafamilial conflict, but he acts insensitively, even arrogantly, and only exacerbates the problems.

In the dream about the sheaves—anticipating the food/famine theme—the brothers bow down to Joseph. The brothers understand this as a threat to their place in the family. This provides a variant on the younger/older brother theme so common in Genesis (see 25:23), but finally no one —Joseph or brothers—will be excluded (50:24). The brothers respond with repeated, sarcastic, rhetorical questions about Joseph’s becoming their ruler.

The second dream expands upon the first: The luminaries (sun and moon are parents;
eleven stars are brothers) add Joseph’s parents to those doing obeisance (Rachel seems still to be alive). No astrological links are evident, but the use of luminaries suggests that Joseph’s role has taken on “astronomical” proportions! Only Jacob responds with rebuking, nonrhetorical questions this time, but finally he ponders what this might mean (v. 11). The dreams are the final step in a buildup of hatred. They are the catalyst for the first voicing of the brothers’ attitude toward Joseph. The dreams finally tip the balance toward violence.

37:12-17. The scene changes abruptly; this enables the brothers to act outside their father’s purview. The brothers journey some fifty miles from Hebron (35:27) to pasture the flock where there is good grassland, in this case near Shechem (a place with family links, 33:18-20). Joseph stays home, a change from established practice (37:2), about which Jacob wonders. Jacob (certainly not innocent regarding brotherly relationships) sends him to look into the well-being (sAlôm) of the brothers and of their flocks and to report back (cf. David in 1 Samuel 17). This seems ironic given previous “reports” (v. 2) and the absence of sAlôm between the brothers (v. 4). Even more, it leads the reader to wonder about Jacob’s motivation. Is this the naive, loving father (the giver of the coat) who hopes that the brothers can work things out? Is he completely innocent of possible violence? Shalom will be hard to come by before this book, let alone this chapter, is over.

Because the brothers had moved to Dothan (fifteen miles north of Shechem), even farther away from their father, Joseph has difficulty locating them, and only then through the hospitality of a stranger. This delay heightens the drama, leaving Joseph vulnerably “suspended between father and brothers, between love and hatred.”

37:18-28. This scene describes the brothers’ plotting against Joseph and its convoluted effects. When the brothers see him approaching, they conspire to kill him. Their motivation centers on Joseph’s dream (they sarcastically call him a “master of dreams”); by killing him, they will make certain that the dream does not become a reality. Ironically, by selling him to Egypt they enable it to become so! They think that human action can affect the outcome of what has been depicted in a dream.

Interpreters debate the meaning of this section. The brothers agree to sell him to passing Ishmaelites (vv. 27-28); yet, Midianite traders are also mentioned (vv. 28, 36). The text reports that both groups sell him in Egypt (v. 36; 39:1). Also, both Reuben (vv. 21-22) and Judah (vv. 26-27) intervene in comparable ways on his behalf. Some would resolve the issue by identifying the Midianites with the Ishmaelites (see Judg 8:24), or claim that the redactor does. Others posit two interwoven traditions: (1) Reuben and the Midianites, who kidnap Joseph; (2) Judah and the Ishmaelites, to whom Joseph is sold.

Since the antecedent of “they” in v. 28a is ambiguous (so NRSV; the NIV interprets “they” as the brothers) we do not know who sold Joseph. The author may have intended
ambiguity, the effect being to destabilize the brothers’ planning and leave the details of Joseph’s transition to Egypt clouded in mystery (as 40:15 and 45:4-5 do). The fact that both groups are descended from half-brothers of Isaac (hence Joseph’s kin, see 25:2) suggests an interest in having the descendants of Abraham through each of his three wives involved in the deed.

The brothers prove not to be of one mind in the matter and two voice their misgivings. Reuben, the oldest son (hence responsible to his father), intervenes on behalf of Joseph and begs the brothers not to take his life, but to throw him into a cistern (holes dug out to store rain water). The narrator informs us that his intention is heroic; he will return to the pit at a later time and restore Joseph to their father (if this happened, Joseph’s reports to his father would, of course, intensify familial conflict). The brothers agree, and without a word from them or Joseph (though 42:21 refers to his pleas), they strip him of his robe (namely, his status), throw him into a waterless cistern (to a position below them), and sit down to eat (cf. 43:31-34 for the next meal).

Judah intervenes, sensing problems. When Ishmaelite traders bound for Egypt (with goods for use in medicine, cosmetics, and embalming; 43:11) enter the scene, he suggests a compromise, designed to appeal to self-interest: a “profit” motive (there is nothing to gain from killing him, though there would be if they sold him); they cannot conceal his blood (cf. 4:10) and will bear guilt; he is a brother, their own flesh and blood. The brothers agree and sell him for twenty shekels (see Lev 27:5) to the Ishmaelites (or the Midianites kidnap him), and he is sold on the Egyptian slave market. (Historically, a lively slave trade existed between Canaan and Egypt.)

37:29-36. This scene describes the effect of the brothers’ convoluted conspiracies. Reuben (who was not with his brothers when they sold Joseph; see 42:22) returns to the pit to release Joseph (v. 22). He discovers to his grief (tearing his clothes) that he is gone. What can be done? His brothers are silent, displaying no knowledge or emotion; all of them simply get on with a ruse to convince Jacob of Joseph’s death. Together, they dip Joseph’s coat—so despised by them—in goat’s blood and take it to their father (NRSV— they had it sent on ahead of them) for identification, following a legal process of substantiating a death. Jacob recognizes it and imagines a story of Joseph’s death uncannily similar to the one the brothers had planned (v. 20). He has been tricked just as he had tricked his father (27:9), though 42:36 suggests he may suspect them. Expecting a report from Joseph, Jacob receives a report about him. Hoping for a word of shalom, Jacob hears a word that destabilizes his life. The coat, given to confirm love, becomes a confirmation of death.

Jacob cries out for his son with deep intensity. With traditional signs of mourning, Jacob laments for many days; his children (daughters, i.e., Dinah and his daughters-in-law) are unable to comfort him. He will lament until the day of his death, when he will go down to Sheol—where Joseph already is (cf. 42:38). Sheol is the realm of the dead, a shadowy, silent existence (more than the NIV’s “grave”). Perhaps Jacob thought his mourning would continue even beyond death. The brothers sought to displace Joseph in their father’s affections, but ironically Joseph will retain a preeminent place in his father’s love
even in death. Will the promise go down to Sheol with him? As if to confirm Jacob’s wishes, Jacob disappears from the narrative until 42:1.

The author concludes by noting that the Midianites sell Joseph to Potiphar, one of Pharaoh’s officials (anticipating chap. 39). At least Joseph is alive. But his journey to become ruler has taken a detour through slavery; his status at this point mirrors Israel’s later life in Egypt. The story will resume again in 39:1, where the Ishmaelites sell him to Potiphar, perhaps another reference to the ambiguity regarding Joseph’s fate, noted above.

REFLECTIONS

1. The dual movement from Canaan to Egypt and from individual Israel to people Israel shapes the Joseph story. This episode sets into motion a concatenation of events that will come to a climax in the formation of a people and the exodus from Egypt, and finally conclude in

   <Page 600 Ends><Page 601 Begins>

   the promised land, with the deposition of Joseph’s bones (Josh 24:32). The narrative as a whole witnesses to a God who uses even the evil designs of people to bring about good, indeed leads to events constitutive of the very character of Jacob’s sons. Sinful behaviors do indeed frustrate the divine purposes in the world, but they do not, finally, stymie them.

2. Dreams in that world were usually understood to be externally and divinely generated (cf. Jer 23:25-26), not the result of an interior psychological process. Yet the brothers interpret Joseph’s dreams as if they are the product of Joseph’s own arrogance rather than a divine word about destiny. This ambiguity provides some of the tension in the narrative. Dreams also create tension by their “prophetic” character, as they move from announcement to realization (see 42:6; 43:26, 28; 44:16-17), yet without the brothers’ realizing it! And not inevitably so, for example, since nowhere does Jacob “bow down” to Joseph (37:10). Moreover, the brothers believe that they can cut off the fulfillment by killing the dreamer, not least because (unlike a prophecy) Joseph himself remains integral to the plot depicted in the dream.

   Eventually, Joseph denies the dreams’ continuing applicability (see 50:19); the brothers are not to be his slaves, for he is not in the place of God. That role will be assumed by Pharaoh in the book of Exodus. Slavery cannot shape the relationship of Joseph to his brothers if they are to move toward reconciliation. Joseph takes the place of honor at the end of the story not least because he gives up on the dream. In so doing, Joseph demonstrates what it means truly to be a ruler.

The dreams do point to a future, but their import depends on the one who hears them and—always a second step—interprets them. One is reminded of the various responses to the visions of the prophets. For the brothers, Joseph’s dreams are understood negatively; for Joseph, they are interpreted in a narrowly personal way; for Jacob, they become a
matter for reflection. Jacob’s response seems particularly admirable. He does not appear gullible, nor does he reject the dreams’ potential import. He initially asks questions concerning the nature and implications of the dreams. But he takes these things and ponders them in his heart (see Luke 2:19), revealing an openness to future possibilities.

3. The narratives in Genesis have depicted the exclusion of various family members from the inner circle: Lot, Ishmael, the sons of Keturah, and Esau. On the basis of this chapter, the reader could think Joseph has joined the list. It is not to be so. The fact that the brothers are progenitors of the twelve tribes of Israel does cast their conflicted story in a different light. Eventually no one will be excluded; all twelve carry the promises into the future (50:24). These intrafamilial conflicts mirror exclusivistic efforts among the people of God in every age. This story finally witnesses to reconciliation among the brothers and the end of exclusion.

4. No individual in this story emerges innocent. Even Joseph, though certainly the primary victim, furnishes fuel for his own troubles. Everyone in his own way contributes to the mess in which the family finds itself; at the same time, to level out the sins of the characters and to make everyone equally irresponsible is to fail to consider issues of communal consequence. Or to turn God into an all-determining power undermines human responsibility for sin and encourages human passivity in the face of the power of evil.

5. Once again, the author tells this story without a single reference to God. The reader will learn (45:5) that God has not been absent from these activities. God works in and through even the worst that this family can perpetrate; in everything—even evil—God works for good. This relationship between human action and divine providence characterizes the entire narrative. The reader will be tempted to fall into one ditch or another in interpreting this dialectic: either divine determinism, where God fully controls events, or deism, where God must simply make do with whatever human action turns up and acts with no independent initiative. Neither of these options grasps the theological perspective that governs the story.

The absence of God language in this chapter commonly results in an emphasis on moral lessons, for example, related to parent/child relationships or intrafamilial disputes and deceptions. One must be careful not to draw easy moralisms, say, about parental favoritism—at most it is a lack of commonsense parenting! Favoritism per se does not constitute the problem; rather, the problem involves the way in which favoritism manifested itself publicly, on the part of both chooser and chosen. In some sense, the same problems arise for the electing God and Israel! Does the text mean to speak about problems in the way Israel dealt with its chosenness?

GENESIS 38:1-30, TAMAR AND JUDAH
COMMENTARY

Interpreters have devoted considerable attention in recent years to the human passions and literary tensions presented in this text. A source-critical approach (usually J) no longer seems sufficient. Despite its independent origins, this narrative plays an important role within its present literary context. This is a family story, not tribal history, that has a “wonderful openness to what is human—passions, guilt, paternal anxiety, love, honor, chivalry, all churning up the narrow circle of one family in labyrinthine entanglement.”

The preceding narrative centers on the conflict between Joseph and his brothers, concluding with Joseph’s being sold to Egypt (37:36). Chapter 38 proceeds as if that were the end of the story for Joseph, taking us into the continuing life of one of the other brothers, in this case Judah (cf. 37:26), who separates himself from the family. It covers some twenty years in his life, and then, in 39:1, the story of Joseph abruptly picks up at the point where it left off in 37:36.

What is accomplished by this break in the story? From a literary perspective, it slows the action of the story and creates suspense concerning Joseph’s fate. Moreover, it shows that the story of Jacob’s family continues alongside that of Joseph, especially important in view of Judah’s later role. It also anticipates and helps to interpret certain features of the story to follow: (a) issues of sexuality (39:9-11); Judah’s serving as a foil for Joseph; (b) the theme of recognition, where Joseph “hides” from his brothers for the sake of their future, not unlike what Tamar does with Judah; (c) the theme of reversal, in view of which Joseph’s return from a seemingly impossible situation parallels that of Tamar; and (d) the theme of deception, through the use of tangible evidence (37:32-33; 38:25-26).

At the same time, chap. 38 picks up many themes from the ancestral story: (1) Judah stands over against the tradition of marriage to Canaanites (24:3; 28:1; Joseph also marries outside the family). Although the Canaanites occupy an ambiguous place in Genesis, the line of promise carries on through Tamar, a Canaanite. The repeated reference to Judah’s Canaanite “friend” (vv. 12, 20) may also provide a positive rather than a negative note. (2) As with Abraham and Isaac, the firstborn sons of neither Jacob nor Judah continue the line of promise leading to David. (3) Onan’s refusal of responsibility toward Er mirrors the conflict between brothers. (4) The symbolic use of Tamar’s clothing has parallels throughout Genesis, from Adam and Eve to various incidents in Joseph’s life. (6) Other women, like Tamar, confront the problem of childlessness. (7) Other women—e.g., Rebekah, like Tamar—act over against established
order, thereby furthering God’s purposes. (8) The web of deception, not least those cases where the deceiver is himself deceived, continues.

This story also relates to the development of Jacob’s older sons. Judah’s older brothers have been sharply criticized up to this point (Reuben in 35:22; Simeon and Levi in 34:30). Judah, the

fourth son, played a slave-dealer (37:26), and he here leaves the rest of the family. This raises a question comparable to chap. 37: Is Judah, too, being excluded from the line of promise? But he returns to become a risk-taker for the sake of the family (see 43:3-10; 44:18-34) and receives high praise in Jacob’s blessing (49:8-12). The story of Joseph becomes, also, the story of Judah, both of whom receive equal prominence in Jacob’s blessing (49:8-12, 22-26).

38:1-5. Judah settles near Bethlehem (the place names in the chapter are all in this vicinity) and marries an unnamed Canaanite woman; they have three children: Er, Onan, and Shelah. Early normality quickly devolves into dysfunctionality.

38:6-11. Tamar (probably a Canaanite) appears on the scene as the wife of Er. Because Er is a wicked man, God puts him to death (through unspecified means; see below). Judah then directs his second son, Onan, to “perform the duty of a brother-in-law to her” (though marriage is not mentioned, consummation probably entails it; cf. v. 14)—namely, to raise up an heir to carry on the name and inheritance of the deceased brother (cf. Deut 25:5-10; Ruth 4).

Onan sabotages the intent of the relationship in order to gain Er’s inheritance for himself upon Judah’s death—the firstborn would receive a double share. He regularly uses Tamar for sex, but makes sure she does not become pregnant by not letting his semen enter her (coitus interruptus, not masturbation). He thereby formally fulfills his duty, lest the role be passed on to his other brother and he lose Er’s inheritance in this way. This willful deception would be observable to Tamar, but God’s observation leads to Onan’s death (again, by unspecified means).

Judah, having lost two sons and perhaps wondering whether Tamar were the problem, seeks to protect his own future by keeping his last son from her. He does so at Tamar’s expense, directing her to return to her own father’s house, where she would not have inheritance rights or be free to remarry. This act cuts her off from her husband’s family and places her future welfare in jeopardy (cf. 30:1). Verse 26 shows v. 11 to be central; Judah deceives Tamar rather than risk his third son.

38:12-23. Tamar does as Judah says, but she does not settle for such an arrangement. When she realizes that Judah has withheld Shelah from her (v. 14b delays this notice), she takes the matter into her own hands and assumes the duty of providing an heir for Er. Having no recourse to the courts, she will move beyond the law to fulfill the law, even at
the cost of her honor and her life. As Judah will say (v. 26), Tamar’s risk-taking on behalf of her husband exceeds his and proves her to be the righteous one in this situation.

The death of Judah’s wife provides the opportunity for Tamar; he will be open to sexual diversion. Hearing of his trip to Timnah, Tamar makes plans to confront him. She dresses in such a way as to attract Judah’s attention and situates herself on the way she knows he will take (see Jer 3:2). The narrator does not speak of her intentions. Although her dress and action could imply prostitution (the veil both invites and conceals), the narrator does not mention it. Judah so interprets the veil and propositions her (vv. 15-16). In v. 21, his friend speaks of her as a “temple prostitute,” probably only more discreet language for a prostitute (with no official cultic reference). The townspeople deny having seen a prostitute, a matter stressed in the friend’s report to Judah (v. 22). When it becomes evident that Tamar is pregnant, “friends and neighbors” of Judah (not the narrator) draw the inference regarding harlotry (v. 24).

Was Tamar playing the harlot? It depends on one’s point of view. Judah and his friend understood her to be a prostitute, and Judah’s not recognizing her seems startling (did she remain veiled? cf. 29:23-25). But she was not publicly so identified by the people of Enaim. While Judah’s friends assume such upon hearing of her pregnancy, the narrator’s perspective does not interpret her action as harlotry. Whatever her intentions and actions, she must not be identified as a prostitute. Tamar’s putting her widow’s garments off and on (vv. 14, 19) symbolizes continuity in identification as the widow of Er. Judah’s failure to regain the signs of his identity signifies discontinuity. His identity becomes ambiguous; will he gain it back?

Before Tamar allows Judah to have his way with her, she exacts a price; Judah (apparently unprepared for such an eventuality) agrees on a young goat from the flock, but she wisely insists on a pledge. Judah naively agrees to what she suggests: his staff (specially marked) and his signet and cord (a seal, suspended on a neck cord, used

to stamp one’s “signature” in wet clay), signs of personal identification. Having completed the sexual act, each goes his or her way, with Tamar’s identity intact and Judah’s identity in the hands of Tamar. The immediate reference to conception establishes her intent in all of this. The narrative draws no moral conclusions about the behavior of either Judah or Tamar (cf. Lev 18:15).

When Judah seeks to fulfill the pledge, he discreetly sends his friend; but he can find no prostitute. Judah contents himself with the fact that he kept his pledge, and he does not risk having his male ego publicly bruised for being taken by a prostitute. He remains a man without identity.

38:24-26. When Tamar’s pregnancy becomes evident, she is charged with harlotry. Upon hearing the news, Judah assumes the role of judge (she was under his authority, though with her family) and exacts the death penalty (cf. Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22). The
irony is sharp: When Judah saw her as a prostitute (hnwz zônâ, v. 15), he used her; when he sees her in this capacity as his daughter-in-law (hnz zAnâ, v. 24), he condemns her. Clearly Judah applies a double standard.

Tamar, however, produces the pledge given her by Judah and sends the items on ahead (less embarrassing?). Judah responds magnanimously; his words and actions go beyond what would have been necessary. His guilt-admitting recognition that Tamar has been more righteous (hqdx zaduqâ!) than he means that Tamar has done justice to this relationship in a way that he has not in failing to give her to his third son. Tamar and Judah do not speak face to face, and he does not touch her again, though he may have been entitled to (perhaps a reference to the reestablishment of her proper place in Judah’s family). We are not informed whether she ever marries again.

38:27-30. The narrative concludes quickly, with the concern for which Tamar fought brought to fruition. Twins are born to Judah and Tamar in an abnormal birth, reminding the reader of the birth of Jacob and Esau (25:22-26). Again we encounter confusion about the firstborn; although Perez is actually born first, Zerah’s arm had already come out, and so he is designated firstborn. Once again, the second born carries on the line of promise, for David (Ruth 4:18) and Jesus (Matt 1:3) descend from Perez.

REFLECTIONS

1. The direct statements that God put Er and Onan to death are unusual for the OT. Such divine actions at the individual level seem reserved for moments when the future of the people of God is at stake (see 1 Sam 2:25). The narrator may understand that here, particularly since the line leading to David is at risk. The narrator does not specify the means by which the brothers meet their death (e.g., sickness; cf. God’s role in the death of Saul according to 1 Chr 10:14). These texts provide no basis upon which to draw general conclusions about death as God’s will. Generally, God wills life, not death (see 45:5-7; Ezek 18:23, 32). Yet, the fact that God may work toward the death of certain persons ought not be ruled out. One thinks of the theological rationale given by some who plotted Hitler’s death.

2. This text involves the continuation of the line of promise, which leads to David (see Ruth 4:18). We have noted links with the story of David (e.g., name similarity, such as Tamar in 2 Samuel 13) and with the Abrahamic promises regarding kings (17:6; 35:11). This line continues through the younger son of Tamar and Judah, Perez (Er drops from the genealogy, perhaps because he had never actually received the inheritance). Tamar is specifically mentioned in the genealogy of Jesus (Matt 1:3), along with three other women who engage in sexual activity of a questionable sort: Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. These women contribute in a direct way to the birth of the Messiah. Such an explicit connection with the birth of Jesus affirms that this royal lineage does not somehow float above the maelstrom of life. This fact presents divine irony: God works in and through what appears weak and despised according to worldly standards in order to accomplish...
God’s purposes (see 1 Cor 1:18-31). Tamar distinguishes herself more than does Jacob’s own son toward this end.

