Beginnings of Sacred History

Studies in the Book of Genesis

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Preface

The Book of Genesis holds a fascination for Bible readers probably only surpassed by the Book of Revelation. Most of the popular treatments of Genesis, however, arise out of presupposed theological concerns, such as, the date of creation, the reconciliation of science and the Bible, the masculine and feminine roles of humans, the nature of original sin, and the eschatological ramifications of God's covenantal promises to Abraham. To be sure, these concerns are not irrelevant, and in fact, how one views them may contribute substantially to one's entire theological perspective. On the other hand, those who approach the Genesis record with a preset agenda of dogmatism or apologetics often fail to glean from the text the central reasons it was written in the first place.

This study is an exercise in biblical theology, that is, it is an attempt to allow any categories and questions to arise naturally from the text itself rather than presupposing them and/or imposing them before one starts. Some of the previously mentioned issues will be addressed briefly, as might be expected, but they will not be allowed to dominate the study. Brief indications will usually be given to diverse positions without necessarily deciding in favor of one over against another. For the person whose theology cannot tolerate open questions, this study will perhaps be threatening. For the person who would wish to explore debatable questions in depth, this study will be frustrating. However, for the person who wants to gain an overall grasp of the Book of Genesis, and who especially wants to put himself or herself in the sandals of the ancient Near Eastern person of about two millennia B.C., this study may prove to be of service.

The lessons of this study have been divided so as to correspond with the divisions of the Book of Genesis in *The New Media Bible*, a film series available from Christian film distributors under the title "The Genesis Project."

Genesis 1:1--2:4a

The Book of Genesis has two primary sections which should be distinguished from each other. One is made up of the narratives of human origins (chapters 1-11), and the other is made up of the narratives of patriarchal history (chapters 12-50). It should be understood that both sections together form what might be called the "pre-history" of the nation Israel. Genesis is not merely an abstract discussion of the primeval period. Rather, it is intended to show how the universe and the nations began, but especially, how God began to interact within human history by choosing a particular family with which to communicate.

Brief Introduction to Genesis

Scope of the Book

The two primary sections mentioned above may be roughly divided into four sections as follows:

The Creation	Chapters	1-2	
The Fall	Chapters	3-5	Human Origins Before 2000 B.C.
The Flood	Chapters	6-9	
The Nations	Chapters	10-11	
Abraham	Chapters	12-25	Patriarchal History (about 300 years long)
Isaac	Chapters	25-26	
Jacob	Chapters	27-36	
Joseph	Chapters	37-50	

Title

The title to the book in English comes from the LXX (Greek Version of the OT) and means "origin" or "beginning". In Hebrew, the title consists of simply the first Hebrew word in the text, "*bereshith"*, or "In the beginning...."

Author

The book is formally anonymous. Moses has traditionally been ascribed as the author since Torah is called the "Books of Moses". This in itself does not mean that Moses necessarily originated all of the accounts in Genesis, however, since many of them may have existed even before Moses' time. Moses may indeed have compiled and/or composed Genesis, but without direct information it is better to leave the details of the question open. Virtually all scholars, both liberal and conservative, admit the probability of preexisting material prior to the book's final compilation, and in all likelihood, there were several strands of ancient material from different contributors which were brought together in a single collection.[1]

The Creation of the Universe

There are two complementary stories of the creation in Genesis. The first one (1:1--2:4a) is more general in that it addresses the entire universe giving fairly equal attention to celestial bodies as well as to plant life, animal life and the human race. This first account is characterized by the use of the name *Elohim* for God.

The second story (2:4b-25) is very human centered, and while it mentions the rest of the universe, the reader clearly understands that the first humans are the focus of the account. This story is characterized by the use of the name *Yahweh Elohim* for God.

Poetic Character

The story of the creation is clearly poetic in character.[2] As such, the reader should not approach it as though it were a description written by a newspaper

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[1] For an overview of the problems connected with the composition of Genesis, see especially R. K. Harrison, "Genesis," *ISBE* (1982) II.432-438.

[2] The distinguishing mark of Hebrew poetry is universally recognized as parallelism. The difference between verse and prose is not as easily distinguished as might be supposed, however, cf. W. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry* (Sheffield, England: JSOTS, 1986) 44-60. The fact that the creation account is punctuated by the repeating phrase, "It was evening, and it was morning," and by the repeating divine value judgments, "God saw that it was good," argue strongly for a poetic character to the account. Furthermore, there is a marked parallelism in the structural form of the six creative days:

ENVIRONMENT	OCCUPANTS
1st Day:	*4th Day:*
Separation of light from darkness	Celestial bodies of light
2nd Day:	*5th Day:*
Separation of the upper and lower expanses	Creatures of the air and sea
3rd Day	*6th Day:*
Separation of dry ground(with vegetation) from the seas	Land animals and humans

When the reader reaches 1:27, he/she will discover one of the most beautiful examples of Hebrew parallelism, recognized in virtually all translations as poetry.

reporter.[3] The emphasis is theological rather than science-oriented.[4] This is not to impinge upon the truthfulness of the account but only to recognize that one should read the creation account according to the genre in which it was written. Genesis informs us that God is the author of the universe, and the creation account suggests the sovereignty and majesty of his power; it does not seek to satisfy our curiosity as to "how" he made it except that it came into existence by his creative excellence.

The Age of the Earth

There is no indication in Genesis as to the age of the earth. The attempts in the 17th century to calculate the time of origins by tracing backward the years in the various genealogical tables produced popular but generally naive conclusions.[5]

Genealogies

It should be noted that genealogies in the bible do not necessarily give consecutive chronology, but rather key descendants within a family lineage.[6]

Bereshith

There is scholarly debate over how the opening word of Genesis should be translated, either "in the beginning" or "when God began."[7] In either case, however, the opening leaves time considerations completely ambiguous, and theologically speaking, the creation does not even take place in time, since time cannot be posited before the existence of the world.[8]

Yom

The Hebrew word for "day" (*yom*) is primarily a structural device for marking off the categories of the creative events. There have been various attempts to grapple

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[3] The Genesis creation account, with its poetic character, follows an OT pattern in that the creation of the world is commonly addressed in other OT passages in poetry rather than in prose. For a sampling of these passages and the importance of poetic interpretive skills, see, cf. H. Van Til, *The Fourth Day* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 57-74.

[4] For more depth regarding the questions of science and the Bible, especially as they relate to Genesis, see Bernard Ramm, *The Christian View of Science and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1954).

[5] Archbishop Ussher fixed the date of creation at 4004 B.C., and Lightfoot, building upon Ussher's work, put the week of creation within October 18-24, Adam being created on the 23rd at 9:00 A.M., 44th meridian time. Unfortunately, this sort of speculation has often been defended as though it were in the Bible itself, much like 16th century theologians once defended a flat earth on the basis of their interpretations of the OT.

On the nature of the *toledot* (= generations) in Genesis and their similarities to other historiographical forms in the ancient Near East, see R. K. Harrison, "Genealogy," *ISBE* (1982) 11.424-426.

[6] D. Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1967.

[7] W. Eichrodt, "In the Beginning: A Contribution to the Interpretation of the First Word of the Bible," *Creation in the Old Testament*, ed. B. Anderson (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 65-73.

[8] J. Lindsay, "Creation," *ISBE* (1979) 1.802.

with the seven days on grounds other than poetic, such as:

a) *Solar Day:*[9] A logistic problem is that the sun was not created until the fourth day.

b) *Revelational Day:*[10] Here the seven days are not associated with creation at all, but with the time it took God to reveal to Moses in successive visions how the universe began.

c) *Age-Days:*[11] Some have attempted to define the days in terms of the geologic eras, but if this is done, one must not press for strict conformity to the classic geologic periods.

d) *Gap Theory:*[12] Others describe a great catastrophe associated with the fall of Satan and place it between 1:1 and 1:2. This theory fails on linguistic grounds, for the theory depends upon a violation of Hebrew grammar.[13]

Though the above theories are interesting in a peripheral sort of way, they each have an Achilles heel with which to contend.