3. This text lifts up issues of social responsibility and justice in an especially forceful way, with a focus on the plight of women. The text offers two primary perspectives. On the one hand, the ancient author recognized Tamar as one misused by a key authority figure in her life. In spite of her oppression, she possesses resources to find a way into a more hopeful future (see below). She subverts Judah’s intentions and accomplishes a stunning reversal of authority. Tamar’s resourcefulness occurs within the order of creation; God does not directly act.

On the other hand, the author presents Judah as one who misuses his authority and fails in both his familial and communal responsibilities. He chooses a self-serving route that places in jeopardy the future of both Tamar and the community to which they belong. The text thus speaks sharply about the use and abuse of power within the family and in the community of faith. But the text is not finally pessimistic regarding changes that can take place within individuals to transform such situations into good. Judah does change and acknowledges that the person he had abused is indeed the one who has been righteous. His experience with Tamar, leading to his public confession, may be decisive; when he risks his life for the sake of the family’s future (43:9; 44:32), he follows Tamar’s example.

4. Tamar’s actions constitute a rebellion against established authority and custom and would normally be considered offensive; most religious people would condemn this act out of hand. But the word used for Tamar’s act is zAduqâ (v. 26). Her action cannot be universalized so as to be declared righteous wherever it is committed; at the same time, such action may be righteous in another time and place if it becomes the way of doing justice to a relationship. It may be necessary to go beyond the law in order to fulfill the law, which should enable life and well-being to a community (see Deut 6:24; Jesus’ sabbath-breaking, Mark 2:27). Here the OT narrative gives especially high value to the future of the community, in view of which individual acts, which might be normally condemned, are viewed positively. Relationships are more important than rules; faithfulness may mean going beyond the law. We cannot help wondering whether this story has informed Jesus’ saying that “the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you” (Matt 21:31 NRSV) as well as his open response to the woman who was a “sinner” (Luke 7:36-50).

We should not “secularize” this note about righteousness; in v. 10, God is explicitly involved in judgment regarding this matter. Hence, Tamar has been truer to her relationship with God than Judah has. Once again in the ancestral narrative, a person who stands outside of the community of promise proves to be faithful to what God intends for human community, indeed for the community of promise. In fact, she is a Canaanite! At least in part because of his evaluation of Tamar, Judah receives a praiseworthy place in
the ancestral narrative (49:8), and his staff becomes a scepter that “shall not depart from Judah” (49:10).

GENESIS 39:1-23, JOSEPH, GOD, AND SUCCESS

Link to:

COMMENTARY

Chapters 39–41 constitute a unified narrative, telling the story of the problems and successes associated with Joseph’s rise to a high official in Pharaoh’s court. Within this narrative, the author has divided chap. 39 into three scenes, the first two set in Potiphar’s home. Verses 1–6 portray Joseph’s initial advancement to a position of power, vv. 7–20, his fall associated with encounters with Potiphar’s wife, and vv. 21–23, a new rise to prominence in prison.

This story bears some resemblance to the Egyptian Tale of Two Brothers. The course of each story is similar; similar phraseology occurs in both, including theological language (e.g., “the strength of a god was in him”; adultery as the “great sin”). Such stories and motifs were probably common in the ancient Near East.

39:1–6. Chapter 37 ended with the reader’s being left in some suspense regarding Joseph’s fate. Chapter 39 picks up the story at that point. Joseph has been sold by the Ishmaelites to an otherwise unknown Egyptian named Potiphar, an official of Pharaoh, in whose home Joseph takes up residence. Now, through chap. 41, we find no reference to Joseph’s home and family. This absence intensifies Joseph’s isolation and may explain the emphasis placed on God’s presence with him.

When Potiphar observes how he prospers under Joseph’s care, he appoints Joseph to a position of authority, entrusting him with the care of his entire household. The narrator interweaves what God has done (vv. 3, 5) with Joseph’s rise to power (vv. 4, 6). By this repetition, the narrator stresses that this success has been made possible because of God’s involvement. The only concern Potiphar has is eating; this reference hints subtly to a lack of interest in anything else, including his own wife. This could explain her sexual interest in Joseph, who was well built and handsome (v. 6a should not be split off from v. 6b).

39:7–20. This famous episode of Joseph and Potiphar’s wife has often been interpreted as a morality tale, designed to specify limits regarding sexuality for persons of faith. A closer look reveals a more complex purpose. The text has also received attention because of the role of Potiphar’s wife, the only woman given a role of consequence in the Joseph story. Although she remains unnamed throughout (Potiphar is named only in 37:36; 39:1
and, unlike his wife, never utters a word), she has much independence and freedom and exercises no little power in the confrontation with Joseph and her own husband. Both Potiphar and his wife are almost always defined in terms of their place in life (e.g., master’s wife; captain of the guard; master).

The description of Joseph (words used for his mother in 29:17) leads immediately to a scene in which his master’s wife—whose appearance the author does not describe—commands Joseph to

<Page 609 Ends><Page 610 Begins>

... go to bed with her: “Lie with me.” Forgoing all preliminaries, she presents the matter in terms of power rather than love, of command rather than seduction; she is “his master’s wife.” But she misunderstands the power issues involved. Joseph resists her demands and responds to her in terms of authority (both human and divine; he begins with master and ends with God) rather than sexuality. He emphasizes that her husband has entrusted him with their household. This element of trust appears central, for his relationship with Potiphar—and perhaps his own life—depends on it (as his later reaction shows). But the text also presents an issue of the responsible exercise of his office; he and Potiphar are in effect equals with respect to authority in the household, hence he need not obey her command. At the same time, he has no rights to her. In fact, it appears that Potiphar has explicitly held his wife back from Joseph (v. 9).

Joseph’s reply also specifies a “great wickedness” (or evil) against God, almost certainly a phrase designating adultery (cf. 20:9). The author has identified at least an implicit moral standard on this matter (cf. Deut 22:22), though not addressed in the abstract (nor in chap. 38). The focus: If he should commit this act with his master’s wife, he would thereby sin against God. He remains true to God by remaining true to his master. He sees adultery as an irresponsible use of power and a violation of the trusting relationship he has both with Potiphar and with God.

The concern for Joseph’s relationship with God appears striking, since the author has not mentioned it. Sin (or wrong, blame) elsewhere in the Joseph story refers to sins or offenses against others (40:1; 42:22; 43:9; cf. also 20:6, 9). From the perspective of Potiphar’s wife, Joseph was guilty of an outrage or insult (NRSV; NIV, “making sport”) not only against her but against “us,” presumably the entire household (vv. 14, 17).

Potiphar’s wife does not accept Joseph’s reply—she continues to request sexual favors from him (v. 12). He persists in refusing her overtures; indeed, he stays away from her. But one day while he is going about his work alone, she encounters him, grabs his cloak, repeats her command, and retains the garment as he flees her grasp. She now finds herself in a position not unlike Tamar (38:25), except Joseph is the innocent one. She holds Joseph’s garment as did his brothers (37:23, 31-32), using it in a deceitful way against him. She accuses him falsely, and she gets away with it (note the absence of retribution, a recognition of the loose causal weave in the moral order).
With Joseph’s garment in her hand, and Joseph in her power, she immediately calls her servants together and fabricates a story involving an insult to all of them (“us”) wherein Joseph is accused of doing what, in fact, she did. The reference to “a Hebrew” may play on their natural suspicion of foreigners (43:32). She also implicitly blames her husband for hiring him in the first place (vv. 14, 17), thereby raising the stakes. She, in turn, repeats the story in more subtle terms to her husband (“his master”), focusing on the insult to her (“me”) and calling him “your servant” (vv. 17, 19). She cleverly makes it as much Potiphar’s problem as Joseph’s. If he hadn’t hired Joseph, this would not have happened! This assures that Potiphar’s response will be driven as much by guilt as by anger.

39:21-23. Potiphar becomes enraged by what he hears (probably for many reasons) and puts Joseph into prison—another pit (37:20)—without either facing him with the evidence or giving him an opportunity to reply to the accusation. Prison (especially the king’s prison) was probably a lesser penalty than what was typical in such situations (Israelite law called for death, Lev 20:10; Deut 22:22). Joseph is an innocent victim, reduced to silence. Yet, in time he responds to the prison warden in a way similar to his response to Potiphar (vv. 4-6), with much the same effect (v. 22): The warden entrusts Joseph with responsibility for the warden’s prison work (so the NIV; he did not do everything, so the NRSV). The narrator interprets what happens in theological terms; reports of God’s enabling activity enclose the chapter (cf. vv. 2-6).

REFLECTIONS

1. These developments in the story are explicitly linked to the activity of God. Many references to God occur at the deepest point of Joseph’s journey. Not since 35:1-15 have God’s presence and action been so directly reported. Generally, reference to God occurs more often in the story than interpreters commonly recognize (some fifty times). Yet, the type of reference to God pushes in somewhat different directions, as will become evident.

The narrator provides eight of the nine references to God in this chapter, and they enclose the story (vv. 2-5, 21-23). They include the only occurrences of “Yahweh” (eight times) in the Joseph story, none spoken by a character. Unlike the immediately preceding chapters, the narrator thereby gives an explicitly theological interpretation to what occurs and links the story with key “God” texts later in the narrative (45:5-9; 50:20). Moreover, the use of Yahweh connects with usage in previous chapters, assuring continuity. More generally, it links up with Israel’s subsequent history.

God works at multiple levels in these events—with both Joseph and Potiphar, and in such a way that the relationship between the two of them develops favorably. Moreover, God’s
work in and through Joseph leads to life and well-being for everything to which Joseph
puts his hand, both human and nonhuman.

2. We focus on the nine references to God in this chapter (see vv. 2, 3, 5, 9, 21, 23). Four
of these references specify that Yahweh was with Joseph. Even more, God remains
present (1) outside the promised land, (2) in the life of one not of the line of promise, and
(3) in everyday spheres of life, especially the political. Two passages occur at those
points where Joseph’s future appears uncertain. Although Joseph was without the support
of his family (v. 2) and in prison (v. 21), the narrator assures the reader that Joseph has
not been abandoned. Although all human supports have failed, and Joseph is far removed
from the community of faith and the land of promise, God stays with him. God’s
presence, neither localized geographically nor dramatic or spectacular, is an unobtrusive,
working-behind-the-scenes kind of presence.

In addition, God’s presence with Joseph encompasses human abandonment and prison.
Moreover, the text offers no evidence that such sin-generated events are the will of God
for Joseph; sin is “against God” (v. 9); hence it is contrary to the divine will. God does
not always get God’s way in the world. Divine presence does not mean “preventive
medicine” or a “quick fix” of whatever may befall a person of faith. There are
implications here for how God works in the world: not in overwhelming power, but in
and through the ambiguities and complexities of the relationships of integrity God has
established.

The narrator thereby speaks not simply of divine presence but of the kind of God who
acts in these events. Presence is one thing; the nature and effect of that presence are
another. Verse 21 speaks of this God as one who shows steadfast love (dsj hesed ); this
word occurs elsewhere in the Joseph story only for human kindness and loyalty (40:14;
47:29). The author emphasizes here divine loyalty to the promise (see 32:10). God also
works with Potiphar, so that Joseph finds favor in his eyes. Thus God appears active, not
only within the lives of the family of promise, but also within those who do not confess
the name of God.

Other references to God’s presence are unusual: The Egyptian Potiphar recognizes that
Yahweh is with Joseph and that Yahweh has prospered Joseph (vv. 3, 23). How should
we explain an Egyptian’s making this theological interpretation? It probably presupposes
that Joseph’s presence “in the house of his Egyptian master” entails theological
conversation, or at least sufficient knowledge of Joseph to make the connection between
his God and his words and deeds. This may also stand behind v. 21, which witnesses to a
divine action within Potiphar—mediated through Joseph’s presence at least—that enables
him to view Joseph favorably. We should compare this response to those events in
Exodus where God acts with Pharaoh and the Egyptians toward a comparable end (7:17;
8:10; 14:4); the Israelites gain favor at least in the eyes of the Egyptians, if not with the
pharaoh (11:3; 12:36).

Two further references to Yahweh focus on the divine blessing brought on Potiphar’s
household and all that he has (v. 5). The author notes that God gives this blessing
“because of Joseph” (as with Jacob, 30:27-30). This divine blessing goes beyond the blessings that come

to all in and through the created order. Not simply God’s presence but Joseph’s presence as well makes a difference to the Egyptian situation. We hear this stated explicitly: From the time that Potiphar made Joseph an overseer, such blessings were forthcoming. Joseph’s activity thus becomes a vehicle in and through which God works to bless in ways that would not otherwise be effective in the same way. In other words, Joseph’s presence intensifies and enhances the general blessing work of God. We may relate this understanding to 12:2-3 (and parallels): In and through the members of Abraham’s family, blessing extends to those who are not the elect. What God’s people say and do makes a difference regarding the welfare of others; God has chosen to depend on them in carrying out the divine work in the world. While God is not explicitly the subject of verbs conveying blessing to the Egyptians, the entire narrative presupposes that God works among them in and through the person and work of Joseph. Indeed, 41:53-57 makes it clear that this blessing extends to include the entire world!

Three references to Yahweh in this chapter involve God’s making Joseph’s way prosperous, successful (vv. 2-3, 23; cf. 1 Sam 18:14; 2 Kgs 18:7). Once again, this activity of God relates explicitly to what Joseph does. Who Joseph is and the way in which Joseph speaks and acts have a positive effect.

The narrative portrays the impact of Joseph’s behavior in a number of ways. For example, the narrator does not neglect the effective methods Joseph uses to bring about well-being (e.g., 41:46-49). Joseph works as an efficient, diligent, and competent administrator, which enables God to work more effectively through him. Moreover, the narrator delves into Joseph’s character; he is loyal, patient under stress, and filled with wisdom (his loyalty mirrors God’s, v. 21). The trust that Potiphar places in him (v. 6), as well as the incident with Potiphar’s wife, are probably intended to speak directly to this point. The author provides the reader a clue to this end with the reference to God in v. 9, the only time a human character utters the word God. Joseph does justice to relationships, both with human beings and with God—and both are important in their own right. Joseph does not succumb to the very real temptations of power and sex. His actions have considerable effect on how God works in and through him. Who Joseph is and what Joseph does make a difference to God’s work in the world. In turn, God’s work in Joseph enables him to mature and develop in ways that would not otherwise be possible.

3. Success and prosperity are not a necessary or inevitable result of either God’s presence or Joseph’s faith or action. Joseph appears genuinely vulnerable and could have failed even with God’s presence and the divine intention for success. Joseph’s success depends not simply on his own devices, but on God’s engagement in the situation.

4. Interpreters have often pointed to thematic parallels with the story of the rise of David
(1 Sam 16:18; 18:12, 14, 28). This comparison suggests a particular interest in associating the presence of God with the political sphere. God accompanies this family as it moves out of the domain of the domestic into the broader sphere of national and political life. God works in every aspect of life.

5. Once again a story in Genesis mirrors a later experience of the people of God or an individual Israelite: Israel from Egypt to the kingship of David and Solomon; David from shepherd boy to king. Also parallel are the theological themes of divine presence and blessing. Different, however, is the basically positive assessment of those who stand outside the community of faith, something typical of Genesis. The incident with Potiphar’s wife indicates the potential for the misuse of power by those in high positions. Yet, in Genesis, the author views political power, both when Joseph is in power and when he is not, much more positively. Rather than mirroring later Israel, this aspect of the story provides rulers with an ideal toward which to strive. The Joseph figure—particularly as mediated through David—provides images for the development of messianic themes.

GENESIS 40:1-23, JOSEPH, INTERPRETER

OF DREAMS

COMMENTARY

This unified episode fits as an integral part of chaps. 39–41. Set in an Egyptian prison, its very inhospitableness provides the context for an important advance in Joseph’s return to a position of power in Egypt. Joseph’s ability to interpret the dreams of two court officials focuses this development. While Joseph’s own dreams have resulted in his slavery, the dreams of others now become the means for his release from slavery.

40:1-8. The occasion commences with an encounter between Joseph and two recently disemployed, unnamed members of Pharaoh’s “kitchen” staff: the chief cupbearer and the chief baker. These were important positions in Egypt; the former personally served wine to the pharaoh. Having committed unnamed offenses against Pharaoh (if poisoning, both could be under suspicion), they are detained in the captain of the guard’s house where Joseph has been placed in charge of prisoners. Since they are in detention, their futures have not yet been determined (because they still have their status, Joseph serves them as he did Potiphar, 39:4). Joseph is obviously aware of their situation, which shapes his interpretation of their dreams.

After some time, these servants of Pharaoh have dreams on the same night; they are
troubled, probably because they relate the dreams to their uncertain fate. Joseph, here the alert caregiver, asks about their dejection. They report having had dreams, but in prison no interpreters are available (v. 8, rtp poter, used only in the Joseph story). Joseph replies that interpretations belong to God (interestingly, he does not say the dreams themselves do)—i.e., God gives the gift of dream interpretation (note TNK translation, “Surely God can interpret!”). Without skipping a beat, Joseph urges them to tell him the dreams. In effect he says: I have the gift of divine interpretation (cf. 41:16). Joseph thereby brings a public witness to God to bear on the situation. God works in and through the dreams of the nonchosen (so also in chap. 41) to develop the future of the chosen.

40:9-19. Joseph proceeds to interpret the dreams (vv. 12, 18). Once again, as in chap. 37, there are two dreams. They are integrally related to the profession of each dreamer. Elements common to both dreams include the number three, food/drink for Pharaoh in a container, and the

hand/head body reference. One key difference is that the cupbearer acts in his dream, while the baker does not (though birds do). Another difference is that Pharaoh is served in the first dream, but not in the second. Commonalities in Joseph’s interpretations are the use of “three days” to represent a short time and the expression “lift up your head,” though in different senses. “Lift up [not off] the head” in v. 13 is a metaphor for freedom from blame; in v. 19 it is literal, to be hanged; in v. 20 it does double duty. This play on words may relate to audiences before Pharaoh, wherein he lifted the bowed head of one seeking royal amnesty.

These dreams provide mixtures of allegorical elements and literal descriptions of what will happen. Allegorical elements in the interpretations include the three branches/baskets (i.e., three days), the instant blossoming and ripening (i.e., soon, the compression of time), and the baked goods (i.e., flesh of the baker). These dreams require an interpreter more so than those of chap. 37; this will be even more the case in chap. 41.

The chief cupbearer tells his dream to Joseph first (vv. 9-15). In it, a vine with three branches, upon budding, immediately puts forth blossoms, and its clusters ripen into grapes. He presses the grapes into Pharaoh’s cup and gives it to Pharaoh. Joseph’s interpretation is that in three days the cupbearer will be restored to his office and will give Pharaoh his cup as usual.

Joseph uses the interpretive moment to ask the cupbearer to show kindness (dsj hesed)—hence to act as God does in 39:21—and to intercede for Joseph’s release before Pharaoh. He has been deprived of his rights wrongfully (kidnapping probably refers to the Midianites in 37:28, but may be a general description) and has done nothing to deserve his imprisonment. He thereby anticipates the laments of his people in Egypt.

The chief baker then takes his turn (vv. 16-19), ironically, as it turns out, after the initial favorable interpretation. In his dream, three baskets of baked goods are on his head, and
birds are eating from the topmost one. Joseph’s interpretation is that in three days Pharaoh will have him hanged (the NRSV’s “from you!” captures the point) and will leave him hanging on the tree for the birds to pick clean. Joseph does not ask the baker to remember him to the pharaoh, for obvious reasons!

40:20-23. These verses report what happens after three days. The dreams are realized as Joseph had interpreted them, on a public occasion, Pharaoh’s own birthday, when such decisions were regularly announced. Each man has his head lifted, but in quite different ways; for one it means death, for the other life (these are important themes for the story as a whole).

The cupbearer does not remember Joseph, so he remains forgotten in prison; it will take two more years (41:1) for human memory to be jogged. For now, Joseph’s future remains uncertain. Joseph’s journey from slavery to freedom is filled with frustration and disappointment (it will take thirteen years in all, 41:46).

REFLECTIONS

1. Verse 8 contains the only reference to God in the chapter. Joseph seems to claim that only God can interpret dreams, and then proceeds to have the dreams told to him in order to interpret them. One should read this verse within the context of other references to God in 41:16, 25, 28, and 38-39.