Theology of the Creation Account

The primary thrust of the creation account is theological and religious. The reader of Genesis would be wise to suspend final judgment on the multitude of details which involve the interaction of science and biblical hermeneutics since both are ongoing disciplines. In the final analysis, all truth is God's truth, and if the Bible is truly God's Word, then God does not contradict his revelation in nature by his revelation in Scripture. A more important concern is regarding the theological significance of the creation account.

An Infinite Reference Point

In the first place, Genesis sets for us the parameter which controls our world-view. It is the existence of God himself. Genesis does not seek to prove God's existence; it assumes his reality as the most fundamental given. As the story of the human fall and the NT later point out, the problem with humanity is not ignorance, but rebellion (cf. Ro. 1:21). The fact of an infinite reference point is both positive and negative. It is positive in the sense that it teaches the power, spirituality, wisdom and goodness of God. It defines what is ultimate, non-contingent reality. On the other

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[9] J. Whitcomb, *The Early Earth* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972) 26-29.

[10] See discussion in G. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction* (Chicago: Moody, 1974) 185-186.

[11] Archer, 186-188.

[12] D. Barnhouse, *The Invisible War* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965) 15-20.

[13] The conjunction *w'* (= and) at the beginning of 1:2 is the explanatory or parenthetical conjunction rather than the narrative conjunction, cf. T. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Scribners, 1971) 164. It may be translated as "now" or "at that time", but it should not be rendered "then".

hand, it is negative in that it forbids idolatry. The creature is not worthy of worship in that he/she is just that -- a creature along with the other creations of God. Secondly, it pictures the ultimate reality as personal. God is not impervious force, but he is actively engaged in bringing order, beauty, and relationship within his handiwork. God communicates within himself (1:26), and above all, he communicates with his highest creature (1:28-30).

A Positive Affirmation of the Universe

The world God made is good (1:10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). It was made to be used and enjoyed by his creatures, and in fact, his human creature was set as the steward over it all (1:28-30). Especially for modern humans, this stewardship mandate calls for a renewed ecological responsibility.

Principle of Work and Rest

The social norms of work and rest have their origin in the nature of God. Work is not a curse but a fundamental structure based on the work of God himself. Rest, by the same token, is not worthless or irresponsible, for it too finds its source in the God who completed his work and found satisfaction in ceasing from his labor.

Maleness and Femaleness

The bisexuality of the human race reflects the capacity for personal relationship within God's own person (1:26-27). Humans are social creatures, and the most intimate of human relationships is between mates who were created for each other.

The Hebrew word for human (*'adam*), derived from the word for soil (*'adamah*), is generic. While often translated by the English equivalent "man", it is not strictly a male word but primarily denotes a human being. There are two categories which belong to humankind, male (*zakar*) and female (*n'gevah*). Both are fully human, and both bear the image of God.

Imago Dei

The image of God in humanity is stated but not defined in Genesis except in terms of the male/female relationship. However, it probably anticipates the fundamental mental character of what it means to be human (cf. 5:3; 9:6), and as human history unfolds, this character is displayed in a multiplicity of human potentials:

- Personality/Uniqueness
- Volition/Freedom, the capacity for choice
- Transcendence over the environment

- Intelligence, the capacity for reason and knowledge
- Morality, the capacity for recognizing good/evil
- Gregariousness, the capacity for communication, fellowship, and the social dimension
- Creativity, the urge to imagine, invent and produce
- Sensibility, the ability to feel pathos and joy as well as the whole gamut of human emotion
- Capacity for self-sacrificial love
- Self-awareness and self-contemplation

Genesis 2:4b--3:24

The Second Creation Account (2:4b--25)

The second creation account flows directly into the narrative of the human rebellion against God. As mentioned previously, the emphasis here is on the humans themselves rather than on the totality of creation. The theme of the account is to depict humans as they once were, and in the third chapter it will become abundantly clear that humans are not now what they once were. Originally, they were created with true glory as lords over paradise (cf. Ps. 8:4-8).

The Garden and the Two Trees

The primeval garden is depicted in exquisite idyllic terms. Everything was prepared for the arrival of the first humans, even the possibility for spiritual awakening. The first human was born free. He could only remain free by the power of his right choices in response to God's wise directives. Furthermore, the garden became the scene where the human's creative nature first began to express itself through work. Work was not a punishment resulting from sin, but it was a creative privilege grounded in the fact that the human was made in the Divine Image, and therefore, like God, he too could work (2:3).

There is some discussion about whether the two trees, each yielding a certain kind of knowledge, not to mention a talking snake, should be taken as strictly literal or as a product of poetic license. Traditionally, most Christians have regarded them as literal. In favor of a poetic metaphor is the observation that the expression "tree of life" seems to be used more figuratively in other parts of the OT (cf. Pro. 3:18; 11:30; 13:12), while the snake is connected to the metaphor of the great Red Dragon (Rev. 12:3, 9).

The Creation of Two Corresponding Partners

The naming of the animals is sandwiched between the announcement by God that human aloneness was "not good" and the actual creation of the human's mate. After a series of divine value judgments, "God saw that it was good" (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31), the reader now is abruptly faced with something that was "not good." Theologically, this sharpens the aloneness of the human, for this creature of all God's creatures was truly alone. All other creatures had their corresponding mates, and it is in the naming of the animals that the human realized just how alone he was. The language of the creation of the second human is quite egalitarian. God began with one flesh, a human who is described in generic terms. He separated this human into a man and a woman so that as husband and wife they might be brought back together into one flesh.[14]

In most ancient societies which were dominated by patriarchalism, the differences between maleness and femaleness were automatically assumed to imply a hierarchy of value. Men were more important than women because they were different and physically stronger. Women frequently were devalued as the property of men. Against this commonly accepted viewpoint in the ancient Near East, the creation account of man and woman is all the more striking for its evenness. As in the first creation account, the primary word used to designate the human which God created is the generic or "earth-creature" (2:5, 7-8, 15-16, 18-23, 25).[15] It was not until the actual creation of the counterpart that the biblical author used the strictly male and female terms "man" (*'ish*) and "woman" (*'ishshah*). Observe the interplay of these words in the following translation of 2:22-23:

> *Yahweh God constructed the rib which he took from the human ('adam) into a woman ('ishshah), and he brought her to the human ('adam). Then the human said: Finally! This is bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh! To this person shall be called the name "woman" ('ishshah), because from man ('ish) this person was taken.*

The woman was taken from the human's side to demonstrate that she was truly part of him, not isolated from him. She was, as he said, "Bone from my bones and flesh from my flesh," a complementary partner. This complementary character is implicit in the expression "helper suitable for him" (2:l8), or quite literally, "like his counterpart."[16]

The first union of a woman and a man was designed by God himself, who, like

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[14] G. von Rad, *Genesis*, rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 85.

[15] In 2:20 the Masoretic Text has pointed the consonants so as to make the proper name Adam. This pointing, however, is unlikely to be correct, and in any case, the Hebrew unpointed text is at best ambiguous and contextually should probably not be rendered as a proper name, cf. E. Speiser, *Genesis* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964) 18.

[16] For the male/female theology of this section, see the stimulating exegesis by P. Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1978) 75-105.

the father of the bride, brought the woman to the man. The divine pattern for monogamous marriage is given in a pronouncement and an observation which together provide the first divine comment on the nature of marriage in four succinct ideas:

Independence: The psychological and physical independence from parents becomes the basis for forming a new family unit.

Permanence: The permanent nature of marriage is described as a "clinging" or "cleaving". The bond is thus intended to be a lasting one.

Union: God himself performed the first marriage, and the union of the man and the woman was a God-sealed bond. It was a coming together on all levels, for it was the fulfillment of why God divided the human in the first place into male and female so that in their union they might again be one flesh. As such, each is the complement of the other.

Intimacy: The nakedness of the man and the woman epitomizes their complete intimacy on every level. This intimacy implies the wonder and beauty of human sexuality, but it also implies the possibility of true intimacy without acrimony. The statement that they sensed no shame is crucial, for shame is above all a social product. One cannot be ashamed when he or she is strictly alone. One is always ashamed before the eyes of another. The true intimacy of the primeval marriage was such that full openness did not lead to exploitation.

The Beginning of Human Rebellion (3:1--24)

Though humans were created as true lords over paradise, they fell from this lofty status by actively choosing to disobey God. The fall of humans was not so much a stumble as it was a headlong plunge. The full story of the fall carries the reader to the time of Noah's flood, and it is a story of jealousy, fratricide, polygamy, exploitation, vengeance and rampant depravity (3:1-7; 4:4-8, 19, 23-24; 6:5). Centuries later, Paul described it as "sin entering the world" (Ro. 5:12).

The Temptation

The snake is brought into the narrative without introduction, though there is no doubt in the minds of other biblical writers that he represents Satan (cf. Ro. 16:10; Rev. 12:9; 20:2). As with most temptations, this one arose as a question, a question which the woman answered with an over-correction (the notion of "touching" the fruit was not in the original command).

It is further to be noted that during the temptation, the man was with the woman. The Hebrew is quite emphatic that the woman was not deceived in solitude

(3:6).[17]

Later, even the fact that they were together becomes the man's lame excuse for failure (3:12). Thus, the man was implicated in the woman's sin before he ever actively involved himself. He was the passive bystander all along, and his passiveness showed his own negligence in protecting his wife.

The temptation which began with a question quickly evolved into a flat contradiction. It was the snake's word against God's word, and the first divine word to be denied was God's word about responsibility and consequences.

Sin's Wages

The heady promise of more knowledge yielded a grotesque fulfillment. The man and the woman knew more, but they had less. The devastating consequences of their sin alienated them from each other. Their nakedness (or intimacy) now became a threat, because they were both vulnerable to exploitation, each by the other. When the relationship between God and the couple had been breached, the relationship between each and the other was suspect. There could be no complete level of trust among lawbreakers, even though they were in partnership. As is shown in the succeeding verses, their alienation was complete. They were estranged from God, from each other, from the environment and even from their own inner selves.

The Sentence

God's judgment came quickly, though with a breath of hope. The woman's progeny would crush the snake's head, though for the woman the pain of pregnancy and the frustration of being exploited by her husband loomed menacingly on the horizon. The shattering of the male/female relationship is poignantly stated in the final couplet of 3:16.

Your craving will be for your husband,
But he shall domineer over you.

The intent of the lines seems to be to point out the sharp contrast between the original egalitarian roles with the couple's interdependence and mutuality as opposed to the later distortion in which the man would seek to dominate the woman and strip her of equal personhood. Yet even though the woman's hardship increases and the man seeks to lord it over her, she inwardly longs for that lost relationship in which she was a mate corresponding to him -- a mate who stood on equal ground. The irony is that even though the created relationship was spoiled by disobedience, the woman is still incomplete without the man. She seeks the lost relationship, and he indulges in the will to power. The problem of hierarchical exploitation between men and women,

[17] The Hebrew expression '*immah* (with her) in 3:6 clearly states that she was not alone.

then, is not so much inherent in creation as it is in human sin. Similarly, the restoration of the lost equality of personhood is finally restored "in Christ" (Ga. 3:28).

The man, for his part, was estranged from his work. Taken from the soil as the "earth-creature" (*'adam*), he is now alienated from that same soil (*'adamah*). Even worse, they were both alienated from life with God and were expelled from paradise.

Genesis 4:1--5:27

Human Depravity Continues (4:1-26)

Herman Bavinck, the noted Dutch theologian (1854-1921), has well said, "The Fall is the silent hypothesis of the whole Biblical doctrine of sin and redemption." The human rebellion which began within Eden continued to the east of Eden with the first offspring of Adam and Eve. Procreation began with the birth of Cain and Abel. Adam "knew"[18] his wife Eve, and she gave birth.

The First Fratricide

The circumstance of Abel's murder came in the context of worship. Each brother naturally brought an offering (*minhah* = gift of homage or allegiance) appropriate for his way of life Cain bringing cereal and Abel bringing an animal.[19] For reasons only hinted at, Cain's worship was not favored while Abel's was accepted.

It has been popular to assume that the rejection of Cain's offering was because it was not a blood sacrifice. This conclusion, however, has not been well thought through. In the first place, the offerings were only gifts of worship and could hardly be directly related to the levitical sacrificial system without severe anachronism. Second, even in the levitical system, worship offerings of grain were quite acceptable as offerings of worship (of. Lev. 2:1-16, etc).[20] The rejection of Cain seems to be more along the lines of a surly attitude than on the technicality of his offering, and at least that is how the NT writers seem to understand it (cf. He. 11:4; I Jn. 3:12; Jude 10-11).

Cain's bitterness toward Yahweh was not allowed to grow unchecked. Full

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[18] The common Hebrew idiom for sexual intercourse is the verb "to know" (*yada'*). It is especially appropriate to describe the full personal level of true sexual union.

[19] The Hebrew word for "flock" (*ts'on*) need not indicate sheep only. It is the more general word for "small cattle" and can refer to either sheep or goats, cf. W. Holladay, *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) 302.

[20] There are numerous references in both Leviticus as well as Numbers to the cereal offering (*minhah*).

opportunity for repentance was offered with the warning that sin, like a wild beast, was crouching for the kill. Cain refused to listen, and he murdered his brother, hiding the corpse in the soil. Yahweh's query, "Where is your brother," parallels the earlier question to Adam and Eve, "Where are you?" The personification of blood crying out has ever since come to represent vengeance. The contrast between Abel's cry for vengeance and the gracious blood of Jesus was later noted in the NT (He. 12:24)!

Cain's curse was a full alienation from his farming vocation. The man who had been born to the soil from parents who had been formed from the soil was now to driven from it. Each time his plow turned the soil, the memory of his brother would haunt him, thus driving him from his fields toward a semi-nomadic life. His own life would be under the constant threat of execution. However, Yahweh gave Cain a mark of protection to preserve his life. The exact nature of this mark is unclear, though it may have been similar to a form of brand which ancient Sumerians placed upon their slaves, or perhaps, some type of clan marking.[21]

The Expansion of Human Population

Human proliferation is implied in Cain's fear of execution (4:14), in his taking of a wife (4:17), and in the subsequent history of the Cainite clan. No details are given, however. The story of the Cainite clan shows the beginnings of civilized life. There are both positive and negative aspects to this development.

Human Progress

Human progress was evident in the building of cities (4:17), in the development of the arts (4:21), and in the production of better tools (4:22). At the same time, human depravity marred this progress with sexual exploitation (4:19) and the arrogant glorification of power and vengeance (4:23). It is worth noting that in Lamech's boast, the young person whom he boasted of killing was probably just a boy (*yeled* = child or young boy).

Another Hope

The death of Abel and the degeneration of Cain made the birth of Seth doubly happy. A spiritual search as well as general human progress is here affirmed. The idea that the Sethites developed into a race of godly persons while the Cainites developed into a race of ungodly persons may be implied, but such an idea is not expressly stated, and in any case, it is likely that both lines probably contained bad persons as well as good.[22]

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[21] R. Harrison, "Cain," *ISBE* (1979) I. 571.