The text suggests that dream specialists are not needed; God does such business: “It is not I [I cannot do it]; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer” (41:16). Yet, Joseph repeatedly interprets dreams—without explicit reference to any divine inspiration: “This is its interpretation” (40:12, 18). Moreover, others publicly recognize him as an interpreter (41:12-13).

Another perspective draws on Joseph’s knowledge of royal protocol. Such statements as Joseph’s are polite disclaimers, devices “for detaching the interpretation from the interpreter; the interpreter bears no responsibility but merely announces what is to come. Joseph in each episode shows himself a sure master of the complexities of court protocol.”

realities would mean that we must be extraordinarily careful so as not to overdraw the theological import of v. 8.

It would seem best to see Pharaoh’s statement in 41:38-39 as ironically putting this data together in an appropriate way: “God has shown you all this, there is no one so discerning and wise as you.” Both human and divine agents are recognized. The initiative and the “showing” come from God, but human wisdom and discernment remain necessary. Joseph’s gifts are not irrelevant (as if any person would do). His abilities come into play
and are used by God in the interpretive process. Note Joseph’s knowledge regarding the royal context, his discernment of the officials’ situation, and his skill at word play.

Joseph is thus engaged at two levels: He receives divine inspiration, and his own gifts of discernment come into play in the interpretation. Yet, Joseph does not boast in his own abilities; he diminishes himself and gives the glory to the God who works in and through him, without whom the appropriate interpretation would not be possible. Comparable language in our own time would be the naming of a sermon as the proclamation of the word of God.

In addition, we find no evidence of polemic in this chapter, as if dream specialists are being put down, or that only God’s people can interpret dreams. Moreover, not all dreams come from God (see Deut 13:1-5; Jer 23:16-17; cf. Eccles 5:7), though in such cases God may choose to enter into the interpretive process. These dreams are so straightforward that special inspiration for their interpretation seems unnecessary for astute persons such as Joseph.

2. The “prophetic” dreams come to pass as Joseph had interpreted them. Unlike modern interpretations, in the OT (and the ancient Near East generally) dreams relate more to the future than the past or present. But would the dreams have been realized apart from Joseph’s interpretation? As for the future of the two officials, is what Joseph says finally irrelevant (except in a “pastoral” function, to reduce or intensify anxiety)? Does not the interpretation in some sense activate the dream (cf. the prophetic word)? Might it have some effect on the shape of the realization? Even more, might not subsequent events also shape the nature of the realization? One thinks of the interpretations of the brothers and the father in chap. 37, where Joseph’s second dream remains unfulfilled. The narrator finally appears to be interested, however, not in the dreams as such, but in Joseph’s interpretive abilities because of the reputation that accrues to him as a consequence (see also chap. 37:5-11).

3. We hear, for the first time, Joseph speaking openly about his own life—for the first time in the narrative (42:21 recalls an earlier moment) he becomes aggressive regarding his situation. Although Joseph has the God-given ability to interpret dreams, he still needs human help. The one inspired by God pleads with a fellow prisoner for help. He asks to be remembered by another—as God remembers Noah (8:1), Abraham (19:29), Rachel (30:22), and the people of Israel (also in bondage in Egypt [Exod 2:24; 6:5]). But to be in need of human help also involves being open to human frailties. The one upon whom Joseph depends will forget Joseph (cf. Exod 1:8), but not forever (see 41:9). Human help will finally be a key to Joseph’s future, as it will be for virtually everybody.

Joseph’s lament anticipates those of his descendants in Egypt, who also are “brought out of the house” of bondage (see Exod 13:14; 20:2). With Joseph, as with the people of Israel, the lament plays an important role in the development of the deliverance (note the integral relationship between lament and divine remembrance in Exod 2:23-25; 6:5). Such language would also recall psalms of lament (and thanksgiving), which often use the word pit to refer to the depths of despair (Pss 28:1; 30:3; 35:7; 40:2; 88:4, 6).
GENESIS 41:1-57, JOSEPH'S ELEVATION TO POWER

COMMENTARY

The scene changes from Pharaoh’s prison to Pharaoh’s palace, mirroring Joseph’s rise from weakness to strength. The dreams continue; this time Pharaoh himself has two dreams (vv. 1-7), which enable Joseph’s dream to come full circle. After the cupbearer remembers him (vv. 8-13), Joseph is called forth from prison to interpret the dreams and to give advice based on them (vv. 14-36). As a result, Pharaoh elevates Joseph to prime minister (vv. 37-46), in which capacity he proves to be an effective administrator of Egypt’s economy (vv. 47-57).

This episode contains a storyline common to many cultures: elevation of a person from low to high status because he or she solves a problem. This chapter has long been considered a composite, but the occasional roughness of expression may be ascribed to its history of transmission. The chapter is a literary unity, thoroughly integrated into the larger segment of chaps. 39–41 (cf. vv. 9-13).

41:1-7. After a note indicating that Joseph has languished in prison for two more years, these verses describe Pharaoh’s two dreams. In the first, the setting is the Nile, Egypt’s lifeline. Seven sleek and fat cows come out of the Nile and begin to graze; then seven ugly and gaunt cows appear and eat the fat ones. In the second, seven plump and good ears of grain grow on one stalk; then seven ears of grain, thin and scorched by the hot desert wind, sprout on that stalk and devour the healthy ones. Although the second is somewhat shorter, the dreams mirror each other; this becomes an important point in Joseph’s interpretation (vv. 25-26, 32). Pharaoh retells the dreams to Joseph in vv. 17-24, with some variations. This same theme, the weak prevailing over the strong, characterized Joseph’s own dreams.

41:8-13. Pharaoh is deeply disturbed by his dreams because their bizarre nature may portend a troubled future, an intrusion that he can neither interpret nor control. Such a God-generated intrusion provides the opening that Joseph needs. Pharaoh calls in specialists to sort out their meaning, but none can interpret them to his satisfaction. They are now in over their heads. Although they are decisively bested by Joseph, the story makes little of their failure (unlike Exodus 7–8 or Daniel 1–2).
These events trigger the cupbearer’s memory, and he recalls his experience with Joseph (cf. 40:14), both his interpretation and its accuracy.

Quite remarkably, he even uses the language of sin (as in 39:9; 40:1) to describe his forgetfulness. This human act changes the future for all concerned.

41:14-36. Pharaoh hurriedly brings Joseph from the “pit” (signaling the end of his journey from the pit in 37:20-29). His shaving and fresh clothing symbolize the change in his circumstance. Pharaoh reports to Joseph what has been said about him; Pharaoh’s expectations are high.

Joseph’s reply in v. 16 has a number of dimensions: Pharaoh’s dreams come from God (cf. vv. 25, 28); he will receive an answer about their meaning, which will effect šalôm (sAlôm) for him (NIV “desired”; NRSV “favorable”). Joseph has not yet heard the dream! Shalom thus relates to Pharaoh’s troubled spirit, that Pharaoh would be satisfied with Joseph’s interpretation because it comes from God. Joseph, not having heard the dream, acts in a straightforward manner here; in effect he puts God on notice that an interpretation will be needed. At stake are the reputations of both Joseph and God.

Pharaoh tells the dream to Joseph (vv. 17-24). The retelling basically matches the first report. Yet, the differences are important; they are in the first person, they anticipate that the meaning is negative, and they reveal Pharaoh’s deep concern: exaggeration (the scrawny cows are unprecedented in their ugliness, and the thin ears of grain are even more withered) and additional bizarre information (the eating did not change the ugly cows’ appearance). The dreams contain both literal and allegorical elements, though the latter predominate here. The number seven (four times) refers to years, with the healthy cows/grain referring to years of plenty and the sickly ones years of grievous famine. The famine will so consume the land that the years of plenty will be forgotten (vv. 30-31).

The heart of Joseph’s interpretation takes the form of announcements about the future (vv. 29-32), though he does not construe them as divine judgment. He gives a fuller theological explanation than that given in chap. 40, followed by a clear recommendation as to what Pharaoh ought to do about the situation the dreams portend (vv. 33-36).

The theological explanations that punctuate this section (vv. 25, 28, 32) accomplish three things: (1) They emphasize that God reveals this meaning; in other words, this is serious business; (2) they indicate that God speaks through Joseph; and (3) they provide a structure for the section.

The enclosing verses (25, 32) stress the dreams’ identical meaning and significance. Verses 26-27 focus on the number seven, vv. 29-31 on the sequence of the events; the author introduces each by a statement that God has revealed to Pharaoh what will happen.
The interpretation centers on the years of famine, the better to impress upon Pharaoh the need to take action.

Joseph offers more than just an interpretation. Without waiting for Pharaoh’s response and using bold speech, yet cognizant of his status (note the repeated “let,” stressing Pharaoh’s decision), Joseph puts forward a plan whereby these events can effectively be addressed, preventing much damage to the country (vv. 33-36). Pharaoh should not resign himself to the disaster, as if all the famine’s effects were a matter of fate. Pharaoh has the freedom to make decisions, though within a context provided by God’s decision. Joseph believes that he can persuade Pharaoh to develop a plan of action so that Egypt will be able to endure the famine in a way that brings the greatest possible well-being to all.

Joseph proposes that a wise and discerning person be appointed (used for an obedient Israel in Deut 4:6 and for Solomon in 1 Kgs 3:12). He carefully articulates the plan in the hopes that he himself will be chosen, not some local expert. Other astute overseers should also be appointed to manage the economic policy. He proposes that enough food—20 percent of the crop each year (i.e., the “all” of v. 35)—be stored during the years of plenty to provide a reserve for the years of famine. Everything will be under “the authority of Pharaoh.” (A historical note: Egypt was renowned in that part of the world for its granaries.)

41:37-46. Joseph emphasizes throughout that God has revealed the meaning of the dream to Pharaoh (vv. 16, 25, 28). Joseph thereby identifies a direct relationship between Pharaoh and God. This emphasis, along with Joseph’s candor and bold speech, as well as his concern for national well-being (rather than himself), convinces Pharaoh. While he gives all the “credits” to God, Joseph obviously mediates the divine revelation.

Pharaoh astutely puts these matters together; we ought not discount his theological insightfulness. He recognizes that God has revealed these things to Joseph (v. 39); hence he must be the one in whom the Spirit of God rests (v. 38). Pharaoh addresses his question to the court (v. 38), thus drawing them into accepting his conclusion.

Hence, Pharaoh chooses Joseph as the “discerning and wise” person Joseph himself had suggested and had modeled through his speech. Pharaoh makes Joseph the prime minister, in charge of both the palace (v. 40) and the country (vv. 41, 43), second in command only to Pharaoh, with wide-ranging authority. Verse 44 specifies the unlimited character of his command, against which no one shall lift up hand or foot—namely, rebel. Once again, the author portrays Pharaoh as a wise and discerning person in his own right due to his elevation and empowerment of Joseph.

Verses 41-44 describe an act of installation. Pharaoh opens and closes with a formal
statement of Joseph’s authority (v. 41, 44; cf. Jer 1:10) and gives him the symbols of his new office: his signet ring (with Pharaoh’s own “signature,” cf. 38:18), a royal garment, and a gold chain. His clothing may mirror the cloak given him by his father. He rides in a royal chariot throughout the city, before which Egyptian heralds call to the crowds to acclaim him: “Bend the knee” (or “Attention”). At some point later, he travels through the entire land so that people can recognize him in his new position (v. 46b; cf. 13:17). Through all this, Joseph remains silent; only in the naming of his sons will he reveal his reaction.

Pharaoh gives Joseph an Egyptian name to signal his new status, Zaphenath-paneah (i.e., God speaks and lives), and provides him a wife from the nobility, Asenath (i.e., she who belongs to the goddess Neith). She is the daughter of Potiphera (i.e., the one whom Re gave; probably identical in meaning to Potiphar), priest of On (i.e., Heliopolis), a prominent center for worship of the sun god Re.

A historical note: There is some evidence that slaves from the ancient Near East achieved positions of high standing in Egyptian royal circles. The rite of installation also has parallels in that world, and rings, chains, and chariots that were used on such occasions have been found. Finally, famines were not uncommon; a seven-year famine occurs as a literary convention in Israel (2 Sam 24:13), in Egypt, and in Mesopotamia.203

41:47-57. Joseph is thirty years old when these events occur, thirteen years after his enslavement (37:2-3). As prime minister, he carries out the economic program needed to prevent the disaster that Pharaoh’s dreams portend. During the seven years of plenty—more than could actually be measured—he stores up food in all the cities. The image of the sand of the sea continues the blessing of the family of Abraham (22:17).

Verses 50-52 are not intrusive; the fruitfulness of Joseph and Asenath mirrors the fruitfulness of the land. They have two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. Joseph names them in recognition of God’s involvement in this massive change in his life: Manasseh, because God has enabled Joseph’s slavery in Canaan and Egypt to be forgotten; Ephraim, because God has prospered Joseph in the very land in which he has experienced so much misfortune. These names reveal Joseph’s life experience: God’s preserving and prospering activity in the very midst of great personal hardship. External appearances provide no clear barometer of the depth and breadth of God’s blessings. This family reference also anticipates the chapters to come.

When the years of famine come, it affects every country, not just Egypt. But only Egypt has grain. The success of Joseph redounds to his reputation. When Egyptians cry out for bread due to the famine’s severity, they can get relief from Joseph (note that they buy grain; it is not given away). In fact, Joseph’s wisdom enables Egypt to become the bread basket for “all the world” (vv. 54, 56, 57).

REFLECTIONS

1. The Spirit of God rests on Joseph (v. 36). Some have suggested that Joseph was a
charismatic personality and should be understood from within the prophetic tradition. One may also appeal to the relationship between God and wise kings like Solomon (see 1 Kings 3–4). Generally, Joseph’s empowerment should be understood in terms of Exod 31:3; 35:31 (cf. Dan 5:14), which connect particular gifts suitable for the task at hand with the presence of the divine spirit. These texts recognize God-given talents rather than a pouring out of the Spirit for the occasion, a way in which the people of God might well speak of the work of the Spirit of God in every age. Joseph’s portrayal has no single antecedent tradition.

2. The realities of dreams and their interpretation issue in a complex configuration of divine, human, and nonhuman agency (see chap. 40). God sets the context, but does not override human discernment, care, and planning. Humans channel the divine blessings to their most effective ends. Dreams and their God-given interpretation do not necessarily shape the future in detail. Creaturely response also shapes the future. Natural disasters (the famine) do not have predetermined effects; wise human planning can ameliorate their negative impact.

3. Policies are to be developed “so that the land may not perish through the famine” (v. 36). The dreams do not determine the future in every respect. God has firmly established the future to which the dreams point, and God will act soon (v. 32). At the same time, the full future that the dreams open up depends on more than God’s becoming involved. The economic policies adopted during the years of plenty mean that the land will not be consumed, the dreams will not have their fullest possible negative effects.

Inasmuch as famine results from the failure of the Nile’s waters to overflow, and the Nile is a pharaonic symbol of fertility, the story calls into question the very future of the pharaoh. The future does not lie within his control; he appears subject to a future that comes from God. Since Pharaoh listens to Joseph, however, and takes appropriate action, he helps to shape his future. Although his choices are limited, he exercises power, and his elevation of Joseph reveals considerable insight.

4. The story reflects the various ways in which God can work in and through people. God works outside the religious sphere, in economics and government. Moreover, Joseph was not the obvious choice, but was raised up from the lowest rungs to lead a people from the highest levels of authority. Joseph becomes part of a hierarchical structure of power (see chap. 47). With the proper leadership, such structures of authority need not be oppressive.

The problems presented by this chapter have been faced by virtually every generation in every country. The issues have to do with agriculture and related industries, with the difficulties of feeding people when crops are not produced in sufficient amounts. It also presents issues of the management of an economy. God’s work in the world through wise leaders affects every sphere of life.
5. God’s work of blessing in this chapter includes the entire human race, not just the chosen ones. God works in Pharaoh’s life in ways Pharaoh does not know, even communicating in and through a dream. This experience testifies to significant levels of divine activity in human lives outside the community of faith. At the same time, the chosen have the God-given mandate and capacity to enhance God’s blessings in such a way that enables them to become more than they would be without human participation.

Moreover, Joseph’s work of interpretation, his wisdom and discernment, provides an entry point into the life of Pharaoh. Deuteronomy 4:6 uses this same language to speak about Israel; other people will see their obedience and say: Surely this great nation is a wise and discerning people. This work of interpretation—not simply of dreams—has the potential to draw outsiders into conversation regarding God and God’s ways in the world, and can, as with Pharaoh, actually lead to their public witness regarding God’s involvement in their lives. Indeed, Pharaoh becomes a theologian of no little consequence when he interprets these events (vv. 38-39).

6. Joseph does not boast about what he has done or will do: “It is not I, but God.” He speaks of God as the one without whom interpretation would be impossible; God has given him the ability to interpret dreams (cf. 40:8). God enables Joseph to play the critical role (v. 16). Joseph links the chosen people with the unchosen people to bring blessing on the latter.

Precisely because of his disclaimers, Joseph appears as an ideal figure: patient through numerous setbacks and deep suffering; loyal to God, honoring of human relationships in the midst of severe trials and temptations. His bold speech, especially in the presence of persons and systems of power, reveals courage and integrity. He acts wisely and in a discerning manner in all of his dealings with people and their problems. Joseph stands as a model for the godly life, but moving far beyond the religious sphere; it is a life lived in the midst of the full range of human problems and the complexities of human existence.

7. In Joseph’s naming of his children, the themes of forgetfulness and fruitfulness are highlighted; God has enabled both. What an incredible gift: God enables one to forget, to put the past behind, to move beyond dwelling on misfortunes and get on with the ever-new gifts that God brings. Joseph’s confession should guide the reader’s interpretation of the way in which he works with his brothers in the following chapters.

As for fruitfulness, Egypt becomes the context for this blessing, anticipating Exod 1:7 and the growth of Israel in that same land. Joseph’s life anticipates Israel’s. Blessing comes in the midst of affliction (hn[ (Anâ, used for Israel’s oppression in Egypt, Gen 15:13; Exod 3:7). These acts of naming could be profitably compared with the naming of Joseph and his brothers in 29:31–30:24, where the mothers do the naming, in view of their life experience and to praise God. Joseph’s naming of his sons testifies to the
continuing link between tradition and personal life experience and the importance of their interaction.

8. Both Joseph and his brother Judah (see chap. 38) marry women outside the family and its religious heritage. Later legends speak of Asenath’s conversion, but Genesis has no interest in this. The text attests to a remarkable capacity for the integration of Yahwistic faith and other religious communities and expressions (similarly 2 Kgs 5:15-19). Many OT texts do not tolerate such practices, but the reasons are contextual rather than normative (e.g., dangers of syncretism). Joseph functions as an ideal for Israel at this point, demonstrating that the later intolerance is not characteristic of the Yahwistic faith in and of itself. Joseph illustrates that such integration can be a positive experience and need not carry negative effects.

GENESIS 42:1-38, JOSEPH MEETS HIS BROTHERS

Link to:

COMMENTARY

Chapters 39–41, focused on Joseph in Egypt, are now balanced by chaps. 42–44, which center on a new relationship for Joseph and his family. The former developments make the latter possible. The two journeys of the brothers to Egypt mirror the doubling of the dreams in the previous chapters.

This chapter may be a composite of J and E, but works now as a unified whole. Linked with chaps. 37 and 39–41, bringing those different scenes and people together, it also reverses the situation of chap. 37; Joseph now has the power, and the brothers are at the mercy of his decisions. The text now addresses Joseph’s use of that power. While some scholars have a basically negative view of Joseph’s use of authority, we side with those who take a more positive view.

The scene in this chapter shifts back and forth between Egypt and Canaan, between palace and local village. The reader encounters Jacob and Joseph’s brothers (except for Judah) for the first time since chap. 37. Famine has affected Canaan, too. Egypt has grain, however, and this means a trip to procure it (vv. 1-5; cf. 12:10-20). The stage is now set for Joseph and his brothers to encounter one another again, described in vv. 6-24. Verses 25-38 portray the brothers’ return to Canaan and the associated difficulties occasioned by Joseph’s testing of their integrity.

42:1-5. Verse 1 brings the reader into the middle of a conversation—something of a to-do in the family of Jacob. It is the same old story, but unbeknownst to them, a massive change is in the offing. The famine in Canaan has created a problem, and the brothers are reduced to “looking at one another,” waiting for a solution. Jacob, a stabilizing influence
in this scene, reports that Egypt has grain, telling his sons to journey there and purchase some. Unknowingly and ironically, he tells them to go to Joseph just as he once sent Joseph to them (37:13-14). Only ten of Joseph’s brothers go to Egypt; Jacob holds Benjamin back for fear of his life. As the one remaining son of his beloved Rachel, Benjamin is now the favorite; Jacob will not repeat the mistake he made with Joseph. This decision sets up a key development in the story. The end of the chapter will return to his concern about Benjamin.