[22] The name Yahweh appears throughout the Genesis accounts, even prior to the phrase in 4:26 which says, "At that time, the name of Yahweh began to be invoked." This would not be a problem except for the plain statement in Ex.

The Family of Seth

Just as the latter half of Genesis 4 describes the family of Cain, Genesis 5 describes the family of Seth.

The Poetic Character of These Sections

Several factors point toward the poetic character of these early family histories. First, there are several clear examples of formal poetry, such as, 4:3-24 which contain a nomadic vendetta of great antiquity[23] (other formal poetry is to be seen in 1:27; 2:23; 3:14-19). Second, the poetic character of the creative days has already been observed. Third, the use of personal names which carry a meaning all their own as word-plays in the context of the story line suggests a strong internal poetic symbolism.

Adam [‘*Adam*] - (play on the word ‘*adamah* = soil)

Eve [*Hawwah*] - (play on the word *hay* = living)

Cain [*Qayin*] - (play on the word *ganah* = to acquire)

Abel [*Hebel*] - (play on the word *hebel*= vapor, nothingness)

Seth [*Sheth*] - (play on the word *shath* = granted)

Nod [*Nod*] - (play on the word *nod* = homelessness, wandering)

If one is to appreciate the way an ancient reader would have read the stories, it is necessary to replace the anglicized forms of the names with their Hebrew nuances. As such, the story line reads:

> *To Soil-Creature and his wife Life were born Acquire and Breath. When Breath was murdered by Acquire, Acquire was banished to the land of Homelessness. Later, Soil-Creature and Life had another child, named Granted.*

Other poetic images appear also, such as, trees which produce moral knowledge and eternal life, a snake which talks, a quivering sword which guards, blood which cries out, and a mark which protects. To this may be added the anthropomorphism of God, whose footfalls were heard rustling in the garden in the breezy time of day (3:8).[24] This poetic character need not cancel out the reality of the

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6:2-3 that the patriarchs were not familiar with the divine name Yahweh. Unless one is content to admit a contradiction, there seems to be only two ways in which to harmonize these statements. One is to hold that the name Yahweh has been retrojected back into the Genesis account by a later hand (thus taking the Ex. 6:3 statement as the controlling one), cf. R. Gordon, “Exodus,” *The International Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Marshall Pickering/Zondervan, 1979) 152. The other is to maintain that the name Yahweh was a name without content in the patriarchal era, and it was only later, in the exodus events, that the name received special content (thus taking the Ge. 4:26 statement as the controlling one), cf. R. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 578-582; Kidner, 78-79.

[23] N. Gottwald, “Poetry, Hebrew,” *IDB* (1962) III.836.

[24] See the translation and notes in Speiser, 21, 24.

accounts, but it does call for the reader to appreciate the literary genre of the stories when they are read.

The Antediluvians

The table of family names in Genesis 5 lists descendants, ages at the time of fatherhood and total ages. These individuals apparently lived up to 900 or so years of age, though it is to be noted that the precise numbers vary considerably between the Masoretic Text, the Septuagint and the Samaritan Pentateuch.[25] The extraordinary longevity of the antediluvians has long raised questions of credibility. Other than simply dismissing the accounts as exaggerations which idealize a golden age,[26] such questions have been answered in basically three ways:

1. *Straightforward Literalism:* Some read the text as a simple family tree. As such, the extreme ages are explained in terms of an antediluvian atmosphere which was conducive to longevity. This view is part of the general perspective that the earth is relatively young (less than 10,000 years).[27]
2. *Reductionism:* The idea of ancient peoples living to extreme ages is not uncommon in ancient literature (Babylonian records speak of men living to 30,000 years of age!). As such, the hypothesis is put forward that the "years" listed in the tables represent a different time unit than the ones to which we are accustomed. Therefore, the actual ages of the antediluvians must be "reduced" by factors of, say, 10 to 1. (There is a difficulty here, however, in that some men would then be fathering children at untenably young ages.)[28]
3. *Clan Histories:* A third possible approach attempts to take the text seriously in that the names and ages represent epoch cycles of clans. It is certainly not unusual to use Patriarchal names to represent the clan itself (cf. "Jacob" frequently enough refers to the nation as well as to the individual). The longevity represents the time in which a certain clan held prominence, and the name of the descendant denotes the rise of a new family clan to prominence. It is to be remembered that the Hebrew idiom for "son" and "daughter" and "father" does not necessarily imply linkage within one generation. It can just as well refer to "descendent" or "ancestor".[29] On the other hand, Enoch, who was taken to be with God, becomes a problem since it is difficult to conceive of a whole tribe being taken up to heaven.

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[25] For a comparison of these variations, see the chart in J. Payne, "Antediluvian Patriarchs," *ISBE* (1979) I. 130.

[26] L. Hicks, "Patriarchs," *IDB* (1962) III.677.

[27] This position is especially defended by J. Whitcomb and H. Morris in their various works on the early earth and flood geology, cf. especially *The Genesis Flood* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961).

[28] Ramm, 236-237.

[29] J. Davis,"Antediluvian Patriarchs," *ISBE* (1943), 1.139-143.

However the antediluvian family records are to be explained, it is unnecessary to force the text into an unbroken chain of consecutive births. It seems that the writer may have intended to arrange his materials into sections, each of which feature 10 patriarchal family heads (much like Matthew does with Jesus' genealogy in 3 sections of 14 generations each).

4:1, 17-22	5:1-31	11:10-26
Adam	Adam	Shem
Cain	Seth	Arphaxad
Enoch	Enosh	Shelah
Irad	Kenan	Eber
Mehujael	Mahalalel	Peleg
Methusael	Jared	Reu
Lamech	Enoch	Serug
Jabal	Methusaleh	Nahor
Jubal	Lamech	Terah
Tubal-Cain	Noah	Abraham

Enoch

The brief account of Enoch's close association with God has long intrigued readers of Genesis. The phrase "he walked with God" is also used of Noah (6:9), and indeed an intentional parallel may be present in that while Enoch walked with God and God took him, Noah also walked with God and God left him to accomplish an important mission in the world. Passages like Ps. 49:15 and 73:24 probably reflect upon the story and express an embryonic hope for eternal life. Certainly, the figure of Enoch captured the Jewish imagination of the intertestamental period (cf. Sir. 44:16; 49:14; Wis. 4:10-14). Apocalyptic literature refers to him (Jubilees 4:14-16; 10:17; I Enoch), and the Book of Jude in the NT quotes I Enoch 1:9 regarding Enoch's vision of the coming of the Lord.

Genesis 5:28--11:30

The Great Flood (5:28--9:17)

One of the most cataclysmic and at the same time controversial stories of the early chapters in Genesis is the account of the great flood. Even in the NT, the story of the flood became an historical guarantee that God would bring judgment upon rebellious humans (cf. Mt. 24:37-41; Lk. 17:26-27; 2 Pe. 2:5; 3:6-7).

In the Great Flood, God destroyed the ancient world and all creatures of the land and air as a judgment for the earth's violence and corruption. However, eight persons were saved by God's grace -- Noah and his family. The means of survival was a huge, probably flat-bottomed boat in which Noah, his family, and selections of pairs of animals survived for some 370 days.[30] The boat itself displaced a volume of well over a million cubic feet.[31] The tradition of a great flood is well-documented in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, particularly in a Babylonian story known as the Ginghams Epic.[32] The parallels between the two are striking enough for some scholars to posit a literary dependence,[33] though this view is not as popular as it once was.[34]

A number of thorny issues arise from this section of Genesis, and because of their complexity, the nature of the controversies can only be sketched in.

The Nephilim (6:1-4)[35]

As the account stands, a primary reason why God sent the great deluge was the intermarriage between the *bene-ha'elohim* (sons of God) and the *banot ha'adam* (daughters of humans). Two main camps of interpreters read the passage in radically different ways.

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[30] For an analysis of Noah's "log", see G. Wright, "Deluge of Noah," *ISBE* (1943) II.822.

[31] See the calculations given in B. Waltke, "Ark of Noah," *ISBE* (1979) 1.291. Persistent rumors of the discovery of the ark in the glaciers of the Ararat Mountains keep reccurring, but so far, they have never been verified, of. H. Vos, "Flood (Genesis)," *ISBE* (1982) II.319.

[32] J.Pritchard, ed., "The Epic of Gilgamesh," *The Ancient Near East* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1958) 40-75.

[33] J. Marks, "Flood (Genesis)," *IDB* (1962) II. 280-283.

[34] Vos, 319-321.

[35] The meaning of the Hebrew term *nephilim* in 6:4 is not clear. The traditional English rendering as "giants" (KJV) has been abandoned by the major modern English versions which simply transliterate the term from the Hebrew text and leave it undefined (so NASB, NIV, NEB, RSV, ASV, NAB, JB). Possible meanings based on etymology are (1) "extraordinary ones" [based on the verb *pala'* = to be extraordinary, marvelous] (2) "fallen ones" [based on the verb *naphal* = to fall]. Out of this latter derivation, there are still rather wide possibilities, including supernatural beings (fallen from heaven), morally corrupt persons (morally fallen), hostile or violent persons (those who fall on others), and bastards (unnaturally begotten), cf. H. Van Broekhoven, Jr. and R. Harrison, "Nephilim," *ISBE* (1986) III.518-519.

Sethites vs. Cainites

This reading places heavy stress on Ge. 4:26 and defines the descendents of Seth as the *bene-ha'elohim*, that is, as a godly family line. The *banot ha'adam*, on the other hand, are defined as an ungodly family line, the descendants of Cain. As such, the wickedness consisted of the intermarriage of the righteous and the unrighteous, and this union produce *nephilim*, offspring which became oppressive tyrants.[36]

Angels vs. Humans

This reading stresses the broader context of ancient Near Eastern cultures, where the term *bene ha'elohim* (or alternately, *bene* '*elim*) was commonly used to refer to demigods (e.g., Ugarit, Phoenicia, Ammon).[37] Elsewhere in the OT itself, the term *bene-ha'elohim* ordinarily indicates angels (cf. Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Ps. 29:1; 89:7; Dt. 32:8 LXX), and this is how the passage was interpreted in Jewish literature,[38] and probably by writers in the NT as well (e.g., Jude 6; 1 Pe. 3:19-20; 2 Pe. 2:4-5). As such, the wickedness consisted of the intermarriage between god-like creatures and humans, and the *nephilim* were demi-gods, giants which became great warriors in the ancient world. There may even have been the implicit threat that the offspring of this union tended toward immortality.[39]

If one reads the account in the former way, which relieves any awkward explanation of a mythological character to the story, he/she must contend with the fact that the Hebrew language and ancient Near Eastern context is not favorable. If the reader takes the latter interpretation which the language, context and culture seems to favor, he/she is left with what defies the normalities of experience.

The Extent of the Flood (6:5--8:19)

Even more controversial than the prologue to the flood is the nature of the flood itself. Again, there are two camps, each with a reading of the story which both solves problems while it creates others.

The "Universal Flood" Position

The universal flood position is traditional and favors a straightforward reading of the biblical text. The flood covered the entire globe, annihilating all humans and

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[36] For a treatment of this position with respect to the Hebrew text, see, C. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, trans. J. Martin (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971) I.127-138.

[37] R. Hendel, "When the Sons of God Cavorted with the Daughters of Men," Bible Review (Summer 1987/Vol. III No. 2) 10.

[38] 1 Enoch 10-16; 21; 2 Baruch 56:12; Jubilees 5:6; 10:1-14; 2 Enoch 7; Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs / Naphtali 3:5; Josephus, *Antiquities*, I.3.1.

[39] F. McCurley, *Genesis, Exodus Leviticus, Numbers* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979) 26-27.

land animals except Noah and his cargo. The difficulties with this position, which arise largely from scientific and logistical problems which beg explanation, are many.

The geologic strata is against it. Enough water to cover the Himalayas (approximately 6 miles deep from sea level) would require 8 times more water than our planet contains in any form. Ridding the earth of this vast amount of water would have been at least as miraculous as providing it, since there was no place for it to go. Plant life could not survive the extended saline concentration which must have happened as the oceans and fresh water bodies mixed; similarly, many fresh water fish would have died in salt water, and salt water fish would have died in fresh water. The increase in earth mass (by 6 miles of extra water around the globe) would have caused astronomical disturbances now detectable by astronomers but which are non-existent. The task of eight persons caring for the feeding and cleaning of representatives for all these animals of the world would have been astronomical.[40]

One attempt to address these problems has been through what is known as "flood geology", an interpretation which rejects uniformitarianism, i.e., the geological axiom that present geologic processes are consistent with what has happened in past times, while arguing for a young earth (less than 10,000 years).[41]

The "Local Flood" Position

Due to the problems associated with the above reading, many scholars have preferred to read the account as describing a flood of unparalleled severity in the area of Mesopotamia, but one which did not cover the globe. The language of the Genesis flood is taken to be phenomenological, that is, as describing the flood as it appeared from a limited vantage point. The word '*erets* (= earth, land), for instance, need not refer to the globe but could just as well refer to a more localized geographical context.[42] While this position avoids some of the scientific and logistic difficulties, it creates other difficulties, both scientific and theological, and it must be prepared to address the conclusion that humans probably lived beyond the Mesopotamia valley and thus survived the flood. According to this viewpoint, the destruction of the flood

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[40] Ramm, 163-168.

[41] J. Whitcomb, Jr. and H. Morris, *The Genesis Flood* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1961); J. Whitcomb, Jr., *The World That Perished* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973. These works hypothesize that the earth was relatively smooth prior to the flood, and that the continental uplifts are post-flood occurrences. The major geologic strata was allegedly formed during and after the flood with tremendously increased seismic and volcanic activity, which in turn formed the ocean basins. Accelerated erosion, sedimentation and decay is thought to account for all the present geologic phenomena. Against this hypothesis stands evangelical geologists who argue that flood geology is naive and fails to understand geology itself, cf. D. Young, *Creation and the Flood* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

[42] Treatment of the Genesis account as a limited flood may be found in F. Filby, *The Flood Reconsidered* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1970)

was thorough, but in a relative sense rather than in an absolute sense.

The Covenant with Noah (8:20--9:17)

When Noah and his family had disembarked from the ark, God established a covenant with them and the race which would descend from them. The context of the Great Flood is the first time the term *beri't* (= covenant) is used in the Genesis record (cf. 6:18; 9:9), but it becomes a central vehicle for the divine-human relationship from this point on. Here, the covenantal terms are unilateral and unconditional, given wholly at God's initiative. A regular sequence of seasons was promised, certain requirements were mandated for human society, and the promise was made that such a flood would never occur again, verified by the celestial sign of the rainbow.

After the Flood (9:l8--11:30)

Several narratives are provided to make the connection between the time of Noah and the time of Abraham.

The Cursing of Canaan (9:18-29)

If only to set the record straight, it should be observed that Noah's curse on Canaan, the descendent of Ham, most likely points toward the eventual subjugation of the Canaanites by the Israelites in the exodus and conquest of Palestine. The fanciful idea that this curse was somehow directed toward the Black race, as developed in the American South by pre-Civil war Christians, was a thinly veiled attempt to justify racial bigotry and Black slavery. Serious students of the Bible will avoid such tendentious interpretations.