The life-and-death matter presented here is a theme struck by Jacob himself in v. 2, and it reappears at important points in the subsequent narrative (vv. 18, 20; 43:8; 45:5-7). Jacob articulates thereby a key objective for the entire story, one that will be picked up by Joseph and even by the brothers.

Verse 5 seems to be set already in Egypt. It blends the brothers into a crowd of peoples who have made the journey for the same purpose, picking up on the theme of 41:57. The phrase “sons of Israel” (cf. 46:5, 8) appears purposely ambiguous; it refers to Jacob, but also anticipates the Israel of the exodus. The journeys in and out of Egypt mirror later developments.

42:6-24. These verses describe the first of four dialogues between Joseph and his brothers (cf. 43:27-31; 44:15–45:13; 50:15-21), a scenario not unlike the encounter between Jacob and Esau, only here the recognition is not mutual. In vv. 8-9a the narrator provides a key comment to make sure the reader understands who recognizes whom and that Joseph recalls his earlier dream just before the interrogation begins.

Verse 6 immediately brings the brothers into the presence of the highest official in Egypt, upon whom they now depend. The fact that they bow down before Joseph fulfills the dream in 37:7, reinforced by the brothers’ repeated use of lord/servant language (vv. 10, 11, 13, 30, 33). Verse 9a shows that Joseph recognizes this; his dream has now come full circle. This recognition now propels the story over the next chapters. The brothers’ lack of recognition enables Joseph to manipulate the situation toward the objective he chooses.

What will Joseph do in view of his recollection of the dream? Now that the dream has been realized, and in view of 41:51, he begins to move toward healing the breach. But this becomes a complex task. He cannot simply speak to them, for he may not discern equivocation (cf. God’s test of Abraham). He must set up situations that will enable him to observe them without their realizing it and to bring their common story to the surface so that it can be dealt with properly. Again and again, these situations will mirror their treatment of him, forcing the issue into the front of their consciousness.

Joseph decides to treat them as if they were strangers, thus creating an artificial
relationship. He speaks in an abrupt, officious manner, refusing to take them at their word. He questions them sharply, repeatedly accusing them of spying (historically, an Egyptian concern; the “nakedness of the land” refers to exposed borders), ironically exposing their defenselessness. The tables have been turned on the brothers; they experience what Joseph did in chap. 37, including the possibility of being assigned to a comparable fate. The accusation achieves its purpose; it draws out information about the family, including Benjamin, and, when combined with Joseph’s shifting strategies regarding their future, it leads the brothers into confessional/theological reflection.

The brothers refuse to accept the evaluation and proceed with a defense born of surprise and fear, revealing more than they need to. They repeatedly insist on two things: (1) They are a family (“sons of one man”). This makes sense as a defense; it would be unusual for an espionage group to place in jeopardy so many from the same family. Ironically, the brothers appeal to family solidarity, so sharply violated in their treatment of Joseph. In this concern they unwittingly join forces with Joseph. (2) They are “honest people,” men of integrity. This note recurs (vv. 11, 19, 31, 33, 34)—are the brothers honest or not? This claim recalls that their dealings with Joseph and their father were marked by a lack of integrity. Joseph needs to test this point: “whether there is truth in you” (vv. 16, 20). Joseph sharply continues his accusation and sets up a test. No doubt noting their equivocation regarding his fate (“one is no more”), he picks up on their unnecessary reference to Benjamin. This may have given him a clue that not all was right with his family. If Benjamin had simply displaced him in Jacob’s affection, then the problem between father and brothers (see v. 36) had only been papered over. Benjamin thus becomes a passive vehicle for getting this issue out in the open.204 One brother is to return for him, while the rest remain in prison. Joseph’s repeated use of the oath “as Pharaoh lives” mirrors Israel’s use of God or kings in their oaths (cf. 1 Sam 17:55; 2 Sam 15:21), and to rhetorical effect. Together with talk about life and death, it emphasizes the seriousness of the conversation. Joseph then has all of them peremptorily taken into custody (v. 17; cf. 40:4). This arbitrary act gives them a taste of the “pit” experience they put Joseph through and helps to prompt their memory (vv. 21-22).

After three days, Joseph approaches them with a less onerous plan, allowing all but one of them to leave. This extends the test: Will the brothers sacrifice one more brother? This plan mirrors still another dimension of his own experience. Yet, in this plan Joseph gives them an experience of graciousness. This combination of

judgment and graciousness elicits their confession (vv. 21-22). Joseph’s comments this time are positive in tone; he expresses interest in life for them and their family (vv. 18-19), though death still lingers in the air (v. 20). His rationale for these positive directions touches base with their own tradition: “for I fear God” (see 20:11), and stands in ironic contrast to their lack of concern for life.

The brothers agree to the plan (are they sincere?) and begin to lament their plight, not realizing that Joseph, having spoken through an interpreter (unique in Genesis), could
understand them. They are “paying the penalty” (or are certainly guilty). The word !va (Asem; v. 21) means both guilt and its ill effects. Their speech becomes a public confession of guilt for what they did to Joseph, whose anguished cries went unheeded. The detailed recollection after so many years is striking; it reveals a stricken conscience. Even more, ironically, their cry now mirrors his. They engage in moral order talk (what goes around comes around). They see that their present experience corresponds to Joseph’s (the punishment fits the crime). More specifically, one brother will suffer the same fate as did Joseph. But the brothers do not perceive that Joseph himself executes the moral order.

Reuben enters an “I told you so” speech (cf. 37:21-22) into the conversation, which could only intensify their sense of guilt; he had told them not to harm (i.e., sin against) the boy, for such crimes cannot finally be concealed. He knew there would be a “reckoning” someday (cf. 9:5). His speech is met with silence, suggesting some level of acceptance.

When Joseph hears their guilt-ridden response, he almost gives himself away, turning from them to weep. Having calmed himself, Joseph turns back to the brothers and proceeds with the test. He binds Simeon (the second oldest; because of Reuben’s defense?) as the one to stay behind to guarantee their return with Benjamin, which would confirm the brothers as honest men.

42:25-28. Joseph, however, has another gambit. He orders not only that they be given grain and food, but also that the money paid for the grain be placed in their sacks. This ploy explores the theme of integrity rather than being a sign of love or harshness. Even more, it ironically relates to their selling him for silver (#sk kesep, 37:28). This elicits further reflections regarding what they have done, including God’s activity in their lives (v. 28).

The brothers depart for Canaan without Simeon; en route one brother discovers the money. Their “hearts sink”—they could be accused of being thieves as well as spies. Perhaps catching the irony of the silver, they feel themselves at the mercy of powers beyond their own. But this now takes explicit theological form, not some general disease. Joseph, of course, had done this; yet, his discernment and wisdom are God-given. Hence, the brothers do get it right in one sense: God indeed remains active in these exchanges among the brothers, not least in seeing to the moral order at work in their lives. Their first reference to God represents another advance in their development (cf. 44:16; 50:17, their only other explicit God statements). In 50:20, Joseph will answer this question: God has been at work in their lives for good—a response anticipated by Joseph’s steward (43:23!).

42:29-38. The brothers’ return to Jacob follows a pattern similar to 37:32-36; they report their encounter with “the man” (vv. 29-34), but with subtle differences, perhaps to protect “their father” (a rare designation). They stress the positive (even exaggerate, v. 34b), with no mention of this as a life-and-death matter, and fewer references to Benjamin (two times vs. four times). But the author heightens the issue of honesty (three times vs. two times) in the formula: “By this I shall know” that you are honest men (v. 33). The brothers also do not speak of being jailed or the discovery of the money. The
narrator also reports the new discovery of money by the other brothers. These verses (sometimes seen as a doublet) double the effect of Joseph’s action; the returned money affects the brothers on their journey and at home, not only themselves but Jacob as well. It also intensifies the memory of the brothers’ selling Joseph for silver (Judah’s comment in 43:21 that all the brothers had discovered money at the lodging place telescopes vv. 27-28 and 35).

Jacob responds by lamenting the tragedies of his family: you are making me childless (does he suspect them?)! Two sons are gone, and now Benjamin is threatened. This sort of thing is always happening to me! He may be concerned about preserving the family, but tones of self-pity are evident. Reuben asks that Benjamin be put in his care and, in a sign of desperation, offers the life of his two sons should Benjamin not return (how could a loss from the next generation help?). Jacob refuses the offer, for if harm should come to Benjamin (cf. v. 4), he would die in great sorrow (cf. his comments about Rachel’s other son in 37:35). Better that Simeon be lost than risk losing Benjamin, too.

REFLECTIONS

1. Various suggestions have been made regarding Joseph’s motive for giving the test: (1) To exact revenge or punish his brothers. This seems unlikely, given the “test” language—and he is up front about this—and given the diminished test, with one brother detained. While his response may be somewhat harsh, the author’s emphasis on Joseph’s wisdom and discernment (as well as 41:51 and 42:9) suggests that he has everyone’s best interests at heart. (2) To learn whether they are spies, but he knows they are not spies. This issue provides a facade, necessary only to serve another purpose. (3) To bring Benjamin to Joseph.205 He wants to see his brother (vv. 15-16, 20) and weeps when he does (43:30). Yet, in the larger narrative (cf. 50:15-24) Benjamin becomes a means of achieving family unity, presupposed by the events of Exodus. (4) To determine whether the brothers have changed and are acting more like brothers. Although certainly true in part (v. 16), they may act so only to satisfy the needs of the moment—hence the need for more than one test. (5) To achieve a larger objective: the best possible future for this family as a unit, whose very future is at stake. The brothers need to pass through an ordeal in order to bring their memories and guilt to the surface, where it can be dealt with adequately, before reconciliation can truly take place, and hence safeguard the future of the family. This process transpires (see vv. 21-22, 28; 44:16; 50:16-17).

2. The recurring theme of Joseph’s weeping (43:30; 45:1-2, 14-15; 46:29; 50:1, 17) has two basic purposes: (1) It breaks “the tension with progressing signs of hope for a full reconciliation.”206 The brothers’ remorse prompts the first such sign. (2) Even more, it reveals “Joseph’s growing feelings of compassion for his brothers behind his harsh facade, so that the reader can be aware that the meaning of Joseph’s actions is not to be
found in their surface appearance.”207 The author conveys Joseph’s thoughts and feelings through this device.

3. The issue of guilt and punishment surfaces in a number of ways. It involves, however, not forensic acts of divine judgment, but the functioning of the moral order. The moral order does not function in some exact temporal way; the brothers’ actions against Joseph come home to roost only after some thirteen or more years. Moreover, it does not function mechanically. The brothers certainly reap the consequences of their sins and relive many dimensions of Joseph’s own experience of suffering; yet both human and divine actions are capable of breaking into that spiral, and reconciliation among the brothers finally comes. Nor does the moral order function in some deistic way. God works within it to bring about good (see 45:5-9; 50:15-21). Yet, God does not have full control over human behaviors, else one could not speak of sin as in any sense a human responsibility. But human sin cannot finally stymie God, who can draw everything that has happened into the orbit of larger purposes for good.

<Page 630 Ends><Page 631 Begins>

GENESIS 43:1-34, THE SECOND JOURNEY TO EGYPT

Link to:

<Page 631 Ends><Page 632 Begins>
<Page 632 Ends><Page 633 Begins>

COMMENTARY

This chapter continues the segment begun in chap. 42 and follows a similar outline, though with contrasting content (e.g., the brothers’ reception).208 The chapter begins with a conversation between the brothers and Jacob (43:1-15) and moves to a description of the brothers’ journey to Egypt and their encounter with the steward (vv. 16-25), followed by another audience with Joseph (vv. 26-34).

This doubling of the journey to Egypt has raised the question of sources, suggesting to some that there is really only one journey, twice-told. Others insist on two different journeys, which is the shape of the final redaction in any case. Thus, although Simeon is neglected, he is not forgotten (v. 14). Also, the details of the second journey often presuppose the first (e.g., vv. 2-9). One may recognize a delay in returning (v. 10; see Joseph’s concern in 45:9), though perhaps no more than a month or so, given the two weeks needed to make a round trip to Egypt.

43:1-15. Because of the severity of the famine (as in 41:57), the need to return to Egypt for food arises once again (as Joseph anticipated). Israel(Jacob’s only name in chap. 43)
again tells his sons to go to Egypt, but they will not go without Benjamin (whose age is
difficult to discern; cf. “boy” in v. 8).

Judah becomes a resolute spokesman for the brothers (cf. Reuben in 42:37) and remains
so for the balance of the story. He plays a key role in helping to overcome the impasse
centered on Benjamin. This conversation ought not to be considered a doublet of the
report to Jacob in 42:29-34, not least because it focuses solely on the condition regarding
Benjamin.

Judah forcefully reminds his father of the conversation with “the man” about Benjamin.
Joseph had “solemnly” warned them. To reinforce this, Judah repeats Joseph’s words:
“You shall not see my face [i.e., me] unless your brother is with you” (vv. 3, 5). Israel
wonders why his sons had even mentioned another brother, knowing how he would feel.
They (i.e., all the brothers, v. 7) say it was in response to Joseph’s questioning. This
appears to skirt the truth, for in 42:13 they volunteer the information; yet, Joseph does not
object when Judah reports the conversation to him (44:19-20). So we have difficulty
discerning whether the brothers are “honest

men.” This may be exactly the question the narrator intends the reader to raise.

Judah proceeds with what proves to be a highly persuasive speech (vv. 8-10). He pleads
with Israel to let Benjamin return with them, claiming this to be a life-and-death matter
for the family—even the children (he echoes the words of both Jacob and Joseph, 42:2,
20). Jacob had not heard the matter put in such terms by the brothers before (42:29-34).
Then Judah, in a way more laudable and magnanimous than Reuben (42:37), places
himself on the line as the personal guarantor of Benjamin’s safety (see 44:32). Finally,
Judah notes the delay in returning, indirectly pointing to Jacob’s own refusal to send
Benjamin (42:38). Joseph’s concern about the delay (cf. 45:9) could have raised the issue
of the brothers’ integrity (in view of their agreement, 42:20) and prompted further testing.

Israel realizes that he must allow Benjamin to go, but he seeks to assure his return by
sending gifts to “the man.” They are to bring the best produce available in Canaan (cf.
24:10), ironically acting like Joseph’s traders (37:25). They are also to take double the
money (including the money found in the sack), a matter not raised by the brothers
(unusual in view of their fears in v. 18). Jacob thus rescues his sons’ integrity on this
matter. They are to do this posthaste. Then Israel pronounces a benediction upon the
success of their journey. Having done as much as he can, Jacob resigns himself to
whatever may come; if deprived of children, his will be a deep loss indeed. The author
does not name Simeon (“your other brother”), leaving room in the readers’ mind for
Joseph. The importance of Benjamin to Jacob sharply informs the brothers’ subsequent
behaviors (see esp. 44:18-34).

43:16-25. The brothers follow Israel’s directives and proceed to Egypt, immediately
presenting themselves to Joseph. But they do not get an audience with Joseph right away. Joseph, having observed Benjamin’s presence without being seen, chooses to have his steward—an alter ego—deal with the brothers first (v. 16). The narrative purpose for the role of the steward allows Joseph to observe his brothers’ behavior at some distance. They have fulfilled his demand regarding Benjamin, but the issue of the money and their honesty (so stressed in 42:11-34) remains open.

The brothers are received cordially this time (cf. 42:7). A dinner is to be prepared, and the brothers are to dine with Joseph. Yet, when they are brought in (probably to the courtyard), they become frightened, a fear born of their last experience with Joseph. They suspect a trap, that they will be overpowered and enslaved because of the money, with the means for their return to Canaan (donkeys) taken away. They take the initiative, telling the steward about the money that mysteriously appeared in their sacks; they are returning it and have additional money for grain. They conclude their defense by pleading ignorance of how this happened. They would appear to have passed the honesty test, but Joseph continues to pursue the issue in the next episode. Does Joseph suspect what the reader knows—namely, that Jacob had to see to the return of the money?

The steward responds graciously, even though he keeps them off balance by the way he talks about the money and God. He assures them that everything is in order (literally, “shalom [!wlv] be with you”); they need not be afraid. He tells them that God must have put the “treasure” in their sacks. His statement about receiving their money renounces any claim to it; he does not offer a half-truth. He thus does not feign ignorance about the money; rather, he puts the truth in theological terms.

The scene concludes without dialogue. The steward brings Simeon out to fulfill Joseph’s pledge to release him if Benjamin was brought along. The steward sees that the brothers’ needs are met, as well as those of their animals, and they ready themselves and their gift for Joseph. They are Joseph’s guests. The story invites us to think that everything will now be fine between Joseph and his brothers. But not yet.

43:26-34. When Joseph makes his appearance, the brothers present their gift and again bow before him to pay him honor (two times!). The realization of Joseph’s dream continues (37:7). At the same time, the theme of peace (shalom), introduced by the steward (v. 23), is repeated by Joseph (v. 27)—recall 37:14—and is picked up by the brothers (v. 28). This marks an important transition in the narrative. At least from Joseph’s perspective, the relationship between the brothers has shifted toward the positive. This exchange of peace, which occurs in an everyday context of greeting, outside of the land of promise and apart from a liturgical setting, provides evidence of its importance for interpersonal relationships.

At the same time, the brothers’ obeisance (vv. 26, 28), even if now marked by honor
rather than simply submission, makes clear that their relationship with Joseph remains difficult. One verb used in v. 28, ddq (qAdad, “bow down”) occurs only with God as the object elsewhere in the Pentateuch (cf. 24:26, 48). Joseph will claim in 50:19 that he does not stand in the place of God, and thereby recognizes that such obeisance is not appropriate to a proper relationship between himself and his brothers.

Joseph begins by asking about their welfare and that of their aged father (see 44:20). Joseph then shifts his attention to Benjamin. Although Joseph recognizes him, he continues the ruse by asking into Benjamin’s identity. Without waiting for a reply, he pronounces a blessing on Benjamin in language that echoes Jacob’s blessing (v. 14), as well as Joseph’s own gracious treatment by Potiphar (39:4, 21).

The encounter with Benjamin, for whom Joseph shows much affection, so moves Joseph that he excuses himself and weeps privately. The second time that Joseph weeps will not be the last (see Reflections on chap. 42). Having composed himself (see 45:1), he returns and directs the meal to begin. The brothers are now guests rather than enemies. Yet, the one with whom they are eating still appears as a stranger, signaled by the absence of conversation between them (until 45:3). The relationship has progressed, but Joseph still holds back his identity. For reasons not stated, Joseph believes the time is not yet right to reveal himself to his brothers. Given the events of the next chapter, a further test seems necessary. The brothers have not reached the end of their journey.

The author reports no further dialogue, but notes certain unusual incidents. Separate servings are given to Joseph, to the brothers, and to the Egyptians, because of religious scruples (Joseph sits between communities!). This information shows that reconciliation has not yet truly taken place. The brothers are seated at Joseph’s direction (i.e., “before him”)210 according to their age, a strange procedure at which the brothers are astonished: How would he know how to seat them without being asked? Benjamin’s portion is five times greater than that of his brothers, demonstrating pleasure at Benjamin’s presence, though Joseph also wants to see the brothers’ reaction to this favoritism. Benjamin may be the guest of honor, but the absence of any speech on his part (in the entire story!) diminishes his role. The comment about this being a happy occasion sets up the not-so-happy turn of events that follows.

REFLECTIONS

1. The tensions created for the reader of this chapter revolve around difficult decisions that deeply affect family life. The author addresses feeding one’s family in the midst of famine, but also the danger presented by the strange request that getting more food from Egypt is contingent on the presence of Benjamin. In weighing options, Jacob finally decides that seeing to the future of the community overrides the fate of a beloved individual family member and his own personal well-being (cf. 34:30).

2. In v. 14, Jacob first mentions God (El Shaddai, see 17:1) in this story; he uses the language of mercy (!ymjr rahamîm), undeserved divine favor, a frequent element in Israel’s confession about God (cf. Exod 34:6). The success of his sons’ journey depends
on the mercy of God. The stress on mercy lifts up the reality of this dysfunctional family. Although hopeful, Jacob knows—and wisely so—that things may not work out as well as he anticipates. His hopes have been dashed before, for anti-God forces are powerful, often frustrating divine purposes. Yet, his trust in God enables him to continue to express hope for the future, for he believes that God’s work does have good effects in ways beyond his knowing and beyond external observation.

Joseph’s use of the verb meaning “be gracious” (@nj hAnan) in v. 29 recalls an important theological claim made by Israel for the nature of its God (see Ps 86:15-17). As elsewhere in benedictions (see Num 6:25; Ps 67:1), it functions here as a welcoming word. And as in laments (see Pss 4:1; 86:15-17), it suggests here a response to Jacob’s lament about Benjamin—God has been gracious. This word relates back to creedal language used by Jacob at the sending of the brothers (v. 14; see above). Israel’s creedal statement about its God (Exod 34:6) attests to this kind of experience with God. Jacob also used this language at the reconciliation with Esau and in the wake of God’s graciousness at Jabbok (33:5, 11). God, indeed a gracious one, extends blessings to all, freely and undeservingly (see Exod 33:19).