The Table of the Nations

As with previous family tables in Genesis (Ge. 5), there is the possibility of an interplay between personal names and clan names. While the names in Genesis 10 appear to refer to persons, one encounters the same names throughout the rest of the OT as clans and nations. It is to be remembered, as before, that the term "father" may be taken in the more general sense of "ancestor". Theologically, the table affirms the unity of the human race. Chronologically, the table describes the dispersion of people on the earth after the scattering from Babel (note that they were divided by "language" as well as geography, cf. 10:5, 20, 31). In general, the sons of Japheth migrated toward Europe. The sons of Shem (from which is derived the term "Semitic") and the sons of Ham dispersed throughout the Middle East and Africa.

While some of the names in this table can be identified with people and places in ancient inscriptions, it is wise to be cautious in such identification inasmuch as

tribal movements invariable alter the significance and form of names.[43]

The Tower of Babel

Ziggurats, artificial mounds with shrines on top, were representations of mountains or "high places" associated with worship in the ancient Near East. In a Sumerian description, for instance, a ziggurat was described as "the Building of the Foundation-platform of Heaven and Earth" whose "top reaches to heaven", and the similarity of this to what is described in Genesis 11 is obvious.[44] At the city of Babel, part of Nimrod's kingdom (10:8-10), a ziggurat was in construction as the ultimate symbol of human achievement. Its very name "Babel" or "Babylon" meant "gate of God", though after the confusion of languages, it was identified with the Hebrew word *balal* (= to mix, pour) and hence "confusion". There is an intentional irony in the repetitive Hebrew verb *habah* (= come on). The people said, "Come now, let us make bricks..." (11:3) and "Come now, let us build..." (11:4). But God said, "Come now, let us go down and confuse..." (11:7).

Genesis 11:31--13:18

The Call of Abram (11:31--13:18)

With the beginning of the Abraham stories, the reader moves into a new era of biblical history. Poetic elements recede into the background. Here God begins to shape the course of future history by direct divine intervention in which he establishes a covenantal relationship with a single man, Abram of Ur. The initiative is Yahweh's, not Abram's.

Ur was a thriving cultural center of ancient Sumerian and Akkadian life in lower Mesopotamia with a known history dating back into the Early Bronze Age (3000-2100 B.C.). It had a complex system of government with a well-developed commercial enterprise. The inhabitants were literate (archaeologists have uncovered several hundred clay tablets of cuneiform writing), and they were accustomed to the amenities of civilization. The city had drains, streets, two-storied homes and a ziggurat. In the Third Dynasty, a number of important buildings were erected, including a ziggurat to Nanna, the mood god and patron deity of the city, as well as a temple for Nm-gal, Nanna's consort.[45]

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[43] For a full discussion of this table of nations and the present state of knowledge about them, see C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, trans. J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984) 504-528.

[44] D. Wiseman, "Babel", *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd. ed. (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1982), 111.

[45] J. Thompson, *The Bible and Archaeology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1962) 15-16; C. Pfeiffer, *Old Testament History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 53-55.

The Move (11:31-32)

Abram and his forbears were pagans (Jos. 24:2). Why Terah left Ur for Canaan by way of Haran we are not told, but at least Abram's relationship with Yahweh began in Ur (cf. 15:7; Neh. 9:7; Ac.7:2).[46] The family made an extended stop in Haran, perhaps because Haran also was devoted to Nanna worship. Terah died in Haran, but Abram and his relatives continued their migration on into Canaan, a land composed of a number of rather sizeable city-states.[47]

God's Covenant with Abram (12:1-3)

Five times Yahweh said to Abram, "I will. . ." These promises combine to form one of the most impressive and far-reaching divine declarations in the entire Bible, for they defined the foundation of Israel's faith in the OT, and they carried implications which were only to be fully developed in the faith of the NT. God's unconditional covenantal promises to Abram were:

1. I will…make you into a great nation (*goy gadol*).
2. I will. . .bless you.
3. I will. . .greatly magnify your name (*gadol shem*).
4. I will. . .bless those who bless you.
5. I will. . .curse those who curse you.
6. All families of the earth will find blessing through you.[48]

The remainder of the Book of Genesis is dominated by this covenant. God required of Abram complete disassociation from his pagan past and a migration to a land of Yahweh's choice (cf. He. 11:8-10). The immediate familial background of the covenant was the barrenness of Abram's wife, Sarai (11:30).

The Theophanies and the Altars (12:4-9)

Continuing south, Abram stopped at Shechem, the crossroads of central Palestine, in the pass between Mt. Ebal and Mt. Gerizim. Here Yahweh "appeared" to him. The various appearances of God to Abram and others are usually called

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[46] Hence the KJV and NIV render the Hebrew perfect, "Yahweh said" (12:1), as a pluperfect, "Yahweh had said."

[47] The figures given in Ge. 11:26, 32; 12:4 suggest that Abram left his father in Haran some 60 years before his father's death. However, the Samaritan Pentateuch gives different numbers which suggest that Abram left only after his father died, and this computation is apparently followed by Stephen in Ac. 7:4.

[48] The niphal form here may be reflexive. If so, it means that the nations of the world would point to Abram as their ideal, either in pronouncing blessing upon themselves or upon others (i.e., "may you be blessed as Abram is blessed"), cf. Speiser, 86. On the other hand, if it is taken as a passive, it means that all nations would be blessed through Abram, cf. E. Maly, "Genesis", *Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Brown, Fitzmyer and Murphy (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1968), 18.

theophanies or epiphanies.[49]

The various places where Abram built altars, such as Shechem, Bethel, and other locations, were probably already cult centers for the religions of the Canaanites (archaeology seems to favor this). However, Abram did not bow before their gods but reserved his worship for Yahweh alone. The building of altars at these shrines may indicate the special claim of Yahweh upon the land through Abram, his representative. There is a striking contrast between what Abram "built" and what he "pitched". He "pitched"tents (denoting temporary residency, cf. He. 11:9-10), but he "built" altars (denoting permanency). The places where Abram built altars became sacred sites in the later history of Israel after the conquest. At these sites, God continued to reaffirm his covenantal promises, sometimes with added benefits (12:7).[50]

Abram in Egypt (12:10-20)

Continuing south through the Negev, the triangular-shaped, treeless, semi-desert tract to the south of Canaan, Abram was eventually driven to Egypt by drought. Passing Sarai off as his sister, he expected to avoid endangering his life. To be sure, Sarai was at least Abram's half-sister (cf. 20:12), and there was an ancient custom sometimes practiced in Haran in which a man could adopt his wife as his sister with independent legal documents for both the marriage and the adoption.[51] Even so, Sarai was not eligible to be added to the Pharaoh's harem.

This story introduces a common theme which runs throughout Genesis and the history of Israel, the theme of how Yahweh overcame almost every conceivable obstacle to preserve selected heirs and to fulfill his covenantal promises. Abram's falsehood not only threw Sarai but the covenant itself into grave danger. Yahweh proceeded to intervene in Abram's behalf. The covenant promises would be kept, if not because of Abram than in spite of him.

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[49] Theophanies and epiphanies are sometimes distinguished in that theophanies are accompanied by phenomena (wind, fire, storm) while epiphanies are recounted matter-of-factly with few visual elements.

[50] *DAILY LIVES OF THE PATRIARCHS:* In general, the patriarchs are described as semi-nomadic tent-dwellers, even though Abram originally came from a sophisticated urban center. It is possible that Abram was a merchant trader. His large retinue (14:14) and various transactions, treaties, wars and travels suggest as much, cf. C. Gordon, "Abraham and the Merchants of Ura," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* (XVII.1) 30. The patriarchs dwelt in woven goat-hair tents with soil floors and straw mats. Water, wine and milk were stored in skins; bread was cooked daily by heating a flat stone and placing the dough on it while it was still hot. The flat cake would then be turned in order to cook the other side. Staples of diet included meat, figs, grapes, dates, bread (often unleavened), and milk from camels, goats or cows. Grain was ground into flour with a stone mortar and pestal or with a small millstone.

[51] This sort of law is to be found in the Nuzi texts of the ancient Hurrians of northwest Mesopotamia, cf. Speiser, 92-94.

Abram and Lot Separate (13:1-18)

From Egypt, Abram traveled northward again through the Negev and eventually back to Bethel. The sizeable nature of Abram's band becomes particularly evident when it is apparent that he and his nephew could not co-exist on the same pasture land. Accordingly, Abram generously ceded to his younger nephew the choice of direction.[52] Lot, willing to abandon the promised land as permanently inadequate, chose the lush valleys to the south while Abram was left to the broken hills of central Canaan, the place of the previously constructed altars and of God's promise (12:7). Unlike his failure in Egypt, here Abram rose to the demands of faith. Once again, Yahweh reaffirmed his promises, emphasizing even more explicitly the inheritance of land and the hope of posterity. Both of these promises served as important historical anchor points for the future nation Israel which would now have a pedigree in Abram and a right to Canaan in the conquest.

Genesis 14-17

Abram Waits on Yahweh's Promises (14-17)

The next several chapters in Genesis describe Abram in the land of Canaan awaiting Yahweh to fulfill his covenantal promises. If Abram was 75 years old when he left Haran with the promise that he would father many nations (12:4), it was still another 25 years before he would have a son through Sarai (21:5). During this intervening time period, Abram began to build his reputation as the man of faith *par excellence*. For the nation Israel which would come later, this theme of "waiting on Yahweh" would be very important, not only for the Israelites who "waited" 40 years in the desert before they entered the land of promise, but also for the slaves in Babylon who "waited" for Yahweh to restore the nation (cf. Is. 40:27-31).

The Rescue of Lot (14)

At this point in the history of Abram, the story intersects with external history. Several Canaanite city-states had been paying tribute to their Mesopotamian overlords for 12 years, and when they revolted, the Mesopotamian overlords were obliged to teach them their places.[53] In a disastrous effort, the Canaanite kings were soundly defeated, and in the aftermath, the booty of Sodom and its neighbors was

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[52] The Hebrew terms for the two directions in 13:9 may be rendered "north" and "south" or "left" and "right", since the Hebrew words double for both meanings, cf. Holladay, 352, 136.

[53] While the names of the kings mentioned in Genesis 14 cannot be clearly identified with any known kings of Mesopotamia named in other extant king lists, it can at least be said that the names follow the pattern of Semitic, Hurrian, Elamite and Hittite names, cf. Kidner, 119.

captured, including Lot and his family.

Rather than allow his nephew to depart into slavery, Abram mustered his personal army and those who were in covenant with him (cf. 14:24).[54] In a well-engineered night attack, his forces recovered the booty and his relatives as well. On the return, Abram was met and congratulated by the priest-king of the city-state Salem (Jerusalem) to whom he gave a portion of the spoils of war. Three points of special interest arise in this account:

1. *Abram, the Hebrew:* The word "Hebrew" was a term used to refer to the Israelites both by themselves and by foreigners, though usually in a foreign context (cf. Ge. 39:14; Ex. 1:16, 19). In the table of nations, the name Hebrew goes back to Eber, son of Shem (Ge. 10:21). Much scholarly speculation and investigation has as yet yielded no satisfactory conclusions as to how the term was used in the ancient world, though its usage sometimes seems to suggest a pejorative connotation.
2. *El Elyon: El Elyon* (= God Most High) is a compound name for God. The name El is the common name for God used by all the nations of the ancient Near East (including the Canaanite nations). *Elyon* is attested in both Ugaritic and Phoenician texts as a name for specific deities. Later in Israel, *El* became a poetic variant of *Elohim*, and *Elyon* became a poetic title for Yahweh.[55]
3. *Tithing:* The custom of giving a tenth part of the products of land or spoils of war did not originate with Abram, much less the Mosaic law. It was an ancient practice among most nations, and Abram was responding to custom when he gave tithes to Melchizedek.[56]

Yahweh Reaffirms the Covenant (15)

While chapter 14 plunges the reader into a brief episode of world politics, the narrative quickly returns to the major theme - Yahweh's covenant with Abram. There are two emphases in this chapter, progeny and land.

The Promise of Progeny (15:1-6)

In a vision, Yahweh once more affirmed to Abram that the promises were guaranteed. Abram's immediate response was the blunt fact that he was childless. Hurrian family law (derived from Haran) stipulated two kinds of heirs, the direct heir

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[54] The final phrase in 14:13 is literally "and they were masters of the covenant of Abram," which is an idiomatic Hebrew way of saying that Abram was in covenant with them.

[55] R. Wyatt, "God, Names of," *ISBE* (1982) II.506.

[56] P. Levertoff, "Tithe", *ISBE* (1943) V.2987.

and the indirect heir, and Eliezer was juridically in the position to be the indirect heir. Indirect heirs in Hurrian society were adopted to ensure proper burial, or in some cases, to secure a loan in which the borrower might adopt the lender. Apparently, Abram had made his own arrangements in light of Yahweh's procrastination. However, Hurrian law also stipulated that indirect heirs must give place to a true son born later, a fact that would become of great importance as the story progresses.[57] Yahweh declared that the covenant promises would be fulfilled through a direct heir. Abram's faith was credited as an act of righteousness, a statement quoted twice by Paul in arguing that faith is not a crowning merit but a readiness to trust God's promises (Ro. 4:3; Ga. 3:6).

The Promise of Land (15:7-21)

The promise of Canaan as Abram's inheritance was reaffirmed in an ancient rite of covenant-making. Three-year-old animals (the age for ritual maturity) were halved and arranged so that the contracting parties could pass between them, thus inviting the fate of the animals if they should violate the covenant (cf. Jer. 34:18-20). In fact, the Hebrew expression for covenant-making is the idiom "to cut a covenant." The choice of animals was governed by custom and availability (Amorites in the ancient Man texts used donkeys while the Hurrians of Nuzi used a bull, a donkey and 10 sheep). The smoking oven (portable) and flaming torch, which in the Genesis account represent God's mysterious person, are paralleled in ancient Akkadian texts by incantations.[58] Abram's deep sleep and the dreadful darkness further emphasize the mysterious.

In this reaffirmation of the covenant, Yahweh predicted the slavery of Abram's descendents in Egypt and their subsequent exodus. To the later Israelites for whom this was recounted, it served as a mandate of manifest destiny. It was under David's empire that the boundaries of 15:18 were temporarily attained.

Hagar and Ishmael (16)

As the covenant promises began to become more specific (from an indirect heir to a direct heir) and after ten full years had passed, the promise of the covenant seemed more impossible all the time. Abram and Sarai agreed to have a slave-child by Sarai's slave, Hagar, probably one of the Egyptian slaves that Abram acquired

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[57] Our knowledge of Hurrian laws is based on the discovery of the tablets in Nuzi, an ancient Hurrian town to the east of the Tigris. Some 20,000 clay documents inform us of the legal and social structures of society in patriarchal times. The biblical patriarchs kept close contact with Haran, a Hurrian town, and a number of puzzling aspects within the patriarchal narratives have been explained by Hurrian law, of. Speiser, 112; Kidner, 123; Maly, 19; Pfeiffer, 83; Thompson, 25ff.

[58] Speiser 113-114; Maly, 19-20; G. Mendenhall, "Covenant", *IDB* (1962) I.718.

during his trip to Egypt (12:16). Such a practice, again according to Hurrian law, was not unusual. The prime purpose of marriage in Hurrian society was to produce children, at least from a legal point of view, and Hurrian marriage contracts stipulated that a wife who could not produce an heir was obligated to provide a slave-wife who could. A similar provision is also to be found in Hammurabi's ancient *Code of Laws*.[59] Accordingly, Hagar became pregnant with *Ishmael* (= God hears) when Abram was 85 (16:3, 16). Though Paul said Abram "staggered not" at God's promise (Ro. 4:20), it cannot be doubted that he was willing to resort to a creative alternative.