3. The steward’s theological observations in v. 23 are noteworthy. The brothers are extended a word of peace (shalom) and told that they need not be afraid, for God, the God of their father (namely, their family) has taken care of them by putting the money in their sacks. This announcement of peace and the removal of fear recurs as a motif in other biblical texts, especially in theophanies (see 26:24) and in Second Isaiah (e.g., 43:1-5). One who stands outside the community announces this word of comfort to the people of God (even if he learned it from Joseph). This may be disconcerting to insiders, but they must be open to God’s capability of working on their behalf in and through such persons. Outsiders, too, can be the vehicle for a word of God’s peace.

We do not know the extent to which the steward’s theology reflects that of Joseph or the narrator. It could be a generic reference to God that the brothers can interpret as they please. Most likely (as in 41:38-39), he offers a way of speaking about God, indeed a gracious, rather than a retributive, God (cf. 42:28), that helps us to understand other aspects of the story, particularly 45:8, “It was not you who sent me here, but God.” In 43:23, God did not personally insert the money in their sacks (cf. 42:25), but because this human action was in tune with the divine purposes, one could claim God as the subject of the action. Such a claim does not mean that Joseph’s decision to fill the sacks was necessary; he could have taken other actions. The author’s direct use of God language seems purposely ambiguous, for the divine activity is not obvious, but remains confessional, as no empirical claims can be made. It becomes a statement of faith.

GENESIS 44:1-34, JOSEPH’S FINAL TEST
COMMENTARY

This segment continues the episode of chaps. 42–43. It begins in Egypt (vv. 1-5), moves to a point along the way between Egypt and Canaan (vv. 6-13), and concludes once again in Egypt at Joseph’s house (vv. 14-34). Joseph controls the situation from beginning to end. At the same time, Judah, now the leader of the brothers, makes a passionate and persuasive speech before Joseph, in the wake of which Joseph finally reveals himself (chap. 45).

44:1-5. Joseph commands his steward to put food and money (i.e., silver) in the brothers’ sacks for their return to Canaan. This repeats the directive of 42:25, except that Joseph’s silver cup is also to be placed in Benjamin’s sack. An important personal possession allows one more test of his brothers. The return of the money once again has troubled commentators. Yet, while it plays no further role in this chapter, it reinforces the focus on silver and makes clear that Joseph will not keep any money his family has paid for food (see chaps. 42–43).

Shortly after the brothers depart, Joseph sends his steward after them. He takes a hard-line approach, firing questions that assume they stole the silver cup (NRSV/NIV footnotes). The steward’s (Joseph’s) questions focus on the personal character of the deed; the silver cup is Joseph’s own. In some sense it stands in for him, so that he is more personally violated when they “take” this silver; it more sharply mirrors his own violation at their hands when they sold him for silver.

Joseph uses the cup to divine, to seek the meaning of, events through observing patterns in the liquid (cf. the modern use of tea leaves or coffee grounds). God could work through such means, which is linked with Joseph’s ability as a dream interpreter (cf. 40:8). It may be that Joseph does not actually practice divination (cf. v. 15), but he certainly wants the brothers to think he does. They must have had an increasing sense of being hemmed in, at the mercy of powers beyond their control (v. 16a).

44:6-13. When the steward repeats Joseph’s words to the brothers, they strongly deny their guilt; they are “honest” men (using db[ [ (ebeb, “servant”) three times; this word occurs nineteen times in vv. 7-33]). As evidence, they cite their return of the money (cf. 43:12). If they hadn’t kept that money, why would they steal again? They naively offer to
become Joseph’s servants/slaves should the cup be found; indeed, they pronounce a death sentence on the thief (harsher than Israelite law required). By these words they play right into Joseph’s hand (see below). Their innocence, which mirrors Joseph’s innocence, seems ironic. Moreover, they prescribe for themselves a double fate that mirrors his—death for one and slavery to the Egyptians for the rest. Their cries of innocence also parallel Joseph’s (42:21).

While v. 10 remains ambiguous, the steward does not fully accept their self-sentencing. He speaks graciously before the evidence sees the light of day. He agrees only to the enslavement of the culpable one; the rest are to go free. The steward thereby sets Joseph up for a response (v. 17) that will provide the breakthrough in this prolonged process of testing.

The brothers confidently subject themselves to a search. When the cup is found in Benjamin’s sack, the brothers do not respond verbally; they express their distress by tearing their clothes (cf. 37:34). Rather than proceeding to Canaan, all of them return to Egypt for a confrontation with Joseph himself. Their actions are informed by knowing how their father would respond if they returned without Benjamin (see 42:38).

44:14-17. When the brothers prostrate themselves before Joseph (cf. 37:7), he picks up the steward’s accusations. Expressing amazement at what they have done, he claims that he could have (has?) discovered their deed through divination (v. 15). Judah interprets this exposure of guilt as a divine act (v. 16).

Judah, the spokesman for the brothers, acknowledges that they are entirely at Joseph’s disposal; they can do nothing to clear themselves. Although he never confesses that a crime has been committed, Judah makes a public confession of guilt for all the brothers and throws them on the mercy of this “lord.” For him to include all the brothers suggests that he has more than this event in mind, including their actions against Joseph (see 42:21), though Joseph does not recognize this dynamic.

Joseph sharply refuses to make them all his slaves, asking only that the possessor of the cup (Benjamin is not named) be made a slave. The other brothers will return to their father in peace (shalom), an irony, given what their father has said about Benjamin (see 42:38; 43:14). On the surface, this proposal appears magnanimous, but Joseph knows that they cannot return to their father without Benjamin. Joseph has tightened the screws; how will the brothers respond?

By this action, Joseph has placed Benjamin in a relationship to his brothers not unlike the way his own had once been (see other such parallels in chap. 42). In this test, Joseph will certainly gain knowledge about his brothers. Will they act toward Benjamin as they once had toward him? Will they allow Benjamin to become a slave, while they save their own skins?

44:18-34. Judah responds with a passionate speech, the longest in Genesis and a literary masterpiece, not least in the way it gathers up the story to this point. In a way similar in
its rhetorical power to his speech to Jacob in 43:3-10, Judah seeks to persuade Joseph to keep him rather than Benjamin. To this end, Judah makes selective and expansive use of previous conversations, with Joseph himself (cf. vv. 20-23 with 42:12-20) and Jacob (cf. vv. 24-29, 32 with 37:33-35; 42:36-38; 43:2-14). Joseph hears for the first time his father’s reaction to his own abduction, and that Jacob still mourns for him (cf. v. 28 with 37:33).

Judah speaks straightforwardly and sincerely, conveying

what is at stake for this family in quite direct ways. At the same time, he speaks in a highly deferential manner, in initial approach (“you are like Pharaoh himself”), in general language (lord/servant is used twenty times!), and in omitting any harshness from prior conversations (e.g., Joseph’s charge of spying and threat of death). The speech also has strong emotional content, especially regarding the negative effect on their aged father (mentioned fourteen times!), whose life has been so filled with hardship and loss (vv. 19-20, 22, 27-29, 30-31, 34). Judah stresses that this is a matter of life and death for him (vv. 22, 29-31). He also recalls the violence done to Joseph (vv. 20, 27-29) and refers to Jacob’s special love for Benjamin, with whom “his life is bound up” (v. 30; cf. vv. 20, 22, 27-29, 31, 34). Judah speaks of this in nonjudgmental ways, recognizing and accepting such preferential treatment by his father. The climax of the speech refers to the suffering their father will endure (v. 34), a contrast to the brothers’ concern in 37:31-35.

Judah also underscores the extent to which the brothers have acceded to Joseph’s requests, even more, how he has placed his own future on the line (v. 32). This makes clear that he is following through on his promise to his father (cf. 43:9). Judah’s speech accents his integrity and gives further evidence of a change in the brothers. Judah’s willingness also appears ironic, for he would then become the slave of the very one he had made a slave (cf. 37:26-27).

As with Jacob (43:11-14), Judah’s speech persuades Joseph, whose response is detailed in chap. 45. Judah’s references to their father seem to have been particularly effective (45:3, 9, 13, 23).

REFLECTIONS

1. Some commentators believe that Joseph turns the test into “an insolent, almost wanton game.”211 This seems unlikely. As noted, testing must involve action and not just words. Whether there has been a change in fact can more readily be discerned by the way people act. Moreover, the testing gives the brothers an experience not unlike Joseph’s own (as in chap. 42). This mirroring process enables the brothers to recognize their guilt and makes reconciliation possible.

2. Note the important language in vv 5-6. The brothers have done wrong ([[r rA (a () they have returned evil ([r ra () for the good (bwf tôb) they had received from Joseph.
This anticipates the use of good and evil in 50:20. Here the brothers are accused of doing evil (without so intending), and Joseph does good; there they are said to do evil (with intention), and God does good. Regarding the evil, their “innocence” actually mirrors their guilt in selling Joseph for silver, so that this verse and 50:20 are finally parallel. Regarding the good, we see, once again, an elision of divine and human activity; both are engaged in doing good.

3. The author mentions God only once in this chapter (v. 16), but it is significant. Although the brothers had previously acknowledged their guilt to one another (42:21), they now confess before Joseph. Moreover, although the brothers now use God language for the second time (cf. 42:28), previously it took the form of a question. Judah here brings guilt and God together, thereby confessing that God has been engaged in these events, working to expose their guilt in and through what has happened. When we combine this with other changes, we understand that Joseph’s testing (though rigorous) has finally served a positive purpose.

It seems somewhat strange to say that God has “found out,” as if God did not know what had transpired. The author links God and Joseph again (see 43:23). This use of God language also reflects Joseph’s speech in 45:8, where human and divine agency are combined. Moreover, in 45:5-9 Joseph will speak of God as one who has been engaged in preserving life; the reference in 44:16 to God as one before whom guilt stands exposed is directed toward the same end. The exposure of guilt serves life and well-being, not to perpetuate self-loathing. God’s activity in convicting the brothers, therefore, brings about reconciliation in this family.

4. Judah’s speeches (to Jacob, 43:3-10; and to Joseph, 44:18-34) relate directly to the events of chap. 38 and play a critical role in the Joseph story. Genesis 37–50 also involves a story about Judah. In and through what he says, not least his confession of guilt and the changes he exemplifies in his interpretation of what has happened, he enables the story of this family to move to a new level, setting the stage for the reconciliation that follows. Without Judah, Joseph’s ensuing speech would not have been possible. Joseph’s theological interpretation of events builds upon Judah’s confession.

Even more, unlike his earlier attitude (37:26-27), Judah—like Tamar—chooses to risk himself rather than risk the life of another brother. First, he makes this promise to his father. Second, he follows through on it, in spite of his innocence. This self-effacing act—certainly not his only option—serves the future of both father and brother. Self-sacrifice in conflicted situations may lead to reconciliation.

At the same time, Joseph refuses to accept this sacrifice in his response in chap. 45. Joseph recognizes that self-sacrifice is not necessarily a good thing, not least because it can be used in abusive ways to promote the elevation of one person over another. And so
finally, in 50:19-21, Joseph will reject any hierarchical relationship among the brothers. Nevertheless, this does not discount the integrity of Judah’s offer, and it stands in the narrative as a sign of the great change that has come over the brothers.

GENESIS 45:1-28, JOSEPH MAKES HIMSELF KNOWN

COMMENTARY

Chapter 45 provides the climax to the story, but must be seen as closely coordinate with chap. 46 (especially 45:5-8 and 46:1-4). The actual descent belongs together with the preparations for it. After Joseph reveals himself to his brothers (vv. 1-8), Joseph (vv. 9-15, 21-24), Pharaoh (vv. 16-20), the brothers, and Jacob (vv. 25-28) prepare for the descent to Egypt in their own ways.

One of the puzzles regarding this section involves its relationship to 50:15-21. Those verses seem to replicate the events of this chapter, but that is not the case. The key difference lies in Joseph’s relationship with his brothers. Three observations make clear that a full reconciliation does not occur here.

First, in this chapter the brothers do not respond specifically to what Joseph says; v. 15 testifies only to general conversation. In 50:15-18, the brothers still fear Joseph; they still stand in a lord/servant relationship with him, in fact, they seek to perpetuate it. This means that Joseph’s goal of ameliorating their anxieties was not finally successful.

Second, Joseph, in chap. 45, does not specifically deal with the lord/servant reality. His first question relates to his father, not to his brothers (v. 3). He leaves questions of accountability and penalty aside (cf. 42:21-22). These issues burst forth at the point of their father’s death (between 45:26 and 50:15, the brothers speak only at 47:4).

Third, Joseph is the direct object of every verb, with God as subject (vv. 5, 7, 8, 9): God has sent me; God has made me; indeed, he repeats that God has made him “lord.” The author encloses the report that Joseph asks be brought to his father by language that could be described as self-congratulatory (vv. 9, 13). Initially, Joseph calls himself a brother (v. 4), but father/lord/ruler language finally predominates (vv. 8-9, 13; cf. v. 26). Moreover, directives to the brothers abound, and Joseph even appears paternalistic (v. 24; 46:31-33).

The new question addressed in 50:15-21 addresses the nature of the relationship between Joseph and his brothers. There Joseph will reject the ruler/slave image. The dream of 37:7
was earlier realized, without the brothers’ knowledge (do they now realize it?), but the images of that dream must not be allowed to shape their ongoing life together.

45:1-3. Judah’s speech proves to be highly effective. Joseph can no longer control his emotions, but rather than leave (see 42:24; 43:30), he dismisses all attendants so that family members can deal with these issues privately. Yet, he weeps so loudly that it proves not to be a private affair after all (Joseph’s weeping encloses the section, vv. 1-2, 14-15). Standing alone with his brothers, he reveals his identity. All the brothers are alive.

In view of Judah’s speech, Joseph asks whether their father is really still alive (“life” could refer simply to good health). His brothers, however, are reduced to an agitated, fearful silence. This silence provides a break in the reunion; how Joseph will move past this awkwardness and deal with his brothers’ fear becomes the question. The task of reconciliation is no simple matter.

45:4-15. Joseph asks his brothers to come closer, not to see him more clearly, but thereby to cross the official barrier. He identifies himself further by recalling their common history, going directly to the heart of the issue: You sold me into Egypt (v. 4). Joseph’s next comment (v. 5a) proves decisive. He discerns that his brothers are dismayed or terrified (NIV), distressed (cf. 42:21), and angry at each other (42:22), no doubt for many reasons, not least what this means for their own future. Joseph does not scold or blame them; he does not try to make them feel either guilty or shameful. He asks for no confession of sin and issues no absolution. Rather, he wants to allay their fears (see the “for/because”). His formulations are thus designed for pastoral purposes, and they take on a confessional or doxological character; they must be interpreted not unlike other such language (e.g., the hymns of the psalter; oracles of salvation in response to laments). Even so, Joseph does not fully accomplish his objective.

Joseph’s speaking takes a form similar to that of a theophany narrative (see 26:24), with self-identification, the quelling of fear, and the announcement of what God has done (not will do). The formal parallels between 45:3-8 and 46:2-4 should be especially noted, because they bring creational and promissory themes together.

Joseph says, fundamentally, that in spite of their past history, all will be well because what has happened corresponds to God’s purposes. He invites them to view the past from the perspective of the present: Everybody is alive. Hence, their particular past can be interpreted as having a fundamentally (not totally, 50:20) positive dimension. God has “taken over” what they have done and used it to bring about this end. Their actions have become God’s by being woven into his life-giving purposes. Even more, Pharaoh’s actions—elevating Joseph as ruler—have become God’s! The author leaves aside the role of the human for a specific purpose (not unlike referring to a sermon as the word of God)—the role of the human returns in 50:20. Human actions could have resulted in
different ends; these ends have come to pass, however, and the result means that the
decisive actor has been God.

Some scholars think that the narrator’s perspective appears most transparently at this
point; yet, it certainly needs 50:15-21 for proper interpretation. The important new
developments in 50:15-21 move theologically beyond this text, so that Joseph’s
perspective becomes more mature (see above). Moreover, we are not fully clear about
how God’s activity should be interpreted. Certainly, God acts unobtrusively, hidden
beneath the ordinary course of events. God is the subject of two verbs, jlv (sAlah, “send”;
vv. 5, 7, 8), and !yc (Zîm, “make”; vv. 8, 9), in every case with Joseph as the object. God
acts to preserve life, particularly the life of Jacob’s family (vv. 5, 7).

Famine provides the sociohistorical context for the divine activity. Famine, a life-and-
death issue, no doubt cost many lives, which explains references to “remnant” and
“survivors” (prophetic use of these words links Israel’s hardships with the experience of
their ancestors; cf. Isa 10:20; 37:32). The author interprets Joseph’s being sent to Egypt
and his elevation to leadership in Egypt (“father to Pharaoh” is a title for a king’s
counselor) as God’s means of preserving life. What God did provides the decisive reality
within this larger concatenation of events that has led to life and well-being. God’s
concern for life also embraces Egypt, indeed the entire world, as already evident in
Joseph’s wise administration (see 41:56-57). The divine objective encompasses every
sphere of life within both family and nation.

In vv. 9-13, Joseph now seeks to preserve his family’s life in ways that correspond
directly to God’s activity. Joseph acts as father, lord, and ruler (all used as images for
God in the OT) in tune with God’s purposes. Joseph tells the brothers to hurry home,
report these events to their father, return with family and possessions, and settle in the
land of Goshen near him (of uncertain location on the eastern edge of the delta region,
near the border facing Canaan). Joseph assures them that he will provide for all their
needs—adults, children, animals—during the continuing famine.

Joseph concludes by repeating his identity, with special notice of Benjamin (v. 12).
Joseph’s word to hurry to “my father” with the news (so different from the news in
37:32!) encloses his directives to the brothers (vv. 9, 13), revealing deep concern for
Jacob.

The episode concludes as it began, with a description of the tearful reunion. The author
singles out Joseph’s reunion with Benjamin, Joseph’s only full brother, the only time in
the story that we hear about Benjamin’s own feelings. The episode also concludes with a
reference to the brothers’ conversation with one another, harking back to 37:4, where the
brothers could not talk peaceably with one another.

45:16-24. Joseph’s instructions to the brothers become those of Pharaoh himself. They
are to return to Canaan and bring their father and their families back to Egypt, with the
assurance that they will have no worries about possessions. The royal household not only rejoices in the good fortune of Israel’s family, but also provides the best land and choicest products (i.e., fat) that Egypt has to offer. Both Pharaoh and Joseph will take care of them. Pharaoh’s pleased response, filled with generosity and good will, proves startling. In view of events in Exodus, this positive portrayal of the Egyptians commands attention, alluding to possible reconciliation for nations—even Egypt and Israel—as well as families. Historically, pharaohs were generous to Semitic peoples in time of famine.

Joseph carries out Pharaoh’s wishes with respect to his family, perhaps interpreting Pharaoh’s directive somewhat generously. He provides for his full brother, Benjamin, in a special way, and seems emphatically lavish in the provisions for his father (which later serve as evidence, v. 27). Reference to the gift of clothing recalls for the reader that Joseph’s coat precipitated this family conflict in the first place; clothing now becomes a sign of reconciliation. Finally, Joseph realistically but paternalistically admonishes his brothers not to quarrel among themselves on the journey (cf. 42:21-22).

45:25-28. When the brothers report the news, Jacob is skeptical. But, when they repeat Joseph’s words and display the evidence, he believes and resolves to go to Egypt to see his son before he dies. “Enough” is shorthand for Jacob’s willingness to put the past behind him and get on with the new possibilities presented by this surprising good news. The parental trauma that Jacob experienced in 37:31-35 now comes full circle; life and joy once more fill the family scene. God enables the past to be forgotten (see 41:51) and makes new beginnings possible. Yet, more will come.

REFLECTIONS

1. For the reader following Joseph’s development closely over these eight chapters, his theological presentation may come as something of a surprise. Joseph’s God talk has been comparatively rare (see 39:9; 40:8; 41:16, 25, 28, 32, 51-52; 42:18; 43:29), but a sufficient basis on which to build. In addition, God talk by other individuals may reveal the narrator’s perspective, particularly those texts that mention God as the seemingly exclusive subject (see esp. 41:38-39; 43:23; 44:16). Such a way of speaking is not new to this text.

Joseph’s theology involves life, not promise. The latter awaits later developments, for Joseph has not yet been the recipient of the promises given to his ancestors (see 46:1-4; 48:3-4). But life remains necessary for the continuation of the promises.

2. At this climactic point in their relationship, Joseph sits in a position to do with his brothers as he pleases. Yet, he makes no effort to hold their feet to the fire; his language and demeanor (loud weeping) evidence no anger or irritation. He manifests more weakness than strength; he sets aside the trappings of royalty and enters into the pathos of the situation, all for the sake of reconciliation. Whereas Joseph’s testings were indispensable in bringing the family to this moment, a display of power and control was insufficient finally to heal them. Joseph must step outside his role as Egyptian ruler (hence the dismissal of others), and join the family at an intimate and vulnerable level.
Yet, as we have noted, Joseph’s language does not always match these behaviors. The brothers remain uncertain. A full reconciliation must await later events (50:15-21).

Joseph does not require sorrow or regret from the brothers (cf. 50:17-19). Rather, he

confesses that God has been at work in all these events to preserve life, and that is the decisive reality in this moment. What God has done stands independent of the brothers’ repentance. The word, for the brothers, thus serves as a straightforward gospel word, spoken by one who has experienced it deep within his own life: God has acted so that life, rather than death, now abounds. So the activity of the brothers, however reprehensible in itself, has been used by God as a vehicle for sustaining the life of this family.

3. The relationship between divine and human agency in vv. 5-9 is much debated. One view understands v. 8a in a literal fashion: God sends Joseph to Egypt, not the brothers. God is the only effective agent in this event (“this all-sufficiency of divine sovereignty makes human action almost irrelevant”).214 A number of difficulties attend such a view, however. (1) The text explicitly ascribes effective agency to the brothers: They “sold” (rkm mAkar) Joseph into Egypt (vv. 4, 5; 37:28; cf. 42:21). The brothers are not considered puppets in the hands of God (see also the agency of Joseph in vv. 9-13). (2) The larger story uses the language of sin (afj hAtA ), 42:22; 50:17) and evil (h[j rA(â, 50:15, 17, 20) to refer to the brothers’ action, for which they are guilty (!va )Asem, 42:21; @w[ (Awon, 44:16). To consider God as the actual subject of these words would be problematic and would rule human responsibility for such activity out of order. (3) The notion of testing is integral to understanding the story (cf. 42:15-16). If God serves as absolute subject of events, there would be no real test of the brothers, for God would bend their wills to respond as God saw fit. All of Joseph’s activities would be only a facade for a divine game. (4) Later, 50:20 speaks of both human and divine intentions effectively at work in these events, though in the service of different purposes. Joseph’s perspective at this point, however, does not seem as mature as it later becomes.

Another view speaks of effective agency on the part of both God and the brothers, but considers God’s intentions as inevitably overriding the brothers’ intentions. This view could be correct if understood in the sense that no human activity can finally stymie God’s purposes for life. On the other hand, such a view seems problematic if it means that God’s will can never be rejected or frustrated, so that human sin becomes in effect God’s will for the moment. The OT as a whole often testifies to the resistibility of God’s word and will.215

Either of these perspectives would profoundly affect how one portrays the development of the story. Talk about the drama of the story should then be cast so that everything happens consonantly with the divine will, and any analysis of human words and deeds,
even thoughts, should be peppered with talk about the controlling divine subject. And, of course, no negative judgment should be placed on the activities of any human subjects, for they are only doing the will of God.

A more acceptable view would speak of the effectiveness of both divine and human agency in the drama, in which both can influence and be influenced, resist and be resisted. As with doxological language more generally, however, God acts decisively, and should thus be celebrated.

We should not evaluate the brothers’ life-diminishing activity against Joseph as good (see 50:20) or deem irrelevant how they conduct themselves within God’s economy. Rather, God’s activity from within the context set in part by the brothers’ sinful behaviors has proved, finally, to be decisive. Hence, what God has done now counts in charting a way into the future. God has preserved life; God has kept this family intact in the threat of death. To use a different image, the brothers’ sinful objectives have been thwarted by being drawn into the larger orbit of God’s purposes and used by God in such a way as to bring life rather than death. To repeat, God has “taken over” what they have done and used it to bring about this end. Their actions have become God’s by being woven into God’s life-giving purposes. Even more, Pharaoh’s actions—elevating Joseph as ruler—have become God’s!

4. The extent to which one can draw inferences from this text concerning God’s more general activity in the world (providence) remains difficult to discern. Westermann denies this possibility, claiming that the text focuses on specific salvific actions of God in this situation. Yet, such actions are stretched out over a considerable period of time; they are also “salvific” in creational rather than redemptive terms. The narrator would certainly claim that the way in which God acts in the world more generally bears basic continuities with God’s actions at any moment. While the text testifies to God as an actor in human affairs, these acts are understood in ways quite different from, say, the Exodus events (or 46:1-4, for that matter); they are more hidden to ordinary sight, much less disruptive of ordinary life.

Such an understanding of God’s involvement in the life of the cosmos seems especially pertinent in our own world, wherein the tracks of God seem so often ambiguous at best. We might confess that God’s activity counts as a factor to be reckoned with in all events, but these same events could be interpreted without reference to God at all. But those who make this confession would also go on to say that, wherever there are signs of life rather than death, signs of reconciliation rather than estrangement, God has been at work in, with, and under human affairs. Depending on the context, it may be that God should be the only subject of such verbs so that we know whose life-giving purposes and activity have been decisive.

GENESIS 46:1–47:26, THE DESCENT INTO EGYPT
COMMENTARY

This chapter begins a new episode, but the parallels between 45:5-8 and 46:1-4 (see below) suggest that chap. 45, as preparation for the descent, must be drawn more closely to this section, which describes the actual trip of Jacob’s family to Egypt. Joseph’s reconciliation with his brothers has been a leading objective of the narrative, but the reunion of father and son has yet to occur. That, too, constitutes an important dimension of the story.

The segment 46:28–47:12 describes issues of settlement in Egypt. After the reunion of Jacob and Joseph (vv. 28-30), Joseph prepares his brothers for conversations with Pharaoh (vv. 31-33); 47:1-12 reports that audience, leading to the settlement in Goshen; 47:13-26 describes Joseph’s agrarian reforms to cope with the effects of the famine; 47:27 concludes this episode with a summary of these events and their effect on Jacob’s family.

The remaining chapters in Genesis are more episodic than 39–45, with a disparate range of genres, which reveal a composite character. Verses 1-4 link this story with divine appearances and related promises in Genesis 12–35 (cf. 26:23-25), as do the itineraries and the genealogy-like list in 46:5-27. At the same time, these texts point forward to Exodus, toward which these chapters begin to lean more and more. Together, these sections help both to unify Genesis and to integrate it with Exodus.

46:1-7. Jacob initially journeys from Hebron (cf. 37:14) and comes to Beersheba, where God once appeared to his father (26:23-25). Jacob worships at the altar built by Isaac before he has his vision (note the sacrifices, rare in Genesis, cf. 31:54). At this juncture in life—once again on leaving the land (cf. chap. 28)—Jacob builds upon the faith of his family heritage, “the God of his father.”

God acknowledges this tradition by appearing to Jacob in visions of the night as the “God of your father” (cf. 15:1; 28:11) and affirms the decision to go to Egypt (cf. 26:2). The plural “visions” seems difficult; it may refer to the intensity of the experience, and could be either oral or oral with a visual component. God’s double call and Jacob’s obedient response are identical to Abraham’s experience in 22:11.
These verses appear formally similar to 45:3-8. Both move from self-identification to the quelling of fear to an announcement, only this time regarding the future. While parallel in form, Joseph’s word to his brothers and God’s word to Jacob are complementary in content. Together they link creation and promise. God’s life-enabling work makes possible the continued articulation of the promises. Without life, there would be no promise. The creative work of God stands in service of the promise.

God allays Jacob’s fears regarding the move by making promises, drawing on past promises, but adjusting them in view of the changed circumstances that Egypt presents. Hence, “I will make of you a great nation there” (v. 3; cf. 12:2; 18:18), indicates that their development into a people will occur in Egypt (see Exod 1:7). Moreover, God will go down with him to Egypt. This statement constitutes a new version of God’s promise of presence to Jacob in 28:15; it not only specifies presence, but emphasizes that this will be a journey for God. This represents a deep commitment of God to enter into all the dynamics of the Egyptian experience. With the promise that God will bring him back to Canaan, the exodus and related events come into view. Inasmuch as Jacob himself does not return to Canaan alive (cf. 47:30; 50:4-14), we may interpret the promise of return in corporate terms as well. Finally, Joseph will close his eyes, implying that Joseph will be with him when he dies (cf. 50:1).

Jacob journeys from Beersheba, accompanied by his family and all their belongings (contrary to Pharaoh’s expectations? 45:20). While the following roll focuses on the brothers and their children, this introductory list identifies the women accompanying Jacob. The daughters of Jacob include daughters-in-law (clearer in v. 15; cf. 37:35).

46:8-27. The author provides a list of Jacob’s descendants—individuals, not clans—who made the migration to Egypt (cf. Exod 1:1). Its relationship to other lists appears to be highly complex (cf. Numbers 26; 1 Chronicles 1–9). It is based on the number seventy (v. 27; cf. Exod 1:5) and ordered according to Jacob’s wives (vv. 15, 18, [19], 22, 25; note the double reference to Rachel), who are called the mothers of both children and grandchildren (e.g., v. 22). The list includes Dinah (v. 15), one granddaughter (v. 17), and four great-grandsons (vv. 12, 17). The author names only Joseph’s wife (v. 20; cf. v. 26) and mentions that a Canaanite woman bore one of Simeon’s children (v. 10). The list assumes knowledge of the previous narratives (e.g., vv. 12, 15, 18, 20, 25), suggesting that an independent list has been adapted to fit this context, breaking the natural continuity between vv. 7 and 28.

Verses 26 and 27 are difficult, perhaps due to several editorial hands; not everything can be sorted out. The numbers in vv. 15, 18, 22, and 25 total seventy (adding Jacob, Joseph’s sons, and one other person, possibly Dinah); the number sixty-six (v. 26), however, takes into account that Er and Onan (v. 12) and Joseph’s two sons (v. 20) never made a trip to Egypt.

46:28-30. These verses begin an episode that continues through 47:12, describing the settlement of Joseph’s family in Egypt.
Jacob recognizes Judah’s leadership in having him prepare the way for their entry into Egypt. When Joseph hears of their arrival in the land of Goshen, he takes the initiative to greet his father. Tears—not words—once again flow for this sensitive man as father and son embrace at length, joyfully reunited after so many years apart. Joseph appears before his father as a son, not as a public official, with appropriate levels of emotional intensity (no fulfillment of his second dream seems in view).

Verse 30 brings one dimension of the Joseph story full circle. The violence of chap. 37 has been turned into life. Jacob, who had lamented that he would go into death mourning (37:33-35) and whose life has been so pervaded by this loss (42:38; 43:14; 44:28-29), now announces that he can die with the joy of knowing that his son who was lost has been found (cf. 45:28).

46:31–47:12. Joseph takes charge of the situation. Having prepared his father and brothers, he mediates with Pharaoh the settlement in Goshen. Pharaoh might be concerned about a settlement in Goshen, which Joseph wanted because his family would be nearby, but which Pharaoh could find difficult for some reason (a border region?). Because Goshen is somewhat removed from the settled areas of Egypt, Joseph devises a plan that would allow his family to move there (a convenient placement for escape?). He directs his brothers to stress that they are shepherds (i.e., keepers of livestock), because shepherding was an unappealing occupation to Egyptians (v. 34). Thus Pharaoh would be glad to have them at a distance, and Joseph would not compromise his own position among the Egyptians.

Joseph announces to Pharaoh that the family has arrived and are in Goshen (also called Rameses, v. 11, elsewhere referred to as a city, Exod 1:11). The brothers respond to Pharaoh’s questions as directed, describing themselves as shepherds (see 46:32, 34) and, going beyond the question, as aliens (!yrg gerîm, cf. 15:13) in the land, temporary residents seeking pasture for their flocks (“holding” in v. 11 suggests permanence; does Joseph disagree with his brothers here?). The brothers request settlement in Goshen; both Pharaoh and the narrator describe this as “the best part of the land” (vv. 6, 11), which Pharaoh had promised them (45:18).

Pharaoh, speaking officially to Joseph (vv. 5-6), supportively acknowledges his statement of v. 1 and agrees to this arrangement. Moreover, going beyond previous conversations, he offers to allow the capable ones among them to oversee his own livestock, guaranteeing the security of the family under pharaonic authority. (Historically, pharaohs possessed herds and used such persons.) The Egyptians are the ones who violate the agreement (Exod 1:8-11); hence they have only themselves to blame for the destruction that comes.
Joseph presents his father to Pharaoh, and Jacob proceeds to bless Pharaoh (rather than do obeisance). He also blesses Pharaoh when he departs (v. 10). We should understand this greeting and farewell more broadly in terms of the blessing motif in chaps. 12–50. This prompts Pharaoh’s question about his age; Jacob’s blessing might speak to issues of longevity. Jacob states that his 130 years have been “few and hard” compared with his ancestors (see 25:7; 35:28), referring to difficulties endured over the years, not least with Joseph. Yet, characteristic of each patriarch has been the sojourning shape of life, its unsettled character, moving toward a goal set by the promises of God. To be a recipient of God’s blessing does not in and of itself mean a trouble-free life. Jacob provides a word of realism for Pharaoh.

Joseph settles his family “in the best part of the land” and provides them with food in this time of famine. We do not know whether Joseph’s family suffers the effects of the famine that afflicted the rest of Egypt. Inasmuch as the author never mentions the Israelites in vv. 13-26, they probably had enough food.

These conversations attest to the fact that Egypt will not, finally, be the home of these people. They cannot be integrated with the Egyptians. They remain transients, forced by famine to live here and not able to call it home. Yet, Egypt will prove to be hospitable for the growth of many generations (cf. Exod 1:7).

47:13-26. This segment seems unrelated to its present context. It is most closely connected with Joseph’s skilled economic leadership in 41:46-57, which it may continue—though links with the seven-year famine are not made (see the inexact reference to years in v. 18; cf. v. 14 with 41:56). These verses illustrate Joseph’s administrative wisdom (and show that it continues beyond the climax in chap. 45). At the same time, such harsh measures made necessary by emergency can be abused if successive leaders are not comparably wise (as in Exod 1:8). Joseph could be faulted for having insufficient vision, especially in making his emergency measures permanent “to this day” (v. 26).

An editor may have placed these verses in their present position because of two themes. First is the report about food in v. 11, where Joseph provides food not only for his family but also for all the Egyptians. Second is the blessings on Pharaoh (vv. 7, 10). Through these economic measures, Joseph serves as the channel for blessing on Pharaoh and his people (stated seven times!).

The reader has some difficulties following the text, which may reflect the redactional process and our lack of knowledge regarding ancient Egyptian economics. The interpreter should thus be cautious in drawing conclusions about Joseph’s role. His policy results in a concentration of property and power in the crown, but the language of “slavery” appears insufficiently nuanced (note the textual difficulties in v. 21). One
should think about “tenant farmers of the state” as well as the draconian measures of nationalization.219

The severity of the famine in Egypt and Canaan (Canaan drops out after v. 15) prompts Joseph to develop new food distribution systems. He responds to the cries of the Egyptian people for bread, and even takes their opinions into account (v. 19). Whatever effects the measures have on the people, the idea has come from them; they affirm it after the actions have been taken (v. 25).

The progressively more severe measures include the money supply’s no longer sufficing to buy food; livestock depletion in exchange for food; Joseph’s buying their land in exchange for food (actually, for seed to grow food). They make this request even though it will mean that they and their lands will come under Pharaoh’s control (v. 19).

Joseph proceeds as they request. All Egyptian lands (the priests had an agreement with Pharaoh) become royal property, and the people become tenant farmers, even though it deprives them of some freedom. Joseph gives them seed for sowing, and they agree that Pharaoh will receive 20 percent of the harvests (making the emergency policy of 41:34 permanent)—not excessive in that world. They are grateful to Joseph for having saved their lives, and ask for his continuing favor, even as they affirm their status as tenant farmers.

REFLECTIONS

1. These chapters begin to move from the story of the person called Israel to the story of the people called Israel. Literarily, the author interweaves Joseph’s reunion with Jacob and the list of the seventy members of Jacob’s family who migrate to Egypt. Rather than simply juxtaposing these developments, the list occurs before the reunion. Beginning with “the Israelites” (46:8) and concluding with “the house of Jacob” (v. 27; cf. v. 31; 50:8), the list signals the shift to a new era as the family becomes a people, anticipating the book of Exodus (cf. Exod 1:1 with 1:7).

The author provides a preface, grounded in a promise with corporate dimensions. These promises, long absent from the narrative (see 35:9-13), still operate in spite of all that has occurred. The promise of a “great nation” in 46:3 gives divine direction to this development. The elision of the individual and the corporate in v. 4 (“I will bring you up again”) anticipates Exodus events. The move from family to people is presented as divinely sanctioned. The reader thereby begins to shift attention to the new reality of Israel as the people of God.

2. The purpose of the story, especially as articulated in 45:5-9, now comes more clearly into view. God’s concern in this entire story has been to “preserve life,” to make sure that there would be a “remnant,” enough “survivors” from this family to move out into God’s larger purposes for the world. This divine purpose for life does not relate narrowly to Jacob’s family, but to the larger
world. All the attention given to Joseph must be related to these overarching purposes. At the same time, the particular promise to Israel now becomes integrated with this purpose.

3. The author integrates Jacob’s twofold blessing of Pharaoh (47:7, 10) with the aforementioned dynamic. As announced in 12:2-3, the chosen family will be a blessing to all, not least to those who extend blessing upon them (as Egypt and Pharaoh certainly have). This entails—even if not actually stated—a blessing for life and well-being for Pharaoh and his family and fertility for his lands and animals. One notes no little irony here, as a lowly foreign shepherd pronounces a blessing upon this paragon of wisdom and power who was understood to participate in the very life of the divine. The text does not state explicitly that Pharaoh, potentate though he is, needs blessing (as his question in 47:8 suggests). Moreover, Jacob represents one who is Lord even of Pharaoh, and from whom all blessings flow.

By this action Jacob adheres to the calling of this chosen family, whose words and deeds on behalf of their God should reach out beyond themselves and include within the circle of blessing even those who seem least in need of it. The need for God’s blessing cuts across socioeconomic strata and political boundaries; Jacob and Pharaoh stand together as recipients of blessing. Even more, the blessing ought to extend to those whose relationship to the chosen may become problematic and difficult. Jacob’s blessing of this pharaoh stands in the background of the later conflict with the pharaohs in Exodus; it remains a sign of the desirable relationship with the Egyptians.

4. In 47:13-26, we see comparable, if more concrete, blessing activity on Joseph’s part. This Israelite, whose authority extends over a nonchosen people, responds to their cries for bread. The links between this text and 45:7 show that the preservation of life remains important for all people. The issues of life and death for Jacob’s family over the course of the narrative have become issues for the Egyptians (note the repeated concern in vv. 19, 25). The place to which Israel has gone to seek relief is now itself caught up in the famine’s effects; Joseph, in effect, returns the favor. The people of God are here engaged in seeking to alleviate the devastating effects of the famine on people who stand outside of their own community, by working in and through a variety of governmental structures. Their methods may not be a model of perfection, but taking the opinions of the hurting people themselves into account, they enter into the fray on behalf of life rather than death.

5. The Egyptians view the famine as a life-and-death issue not only for themselves but also for their land (vv. 18-19). Their cry to Joseph involves the future of the land (“that the land may not become desolate”) as much as their own. They thereby recognize that such events have important ecological consequences and that the human future is inextricably linked with the future of the land. This testifies to the wisdom of the nonchosen regarding the care of creation—a wisdom often evident through the centuries, including our own, and to which the community of faith should be as responsive as Joseph.
6. We now understand better the statement that a later pharaoh did not “know Joseph” (Exod 1:8). Later generations of pharaohs will not remember that frequently Joseph served as the mediator of blessings for Egyptian royalty. There may be some irony in that, as Joseph makes “slaves” of the Egyptians (though not to himself), so the later pharaohs—who do not have the wisdom and commitments of Joseph—will make “slaves” of his family. While we cannot be certain, this reversal raises the question of whether later pharaohs extend Joseph’s economic policy to include the Israelites. Any governmental policy can be twisted in such a way as to become demonic. Yet, that must not be allowed to immobilize people in their efforts to work for life in and through imperfect structures.

GENESIS 47:27–50:26, THE EMERGENCE OF UNIFIED ISRAEL

OVERVIEW

These chapters, evidently a composite, have been pieced together from various sources and given their present unity by the Priestly redactor. We may conclude that they are concerned primarily with the story of Jacob, his final days, his testamentary activities, his death and burial. Certainly they show that Jacob dies in peace (46:30), after numerous indications that it might not be so (cf. 37:35; 42:38; 44:29-31). Yet, Joseph’s role remains important as well. One might suggest that 47:27-28 and 50:22-23 lift up both persons by the way they bracket the section (both “settle” in Egypt, are fruitful, and die at a certain age).

But these chapters possess a more fundamental purpose together with chaps. 46–47: They speak of the transition from the individual sons of Jacob to corporate Israel and the tribal dynamics and interrelationships characteristic of a people. This story comes to a climax in 50:24, with the reconciled brothers receiving the promise from Joseph (who had received it from Jacob in 48:3-4, 21-22). As such, chaps. 48–50 provide a bracket with chaps. 37–38 for the entire story, moving from the apparent exclusion of Joseph and Judah to their special role associated with promises in a unified family.

Subsequent tribal history has shaped these chapters. Hence, the relationship between Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, in chap. 48 plays off the development and history of Israelite tribes with these names, collectively called the house of Joseph (e.g., Amos 5:6). The blessing of Jacob in chap. 49 does so in a comparable way for all of Jacob’s sons, though recognizing the ascendancy of the Joseph and Judah tribes in the north and south.

Genesis 47:27–48:22, Joseph and His Sons
COMMENTARY

This segment begins with a summary statement (47:27-28; v. 27 does double duty) then moves to Joseph’s oath regarding Jacob’s burial (47:29-31), to Jacob’s adoption and blessing of Joseph’s two sons (48:1-22), to Jacob’s “blessing” on all his sons (49:1-28), and his death and burial (49:29–50:14). It closes with the brothers’ reconciliation (50:15-21) and the promise to the unified family (50:24) during Joseph’s final days (50:22-26).

47:27. This verse serves as a preliminary conclusion to the story (see the parallel with 37:1). The people of Israel—not the corporate reference—not only survive in Goshen, but they thrive, gaining many possessions and, in fulfillment of the divine promise (35:11; 1:28; cf. 48:4), growing considerably (cf. Exod 1:7). The connections with both Genesis 1 and 35 provide a link between God’s creative work and God’s promissory activity.

47:28-31. This episode begins with a summary statement about Jacob’s life and death. He lives his last seventeen years in Egypt (cf. 37:2).

Prior to his death, Jacob requests that Joseph swear an oath regarding his burial in Canaan (cf. 24:2 for the phrase “hand under thigh”). In 49:29-32, Jacob will charge all the brothers with this task, specifying the cave at Machpelah, near Hebron (23:1-20; 50:5, 12-13). Jacob asks Joseph to “show kindness and faithfulness” (tmaw dsj hesed we 'umet), two significant theological terms (v. 29). This oath presents strong commitment language for what seems an insignificant issue to moderns, but burial in Canaan is no minor matter to Jacob (and Joseph, 50:25), not least because of God’s own promise (46:4). It may be a not so subtle effort to assure the continuance of his family in Canaan rather than Egypt.

The phrase “lie down with my ancestors [fathers]” is an idiom for death (cf. 15:15; 25:8); the phrase “bow at the head of the bed” (the NIV adopts another text) probably refers to a worshipful gesture in the bed to which Jacob is confined (48:2; cf. Heb. 11:21). It has nothing to do with bowing down to Joseph, as if the dream in 37:9 were partially fulfilled in this gesture; in the immediately following text, Jacob exercises authority over Joseph.

48:1-7. Upon hearing that his father is ill, Joseph takes his two sons to their grandfather for a proper farewell. Because Joseph has not been told of God’s promises (or himself received a revelation), at least in the storyline, Jacob recalls God’s (El Shaddai, 17:1) appearance to him at Luz (Bethel) in Canaan (35:9-13). The major elements of the promise were that his family would experience considerable growth (see 47:27), become a “community/company of peoples” (see 28:3), and receive Canaan as a perpetual holding (see 17:8; perpetuity does not appear in chap. 35).
This report moves immediately to Jacob’s adoption of Ephraim and Manasseh as his own sons, “just as Reuben and Simeon are” (Jacob’s oldest sons), a legal act with parallels in the ancient Near East (see Ruth 4:16-17). The “therefore” (NRSV) of v. 5 shows that Jacob makes this decision on the basis of the previous promise: As its recipient, he assumes power to designate its inheritors. This act places Joseph’s sons on a par with Jacob’s own sons. Should Joseph have other offspring, they are to be his own, though for purposes of inheritance they will participate with the families of Ephraim and Manasseh.

Then (v. 7), for reasons not entirely clear, Jacob recalls Rachel’s death at the time of his own death (quoting from 35:16, 19, perhaps because it follows the just-cited 35:9-13). The link between Rachel and this adoption of her grandchildren could be rooted in Jacob’s special love for the wife who died in childbirth. The fact that the mother of the two sons is Asenath, the daughter of an Egyptian priest (46:20), may also be a factor.

48:8-20. A ritual of blessing now follows (cf. chap. 27) as a concluding part of the adoption ceremony. It begins with a verification of the boys’ identity (cf. 27:18), as Joseph confesses them to be God’s gift to him (so 41:51). The nearly blind Jacob (cf. 27:1) asks that they be brought near so that he can bless them. After kissing and embracing the sons and having them placed near (on?) his knees (v. 12, a symbolic act legitimating their status as sons; cf. 30:3; 50:23), he confesses that God has let him live long enough to see both Joseph and his sons. Jacob certainly had had other opportunities to see his grandsons—here understood to be boys. Hence, these chapters should not be conceived in a linear way.

After bowing his face to the earth (a gesture of honor), Joseph stands them next to his father, Ephraim on the left and Manasseh on the right, the place of honor, assuming that the oldest (Manasseh) would be the recipient of Jacob’s right hand. Jacob, however, crosses his hands so that his right hand rests on Ephraim (v. 14; cf. Num 27:18, 23). When Joseph sees this (v. 17), he interrupts the ritual, thinking of Jacob’s failing sight (ironic, considering his own story; Num 27:1), and begins to switch his father’s hands. But Jacob calmly insists, knowing full well what he has done. He explains: Both sons will become a great people, but Ephraim shall be greater, the father of a multitude of nations. Ephraim will truly be preeminent, so prominent that Ephraim becomes a name for the northern kingdom (cf. Jer 31:9; Hosea). “So he put Ephraim ahead of Manasseh” (v. 20). In terms of tribal history, Ephraim and Manasseh replace the nonterritorial tribe of Levi, thus retaining the number twelve.

The two “blessings” of the sons by Jacob are distributed over the course of the action (vv. 15-16, 20). Jacob verbally treats Ephraim and Manasseh equally, building on the act of adoption. Only in the ritual and the explanation given to Joseph (v. 19) does a distinction become evident.
In the first, Jacob “blessed Joseph,” though it seems that only the sons are blessed (as in v. 20), but, as in vv. 21-22, reference to the father includes the sons (see Deut 33:13-17; cf. Gen 49:22-26). Jacob begins a threefold invocation, in liturgical language, with a structure similar to the Aaronic benediction in Num 6:24-26. The specific content of the blessing (v. 16) consists of (1) their families’ being included within the ongoing traditions that include the names of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; and (2) their considerable growth as families, blessed by God with the power of life (already by Num 26:28-37 their numbers exceed those of Reuben and Simeon; cf. also Deut 33:17).

The second blessing (v. 20) is complicated by the use of the singular “you” (see the NRSV footnote); the first instance probably refers to the sons individually (cf. the use of plural and singular in Num 6:23-26), the second to the one being blessed. The sons’ names can be invoked when Israel (the people, cf. 47:27) pronounces blessings on others: God bless you as he has blessed Ephraim and Manasseh, with all that means in terms of life, fertility, and well-being (cf. 12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). What God has done to them will be an exemplary instance of divine blessing.

48:21-22. These verses show that the adoption of Joseph’s sons does not entail a displacement of Joseph. This elevation of his sons, in effect, represents an elevation of Joseph to the status of firstborn, who in his sons receives a double share (cf. 49:26; Deut. 33:13-17; 1 Chr 5:1-2). Double shares go to the firstborn. The placement of this chapter before the blessings of chap. 49, within which the Joseph sayings (vv. 22-26) are really the only ones that directly relate to the blessings promised his ancestors, attest to this elevation.

Jacob here speaks more directly to Joseph. Jacob has included him in the blessing of his sons up to this point (v. 15), made especially clear in the transmission of the promise of presence and land to Joseph and his family (the “you” is plural). God will be with them; this promise, usually associated with a journey (28:15), anticipates the exodus. God will also bring them back to the land of promise. These are promises heretofore not extended to Joseph; he in turn will transmit them to his brothers in 50:24. In Canaan he will be given one more portion than that received by his brothers (namely, the portions assigned to his two sons; see Josh 17:14-18).

The word translated “portion” (NRSV) or “ridge of land” (NIV) is נַקָּמָה (nakama), usually meaning “shoulder,” but here probably a play on the city of Shechem. Jacob purchased land there (33:18-19), and Joseph will be buried there (Josh 24:32); it became a central city in the northern kingdom (i.e., Ephraim). The defeat of the Amorites (the pre-Israelite population of Canaan; cf. 15:16) may refer to the violent acts of Simeon and Levi in 34:25-29. Yet, it speaks of Jacob’s own sword and bow. Jacob judged those actions harshly (34:30; and in the blessing to be pronounced [49:5-7]). It may be a fragment, recognized also in Israel’s never having to conquer the Shechem area. If it alludes to Genesis 34, Jacob would now be simply dealing with reality; it is past history and can now be assigned to the family of Joseph (not to Simeon and Levi).
REFLECTIONS

1. The close reader of Genesis might have predicted the turn of events in chap. 48. As throughout the ancestral stories, Jacob’s included, primogeniture is set aside; the younger has been given priority over the older. The reader will also recall the deathbed blessing of Jacob’s father, Isaac (chap. 27). Such a deathbed blessing was believed to have a special efficacy.

Israelites believed that Jacob’s act of putting Ephraim ahead of Manasseh accounted, in part, for the later history of these tribes. While both tribes were powerful during the early years, Ephraim became the more powerful by the time of the monarchy. As Westermann says, the account provides a “‘prehistorical’ conception of history,” wherein “events were explained by the family structures underlying them.”221 Jacob’s decision shapes the future, yet not in such a way that his decision floats above the realities of history until it comes to pass. Jacob’s decision continues to be remembered and has effects on the subsequent history of the family, which involves the relative status of each of these tribes.

2. Jacob’s threefold invocation of God (48:15-16) provides a gathering of themes from the Genesis narrative.

God is the one before whom Abraham and Isaac walked (recalling 17:1; 24:40; cf. 5:22; 6:9). The author focuses here not on God’s action, but on human “walking.” Their faithfulness becomes important for what Jacob now has to say. God’s action preceded their response; the deity has been engaged in every aspect of the lives of Jacob’s grandfather and father. Jacob can now testify twice to God’s involvement in his own life (but not his own “walking”).

God is the one who has been his shepherd all the days of Jacob’s life, thereby placing a concrete image on the promise of 28:15 (cf. 35:3). The image of God as shepherd includes the ideas of guidance, protection, and the provision of sustenance for the journey (cf. 49:24; Pss 23:1; 80:2). Jacob certainly draws this image of God out of his own experience as shepherd. This integration of life experience and divine revelation illustrates how new images for God develop within the community of faith. It prompts reflection on how new images for God might be developed out of the interplay of modern experience and inherited traditions.

God is the one who has redeemed (lag go’el) him from all harm (Ir ra’). The text actually reads “the angel [^alm mal]Ak],” i.e., God who appears in human form (see 31:11-13; cf. 16:7-13; 21:17-19; 22:11-12, 15-16). Jacob’s use of “angel” could be informed by his struggle with the “man” at the Jabbok (32:22-33). The language of redemption (go’ul) rarely refers to God’s action on behalf of individuals (cf. Pss 19:14;
103:4). The OT uses it chiefly for God’s salvific acts at the Red Sea (Exod 6:6; 15:13), which this anticipates, as well as in the exile (Isaiah 40–55; Jer 31:9-11). Divine activity on behalf of Jacob thus moves beyond the providential, ongoing activity of the second predicate and more specifically speaks of God’s activity as one of salvation. The author thus integrates creation and redemption themes in these wide-ranging statements about God.

Genesis 49:1-33, The Last Words of Jacob

Link to:

COMMENTARY

Many scholars deem this poem—Jacob’s final words to his sons—to be one of the oldest pieces of literature in the OT. Its language, aphorisms, metaphors, word plays, and other poetic features make for many difficulties in text, translation, and interpretation. The poem has no doubt had a complex compositional history, evident, for example, in the differing length and character of each saying. One confronts difficulties in assessing the literary and historical relationships with a similar list of tribal sayings in Deuteronomy 33 (cf. Judg 5:14-18).

Only the sayings of Reuben and Judah occur in the second person, directly addressed to them; only in those of Reuben, Simeon/Levi, and Judah does Jacob refer to himself in the first person (also in the interlude, v. 18). The order of the sons corresponds to no other text; Leah’s six sons come first and Rachel’s last, with Bilhah’s sons (Dan, Naphtali) enclosing those of Zilpah. The form of the sayings regarding Reuben, Simeon/Levi, Judah, and Joseph is more oracular, that of the others more aphoristic.

The prose context in which the poem is set occasions further difficulties. Verse 28 names this word of Jacob a blessing; yet curse and censure occur. The “blessings” of Reuben, Simeon, and Levi are sharply negative (cf. vv. 4-7). Jacob’s telling his sons “what will happen to you in days to come” presents a similar difficulty. While most of the sayings bear on the future, not all do. Moreover, they also often focus on past events or present circumstance.

The differences among the sayings provide evidence for their independent origins in widely disparate settings. They have been brought together into a larger poem over an extensive period of time, the present composite form emerging sometime late in the period of the judges or in the early monarchy. The sayings were then inserted into a narrative that originally moved directly from 49:1a (“Jacob summoned his sons”) to 49:28b, a reference to blessing but with no specific content. The structural element that most informs the present shape is Jacob’s repeated charge regarding his burial that encloses the two blessings of chaps. 48–49, first to Joseph (47:29-31) and then to all the
sons (49:29-32). Enclosing each of these in turn are the references to Jacob’s death (47:28; 49:33).

These sayings have to do less with the persons in the previous narrative than with tribal entities,

reflecting the history of the tribes during the early centuries in Canaan. Only those of Reuben and Simeon/Levi are explicitly related to earlier incidents; otherwise, only Judah and Joseph mention intrafamilial relationships. The negative words about Reuben and Simeon reflect both their ill-begotten behaviors and their later disappearance as tribal entities; they are the only sayings with a crime/punishment schema. The two lengthiest blessings, those of Judah and Joseph (vv. 8-12, 22-26), reflect both their dominance in the ancestral story and their predominance in tribal history. Only the Joseph sayings mention God explicitly (v. 18 is an interlude); they provide the most direct link to the ancestral promises of blessing. Many of the sayings include lively metaphors from the nonhuman world.

49:1-2. Jacob asks his sons to gather around his deathbed to hear a word about their future. Not all the sayings allude to the future, but in all cases they move beyond the lifetime of the sons. Hence, there is overall movement from individual to tribal entity, which parallels other elements in these final chapters that move from Jacob to Israel (see 46:8; 47:27). This future, already beginning to emerge out of the present, is conceived in historical, not eschatological, terms.

49:3-4. Jacob addresses Reuben directly. Reuben, Jacob’s firstborn and the product of his youthful vigor, excels in rank and power. But like sea waters, he seems unreliable, inconsistent in behavior. He will not excel, because he disgracefully lay with Bilhah, his father’s wife (35:22). Jacob, in effect, deposes Reuben from his status as firstborn (see chap. 48). That future of instability (see Deut 33:6) works itself out historically: The tribe, whose territory lay east of the Dead Sea, was absorbed by the Moabites.

49:5-7. Simeon and Levi are the only sons considered together, no doubt because of the slaughter at Shechem (34:25-30). The poem includes strong language about them; they were murderous, violent, fiercely angry, arbitrary, cruel, and harsh in their treatment of animals. Consequently, Jacob will not participate in their counsels (cf. 34:30). He curses their anger (i.e., “them,” an instance of metonymy) and announces the dispersion of their families throughout the nation. Historically, their “dispersion” appears quite different. Simeon (omitted in Deuteronomy 33) was absorbed into the tribe of Judah. Levi later becomes a nonterritorial priestly group, elect by God (Num 8:14-19; 18:24), a development not in view here (cf. Deut 33:8-11). Jacob’s repeated use of the first person reflects a prophetic mode of discourse; strikingly, Jacob himself (namely, his word) serves as the agent of judgment in v. 7.

49:8-12. Jacob praises Judah highly in recognition of his increasingly prominent role in
the preceding narrative. The heart of the saying contains a promise: All his brothers will recognize him as preeminent because he will defeat his enemies in battle (i.e., seize them by the neck). The poet employs the image of a lion/lioness/lion’s cub for Judah because he is cleverly successful in his ventures (i.e., he always returns to the lair with his prey) and no one dares to provoke him (cf. Num 24:9; “lion of Judah” becomes a messianic image, Rev 5:5).

Verse 10 appears especially difficult, particularly the word hlyv (sîloh), variously translated as a place (Shiloh) or a person (“ruler,” the one to whom rule belongs; so the NIV) or tribute (NRSV). It most likely refers to a person. The basic image is clear: The poet depicts Judah as a royal figure, whose rule (i.e., scepter, staff standing between feet; cf. Ps 45:6) will continue for a lengthy period until a climactic event occurs that assures a glorious future, when he will reign over obedient nations and a fertile earth.

But what will happen to enable this future? Judah experiences some growth over the years, but achieves prominence only during the time of Saul and David. Hence, many scholars suggest that this verse refers to the Davidic monarchy, at which point Judah’s preeminence as a tribe will assume a broader sovereignty over the nations. The imagery has also been interpreted in messianic terms—e.g., the Balaam oracles (see Num 24:17). In such contexts, Judah will rule until the Messiah comes, and all the peoples of the world will serve him in a time of great abundance. Historically, an original Davidic reference was probably given a messianic interpretation during the course of Israel’s history (cf. Psalm 2; Isa 11:1-9).

Although the images are somewhat obscure, vv. 11-12 speak of the new prosperity brought about by Judah’s hegemony. There will be so many vineyards that he can use the tender stalks to tether his donkey (a royal animal, Zech 9:9) and a grape harvest so abundant that he can even wash his clothes in blood-colored wine. He will be a person of surpassing beauty, with dark eyes and white teeth (see Ps 45:2; the images in Num 24:5-7).

49:13. This verse focuses on geographical location (cf. Josh 19:10-16, where Zebulun is not on the coast). Zebulun shall have an advantageous position, with access to the sea, at or near the port of Sidon (=Phoenicia).

49:14-15. The poet describes Issachar as a strong donkey that has been domesticated and rests at ease rather than roaming free (i.e., lives among the sheep, or saddlebags); this may allude to the fertile plain of Esdraelon in northern Canaan. The image suggests one content with his lot, in exchange for which it will (NIV) or has (NRSV) become a servant to others (e.g., the Canaanites or Solomon’s forced levy, 1 Kgs 9:21?). These verses seem to present a negative future (contrast Judg 5:15).

49:16-17. In this positive saying, Dan (a name similar to the word for “judge”) will
become active in seeking justice for the tribes of Israel (note the tribal reference; cf. Judges 18). The image of a poisonous snake suggests Dan as a small tribe struggling for survival, but which will successfully strike at more powerful groups (“horse and rider”) and so advocate the causes it has assumed. The history of this tribe, which had difficulty settling within its original borders and migrated to the north, is very complex.222

49:18. This confession of trust in God provides an interlude reflected in the Psalms (25:5; 38:15; 119:166). Jacob waits for God. He interrupts the blessings on his sons with a word of anticipation for the salvation (h[wy yusûâ) that Yahweh (the only occurrence in chap. 49) will bring to him. This is probably not a word about Jacob personally, but a corporate reference, expressing trust in God’s eventual salvation on behalf of Jacob’s sons.

49:19. Gad settled east of the Jordan and was especially vulnerable to desert marauders. Gad will continue to be victimized by bands of raiders (wndwgy dwdg gudûd yugûdennû, a word play on dg Gad), but will be able to respond effectively by seemingly minor acts of bravery.

49:20. Asher’s coastal land was agriculturally fertile, hence he would provide rich food for royalty, including the export of delicacies. The reference appears positive.

49:21. The positive, but puzzling, image of Naphtali as a doe that has been set free and bears beautiful fawns suggests that he will enjoy freedom, vitality, and increase of numbers in the mountain areas of his home (north of the Sea of Galilee).

49:22-26. The relationship between Joseph and his sons in the previous chapter (see 48:15, 21-22) shows that the mention of either could count for both (cf. Deut 27:12; 33:13-17).

The image of a fruitful, well-watered bough whose branches extend ever outward suggests a growing community that moves into surrounding territories. Joseph’s enemies attacked him (his brothers?), but he held his own with strength, courage, and agility. This response was made possible because of divine aid, specified by an unusually concentrated series of images, drawn from liturgical practice (cf. 48:15-16): (a) Mighty One of Jacob (see Ps 132:2, 5; Isa 49:26; 60:16); God has seen Jacob through thick and thin during his numerous lengthy and troubled journeys. (b) Shepherd (see 48:15). (c) The epithet “Rock of Israel” (cf. Deut 32:15, 31; 1 Sam 7:12) stresses the strength and constancy of God on behalf of the weak and helpless. God’s faithfulness remains steadfast even when being buffeted about by people and events. (d) The title “God of your father” (see Exod 3:6) represents continuity from one generation to the next, informed most fundamentally by God’s faithfulness to promises made. (e) The Almighty (Shaddai, see 17:1).

This God will continue to help and bless Joseph (note the creation and redemption themes). These themes tie Joseph most closely to the promises given to his ancestors (12:2-3) and are expanded (cf. the parallels in Deut 28:3-6; 33:13-16): the blessing of
water for crops—so important in an arid land—from both the heavens above (rain) and the earth beneath (springs) as well as the blessing of the fertility of the females (breasts and womb). The word blessing occurs six times!

Verse 26 has a benedictory form. The blessings extended by Jacob (received from Isaac, 27:28) are richer than any others (if they exceed the mountains, they exceed all). They are now given to Joseph, who has been set apart from his brothers (a reference to chap. 48). The reference to head and brow may be synecdoche or refer to the laying on of hands (cf. 48:13-18).

49:27. The image of a ravenous wolf for Benjamin, though basically positive, does not correspond to anything in the narrative (cf. Judg 5:13-14; 20:15-25). The poem portrays him as relentless and successful in battle with other peoples, which could be related to his territory’s central geographical location between Judah and Ephraim.

49:28. This concluding comment stresses that each of Jacob’s blessings was appropriate to the son—i.e., each was suitable to its person, history, and life situation. The narrator here, for the first time, mentions the twelve tribes.

49:29-33. In this final charge to his sons, Jacob reinforces the oath taken by Joseph (47:29-31); he knows that oaths no more control the future than do blessings. Jacob requests that he be buried in the place purchased by Abraham at Machpelah (chap. 23), where three generations are already buried (the only reference to the burial of Rebekah and Leah). The detail in the text makes the charge unmistakably clear; the repeated clause regarding purchase from the Hittites (vv. 29b, 32a) encloses the place reference, emphasizing its legal standing and authenticating the claim that this is the land promised to Jacob’s descendants. Having completed this charge, Jacob dies (cf. 27:30).

REFLECTIONS

1. Tribal considerations appear in chap 49. While most scholars think these words were written soon after the history they reflect, the text presents these materials as Jacob’s own word. Prophecy would not be fully adequate to describe these materials. We understand them better as Jacob’s judgment regarding the future of his sons’ lives on the basis of his thoroughgoing knowledge and evaluation of them. The past and present life of the son signals the way in which each future will be shaped. While this becomes explicit only with Reuben and Simeon/Levi, these cases function paradigmatically for the others. Hence, the future sketched out does not appear arbitrary, unrelated to experience. The wisdom exhibited by Jacob—an important link with the Joseph story as a whole— involves discerning how the future for each son grows out of past and present experience.

2. The last words of Jacob in chap 49 unify the book of Genesis in significant ways. Links with the divine promises to each ancestor are drawn up into this poem. The
promises regarding a nation/people (cf. 12:2; 46:3), numerous posterity (cf. 26:24; 48:4), and blessings in abundance (22:17) become a reality in the twelve tribes. Within chaps. 37–50, special attention was initially given to both Joseph (chap. 37) and Judah (chap. 38); now in these last words, Joseph and Judah dominate the scene (in terms of quantity of material [some 40 percent]), the extent to which the divine blessing affects their lives, and their role and influence in shaping Israel’s future.

Moreover, the efficacy of the word links the beginning and the end of Genesis, from the creative word of God to the effective word of the patriarch. At the same time, just as one finds a certain vulnerability of the divine word as its waits upon creaturely response, so also the patriarch’s word waits upon the contingencies of historical process as it moves into the future. This appears particularly evident concerning the role of the tribe of Levi, whose “dispersion” can hardly be considered negative due to its special election by God to priestly status (Num 8:14-19; 18:24; Deut 10:8-9). Thus Jacob’s words do not determine fully the future of the tribes.

3. A poet used striking metaphors to depict Jacob’s sons, including lion, donkey, snake, deer, fruit, tree, and wolf. We need to ask how such metaphors function. They have been created on the basis of observations made of commonalities between human beings and the animal and plant worlds. In congruence with the use of metaphor, the enemies of the various tribes are never named (the same phenomenon can be observed in Psalms); this gives the poem a more timeless quality, enabling the reader to relate it to a multitude of situations. We must thus be careful not to seek to pin down each saying to a particular historical moment. The movement back and forth between individual personalities and corporate identities also contributes to this fluidity. Hence, the sayings could link the ancestral period with virtually every succeeding period of the tribal history.

4. We should devote special consideration to 49:10-12 and should not consider this text a straightforward parallel to the messianic oracles of the prophets. First, the text is insufficiently clear to establish this claim. Second, it suggests, wrongly, that a full-blown messianism is present wherever these themes occur. It seems better to think that these verses provide early reflections concerning the future, particularly in view of the failure of the monarchy. These traditions of promise are associated with words of indictment and judgment on Reuben and Simon/Levi.

5. While one rightly should attend to the details associated with each of Jacob’s sons, one should also consider the overall picture of this family that emerges. The sayings suggest both unity and diversity. One could use the image of a body, moving back and forth between corporate identity and individual expression, with the various members of the body contributing in their own unique way to the functioning of the whole. At the same time, not all the members make equally important contributions; Judah and Joseph are evidently the head and the heart of the people. Moreover, not all play a positive role;
among the tribal groups there is excellence and mediocrity, vigor and weakness, goodness and evil. Overall, the author presents a realistic, warts-and-all portrayal of the people of Israel. Yet, the word for the future is positive, most fundamentally because God is at work among them, saving and blessing.

Genesis 50:1-14, The Burial of Jacob

Link to: 

COMMENTARY

The author reports on the events associated with the death and burial of Jacob. Weeping and mourning, on the part of both Joseph and the Egyptians, move in and out of this scene (vv. 1, 3-4, 10-11).

Once again Joseph weeps, marking another major stage in the development of the story (see 42:24). He directs the physicians to embalm Jacob, a forty-day task, included within the seventy days of mourning. The OT reports mummification only for Jacob and Joseph (hence it genuinely reflects the Egyptian setting). Since this practice was customary for Egyptian monarchs, the writer depicts Jacob’s receiving a royal funeral. In contrast, it seems ironic that the burial of Joseph, the royal official, is described in the simplest of terms (v. 26). The Egyptians mourn for Jacob in a grand way (the brothers are never so singled out).

Joseph attends to the oath he had sworn to his father about burial in Canaan (see 47:29-31). Contrary to usual practice (see 47:1), perhaps because of the mourning, Joseph indirectly asks permission of Pharaoh to go to Canaan to bury his father. Pharaoh grants it, and Joseph proceeds exactly according to his request.

Joseph and a “very great company” (v. 9) make the journey to Canaan with Jacob’s body. This return anticipates the exodus and subsequent events, only this time the Egyptians accompany them! The group includes not only all the members of the “household” of both Joseph and Jacob (except children—probably with mothers—and livestock), but also “all” of Pharaoh’s servants and “all” the elders of the land of Egypt, with full chariot (i.e., military) accompaniment. Once again, in purposeful hyperbole, the full participation of the Egyptians appears stunning. The Egyptians seem to agree with the claims of Jacob’s family to the land of Canaan. The author reinforces this claim (ironically?) by the “objective” observation of the Canaanites that the Egyptians engaged in such “a very great and sorrowful mourning” (vv. 10-11).

Jacob’s burial place remains unclear. In v. 5, Joseph quotes his father’s request to be buried “in the tomb that I hewed out for myself in the land
of Canaan.” We do not find this description in either of Jacob’s charges (47:29-31; 49:29-32). The language probably reflects Pharaoh’s understanding rather than a different burial tradition. For reasons unknown, they hold a wake at the threshing floor at Atad (renamed Abel-mizraim, “mourning of Egypt,” by the Canaanites), a place otherwise unknown. While “beyond the Jordan” could mean the Transjordan, if the writer were east of the Jordan it could be Canaan (as the reference to Canaanites suggests). If the latter, the journey would not be a major detour from a direct Egypt-Mamre (Hebron) route. Hence, we would not need to think of another tradition regarding Jacob’s place of burial. Only Joseph observes a seven-day time of mourning (the usual Israelite practice, 1 Sam 31:13), and only the sons continue on to the burial place.

The text stipulates that Jacob’s sons did exactly what their father had instructed them to do (v. 12). This claim must refer to the following verse, hence v. 12 should conclude with a colon (so NIV). This episode concludes with the return of the entire party to Egypt (as Joseph had promised to Pharaoh, at least regarding himself, v. 5).

REFLECTIONS

It would appear that the positive references to Egyptian participation (indeed, Egyptian burial practices) in Jacob’s funeral are intended to stand in sharp contrast to the changed relationship between Israel and the Egyptians in the following Exodus narrative. Genesis speaks of the kind of relationship that can be possible with other, nonchosen peoples. Exodus records an aberration. Genesis, not Exodus, should inform Israel’s post-Exodus relations with the Egyptians.

Genesis 50:15-21, The Full Reconciliation of Israel’s Sons

Link to:

COMMENTARY

The author sets this story of reconciliation between two deaths, though it is difficult to relate it to the story in chap. 45. It may be simply a recapitulation, but its purpose seems more complex (see discussion on chap. 45).

In v. 15, the brothers express apprehension about how Joseph will treat them now that their father has died; he may decide to exact retribution (see 27:41). Given the lack of resolution in chap. 45, this is understandable. Moreover, in the face of the death of a common parent, particularly a parent of such influence and renown, typical patterns of behavior may no longer continue. Life among the siblings has to be renegotiated.
In vv. 16-17, the brothers send a messenger (cf. 37:32) to present their concerns to Joseph, suggesting their high anxiety (the NRSV adopts the LXX reading, omitting the messenger). They couch their concerns in terms of their father’s deathbed wish, rather than a direct personal request. The upshot of Jacob’s request was that the brothers be reconciled, more specifically that Joseph forgive them the crime they committed. No evidence exists that Jacob actually said this, but Joseph remains as much in the dark on this as the reader! This is the only text in which Jacob gives a clear indication that he knows what the brothers did to Joseph (cf. 42:36). Nothing suggests it is a fabrication, spun out of the brothers’ anxiety. In fact, the last reference to a report from the brothers about what Jacob said (44:24-29) appears truthful. The progress of the story toward the unified family of chap. 50 reinforces their speech as an honest report.

Building on their father’s request, the brothers call themselves “servants” (anticipating a key theme in Exodus) of “the God of your father.” The author grounds their appeal in their common faith in the God of Jacob; this binds them to one another in the heritage of their father. The theme of forgiveness occurs twice in v. 17, in Jacob’s request and voiced by the brothers. Words for “sin” and “evil” are used four times, in both their father’s speech and in their own words. This high consciousness of their crime suggests that the encounter in chap. 45 did not resolve the matter for the brothers. Even with the assurances given them by Joseph, they still live with the guilt of what they have done.

Joseph weeps, though not in the presence of his brothers (cf. NRSV). Once again, this marks a move toward the resolution of the conflict. He had wept with his brothers in 45:1-2, 14-15 at the occasion of a reconciliation. Here he weeps over their message, words revealing an ongoing mistrust. The weeping may also signal to the reader that he will not seek revenge, marking another stage in the development of the story (see 42:24).

The reference to Joseph’s weeping leads into the brothers’ coming before him (the NRSV’s “wept” is based on an emendation of the Hebrew), without waiting for any response from the messenger. The brothers do obeisance before Joseph and declare themselves his servants/slaves (once again, the Exodus theme). They intensify the messenger’s words with these personal actions. The brothers’ bowing before Joseph does not fulfill his dream in 37:7 (as it does in 42:6; 43:26; 44:14). Joseph will now reject such status as an inappropriate relationship between himself and his brothers.

The words to have no fear enclose Joseph’s response (vv. 19-21). This signals an oracle of salvation, a word of comfort and assurance. Such language commonly appears as God’s first word in theophany (see 21:17; 26:24; 46:3); Second Isaiah uses it to speak to the exiles (41:10-14). We also find this language in an oracle of salvation at the birth of Jesus and at his resurrection (Matt 28:10; Luke 2:10).

Joseph gives three reasons to ease their fears. First, he responds in tones that are both rebuke and reassurance: “Am I in the place of God?” The question portrays a profound human judgment in this matter, not a “humble declaration of noncompetence.”223 It probably has a double reference—to their request for forgiveness and to their offer to
become slaves. (a) The latter occurs immediately before his response. Joseph is not God, thus they can be assured that he will not behave as a pharaoh to them. He remains subject to God as the brothers are; they stand together under the authority of a divine other who works purposefully on behalf of them all. This theme anticipates the acts of the pharaoh who did not know Joseph (Exod 1:8) and the fivefold use of servant language in Exod 1:13-14, with the authoritarianism and potential for oppression. The implication here functions as it does in Exodus; the people of Israel will be the servants of God alone. (b) Regarding forgiveness, Joseph seems to reject a guilt/forgiveness approach (as in 45:3-8), leaving that up to God. At the same time, his words and deeds reveal a conciliatory spirit, showing that no revenge on his part is in view.

Second, regardless of their intentions, and Joseph names them evil (עָשָׂה חָרֶם; see 44:4-5), they can be assured their actions have been drawn into God’s larger purposes for goodness, and these have come to prevail. The God who created the world and called it good has been about life and its preservation in and through all of these events, despite their intentions for death. Joseph, by clearly naming the brothers’ actions as “evil”—something not done in 45:3-9—makes this matter public. His positive action has their evil behaviors in clear view, and the brothers now know that the evil they have done no longer counts against them.

Third, they will be cared for. In v. 21, Joseph comforts them and speaks tenderly/kindly to them (both words are used in Isa 40:1-2 in a context of forgiveness), assuring them that he will provide for them, with special attention to the children, and hence their future (as in 45:10-11; 47:12). This involves not just words, but concrete practical realities. The brothers do not respond, and though vv. 24-25 assume a positive response, the brothers’ final silence in the narrative may indicate a sense of foreboding, or at least openness, about future relationships.

REFLECTIONS

1. The theme of goodness in Genesis comes full circle here. In Genesis 1, God created everything “very good.” This “good” did not entail perfection or deny the need of development. Throughout Genesis, God has been pursuing these good intentions for the created order. Even more, God recruited human beings to participate in that pursuit of goodness; God’s creative work leads to specific vocations. Joseph’s work in Egypt, for example, served creation (41:33-37, recognized by Pharaoh as “good”), providing for the daily needs of all persons (cf. 45:11; 47:12; 50:21). God’s creational purposes for goodness, life, and well-being in and through people do not cease even in the face of their weakness or failure.

2. The narrator gathers up a key theme of these chapters (50:20) concerning what both the brothers and God have done (see also 45:5-9). The verb בָּשָׂם (hAsab) is translated in
various ways; either “plan” or “intend” will do, though “plan” lifts up the concrete side of intention more directly. This term also more clearly alludes to the plots of the brothers against Joseph. In their very plans, God, too, has been working on a plan for goodness (see Jer 18:11-12, 18; 29:11).

God does not have a highly detailed plan all worked out that will come to fruition regardless of what humans do. The people involved are not automatons, whose good or evil actions count for nothing. Positively, they can act for good in the face of those who plan for evil. Negatively, they can frustrate God’s intentions, so that the future may look different from what would have been the case had only the divine plan been realized. Yet, however much these planners may complicate the divine planning, God’s way into the future will never finally be stymied. God will persevere, will stay with plans for life, though it may entail changes in the ways and means to that goal in view of human intractability and failure. We should remember this perspective, voiced at the end of Genesis, as we move into the “evil” evident in the book of Exodus.

This divine action has been behind the scenes, unobtrusive. Dissimilar to the rest of Genesis, it has been more subtle, interweaving the threads of goodness and mercy among the various strands of evil in their lives, working toward the best possible end. God can take what such persons do and draw it into God’s larger purposes. We do not find a situation in which “even the evil design is included in God’s plan.” God does not intend human evil. Rather, God’s plan “is to bring the evil devised by the brothers to good effect.”225 Paul echoes this text in Rom 8:28: In everything, in even the worst that evildoers may throw God’s way, God will draw it into the divine plans for good. For Joseph, finally, one must trust in these persistent divine purposes on behalf of life.

3. God’s purposes are not confined to the reconciliation of the brothers. Joseph’s word of comfort and assurance does address the context of their fear and guilt. But these words effect salvation in their lives, in the broadest sense of the term, which moves beyond forgiveness to include life and well-being.

This story demonstrates that the moral order does work, but not in any exact or inevitable way. It can be ameliorated by God’s reconciling work as well as human comfort and compassion. The brothers do, indeed, reap many consequences for their deeds (cf. 42:14; 44:16); even forgiveness would not bring those to a sudden end. The issue becomes whether the evil consequences (hence the sin that triggered them) will be allowed to claim the day. God’s move, in and through Joseph, means that sin and its consequences are not allowed to have the last word. The people of God can trust that, in the midst of sin and evil, God pursues his purposes for good.

Joseph does not deal directly with his brothers’ guilt. In spite of their efforts to discern a word of forgiveness, we hear no such word from Joseph’s mouth. “The speech transcends
their preoccupation with guilt and turns them to a fresh way of understanding what has happened.”226 The narrative seeks to “restore their personal dignity and parity with Joseph”; a confession of sin “would make their status dependent upon his grace and would thus establish them in a position spiritually inferior to him.”227 What the brothers have done, God has been able to transmute into good, so their guilt no longer remains; therefore, no word from Joseph appears necessary. Although a word of forgiveness certainly could be appropriate in a general way, yet such a word may be used (consciously or unconsciously) to initiate or maintain a hierarchical relationship between the forgiver and the forgiven. The author seems concerned to make sure that, in the end, all parties to the dispute maintain their self-respect as moral equals.

4. God finally brings unity to this story. God is the only one who has been active in the story with a constant good purpose from beginning to end—that there might be life for all.

God is the only one who has been active at every level of the story, from the highest tier of governmental authority to the lowest sphere of everyday family life, suffusing them with the divine purposes for good. God holds life together in all of its personal and social complexity and ambiguity.

God has been active among both the chosen and the unchosen, including the Egyptians, with exactly the same purpose in mind: life. Genesis attests to God’s universal purpose in this story of Israel.

Genesis 50:22-26, The Promise Transmitted

Link to:

COMMENTARY

This epilogue portrays Joseph’s final years, pulls together a key theme, and serves as a bridge to the next stage of Israel’s story. Indeed, the reference to Joseph’s bones pushes on to the land settlement (Josh 24:32; cf. Exod 13:19). The first reference to “Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob” presupposes the unity of the previous narrative. Joseph’s death at 110 years provides an inclusio for this section (and with 48:28), while Joseph’s “staying” (bvy yAsab) in Egypt in v. 22 ties back to Jacob’s “settling” in 37:1, completing the movement from Canaan to Egypt (cf. 47:27).

Joseph remains in Egypt along with the rest of Jacob’s family, living long enough to see his great-grandchildren. They were born on his knees—i.e., claimed as his descendants. The future of his family, and hence the promises regarding posterity, relates to the rest of
the family. At the same time, the length of time indicates that the family has stayed in Egypt generations beyond the famine, anticipating the hardships of Exodus.

When Joseph is at the point of death, he extends to his brothers (all are assumed to be alive) both a promise and a charge. Jacob had never spoken the promise to his sons, except to Joseph in 48:21, though there are links in chap. 49. He assures them that God will surely visit them in Egypt (see Exod 3:16; 4:31; 13:19) and bring them out of the land of Egypt (see Exod 3:8, 17; 13:19) and into the land of Canaan, the land promised to their ancestors in the previous chapters. Egypt was not to be their permanent home. Joseph’s words create the bridge to the next stage in Israel’s story, just as it has been his actions in this story that have enabled the brothers to go into Exodus as a unified family.

Joseph also charges them that, after these events, they are to take his bones to Canaan (see Exod 13:19). He trusts his brothers to see to his proper burial, as together they had seen to their father’s. He does not insist on a replication of his father’s burial, but he links his future with that of his father and the rest of the family. According to Josh 24:32, Joseph was buried in Shechem. Joseph’s death marks the end of Genesis, but the stage has been set for a series of events that will constitute Israel’s family as the people of God.