When Hagar used her pregnancy as an occasion to flaunt her fertility before Sarai, Sarai demanded her legal rights (see previous footnote). Sarai abused her slave, and the pregnant Hagar fled toward her native home on the road to Shur.[60] Here she was confronted by Yahweh and instructed to return to Abram's tents. Her fate was now inextricably bound up with his, and the blessings of Abram's covenant would spill over into Hagar's life through the descendents of her child. Of special note in this narrative are:

Mal'ak Yahweh

We are here introduced to a recurring figure in the OT, the Angel or Messenger of Yahweh. In many texts, the functions of the Messenger and Yahweh himself are interchangeable (cf. 16:7, 9, 10, 11 and 16:13). The Messenger is not a person in his own right as much as he is a special theophany or manifestation of Yahweh. Such a device holds in tension the OT assertion that God cannot be viewed face-on, but at the same time he reveals himself. This may well relate to the fact that the Hebrew phrase in 16:13 may be rendered, "I saw the back of the one who saw me."

El Roi

Another descriptive name for Yahweh is here introduced, and again it is a compound (see previous comment on *El*). The Hebrew compound *El Roi* (= God of seeing) is capable of two meanings, either "the God who may be seen" or "the God who sees," and this ambiguity is retained in the exclamation, "I have now seen the one who sees me."

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[59] "If a man has married a votary [one devoted to him], and she has not granted him children, and he is determined to marry a concubine, that man shall marry the concubine, and bring her into his house, but the concubine shall not place herself on an equality with the votary," of. G. Knoles and R. Snyder, "The Code of Hammurabi," *Readings in Western Civilization* (Chicago: Lippincott, 1954), 5 (sec. 145).

[60] *Shur* means "wall" and probably refers to a frontier wall built by the Egyptians to guard against invasion, cf. Pfeiffer, 84.

The Sign of the Covenant (17)

When Abram was 99 years old, Yahweh once more reaffirmed his covenant. By this time, the likelihood of a fulfillment had reached impossible dimensions, for both Abram and Sarai were past child-bearing age (cf. 17:1, 17; 18:11). Even so, Yahweh's promise was so emphatic that it could be framed in the past tense (17:5). In anticipation of this fulfillment, Yahweh changed Abram's name and instructed him with a special covenant ritual.

El Shaddai

Yet again the reader is introduced to a new name for Yahweh (17:1), a name that the English versions translate as "God Almighty" after the LXX and early rabbinic interpretation. The name *El* is clear enough, but the name *Shaddai* is ambiguous. It may be related to the Akkadian word for mountain (*sadu*), and if so, may mean "God of the mountains."[61] Other suggestions, though generally less accepted, are that *Shaddai* is derived from the Semitic word for breast (*shad*), hence, "God, the Nourisher," or from the root *shadad* (= to devastate), hence, "God, my Destroyer."[62] A satisfactory solution has yet to be proposed, but the traditional idea of self-sufficiency, which goes back to rabbinical explanations, is at least adequate.

Abram Becomes Abraham

The name Abram, constructed from the Hebrew words '*ab* (= father) and *ram* (= high), means "exalted father". The new name, Abraham, includes a third part *hamon* (= crowd), hence, "father of a multitude." There had long been an irony in Abram's name before it was changed. He had no sons through Sarai, and his name "exalted father" must have seemed a terrible misnomer. Now, when God makes the promise even more stupendous, the irony increases proportionately. Still without issue through Sarai, Abram is now Abraham, the "father of a crowd."

Circumcision

The removal of the foreskin from the male reproductive organ was enjoined upon all Abraham's male progeny as a sign of covenant loyalty. Circumcision did not originate with Abraham, however. It was practiced by many peoples of the ancient world, usually at the time of puberty, and was regarded as a preparation for marriage. In fact, the Semitic word *hatan* (= bridegroom) literally means "circumcised", and the Hebrew word *hoten* (= father-in-law) means "the circumciser".[63] Most of the Canaanites practiced circumcision, the primary exception being the "uncircumcised

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[61] B. Anderson, "God, Names of," *IDB* (1962) II.412.

[62] M. Pope, *Job [AB]* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973) 44.

[63] cf. *BDB* 368-369.

Philistines," and thus circumcision in and of itself guaranteed nothing. However, when coupled with faith in the covenant it was meaningful (cf. Deu. 30:6; Jer. 9:26). In obedience to God's command, Abraham circumcised his 13 year old slave-child, Ishmael, and his whole company of retainers.

Sarai Becomes Sarah

Not only was Abraham's name changed to reflect the fulfillment of the promise, Sarai's name was also changed. Sarai and Sarah are both forms of the name "princess", but the change served to mark an important transition.

Isaac

The motif of laughter is connected with the promised son several times (17:17; 18:12-15; 21:6), and thus the name of the covenant son is appropriately *yishag* (= Isaac), which means "he laughs." Of singular importance is the fact that the covenant itself would be established with Isaac rather than with Ishmael. The covenant blessings would flow over into Ishmael's life, but Isaac alone would be the covenant son (17:19-21).

Genesis 18-19

The Annunciation (18:1-15)

It had now been almost a quarter of a century since Abraham had received the promise of a son. Both he and Sarah were old, and the annunciation of the birth of Isaac must have been as much a shock as it was a joy. While Abraham's midday visitors are described as "three men", the author leaves the reader in no doubt as to the leader's identity by using the name Yahweh (cf. 18:1, 13). Abraham treated his visitors with typical bedouin hospitality, feeding them during the siesta time with a lavish meal of fresh bread, veal, yogurt[64] and milk, which he modestly passed off as merely a "piece of bread".[65]

As before, the promise of the cherished son was still to be fulfilled against all odds, in this case, against both Abraham's and Sarah's ages as well as Sarah's disbelief. Sarah's laughter picks up the theme which was begun earlier in Abraham's laughter (17:17) and which would eventually be fulfilled in the naming of the son (21:6).

Yahweh's question, "Is anything too hard for Yahweh" (18:14), became a sort

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[64] The word translated "curds" was actually a type of yogurt, Speiser, 130.

[65] The NIV rendering, "...let me get you something to eat," translates the Hebrew, "...and let me get a piece of bread."

of "quotable quote" for later generations (cf. Je. 32:17, 27; Lk. 1:37).

The Destruction of Sodom (l8:16--l9:29)

The goal of the three visitors, one of which was Yahweh, was dual. Not only was there a reaffirmation of the covenant with Abraham, there was an act of judgment to be poured out upon Sodom for its wickedness.[66] The sin of Sodom was homosexuality (19:4-5)[67], and particularly, a blatant openness about it (cf. Isa. 1:10; 3:9). Other OT passages associate Sodom with adultery and dishonesty (Je. 23:14), and arrogance and neglect of the poor (Eze. 16:49-50).

By exploring the limits of God's mercy, Abraham was able to grasp the rightness of God's judgment and justice (18:23-25). The nature of Yahweh was not to send indiscriminate calamity. Yet for all Abraham's bargaining, there were not even ten righteous persons in the city.

The Two Visitors

If the reader entertained any question about the other two "men" with Yahweh, that question is plainly answered by the designation "angel" in 19:1. They arrived to find Lot at the city gate, an expression that probably indicates that he had achieved some level of social status in Sodom,[68] though one should be careful about assuming his involvement in any of Sodom's moral decay (cf. 2 Pe. 2:7-8).

Lot certainly knew his fellow-citizens, for he would not hear of the visitors spending the night in the plaza. Furthermore, the haste of baking unleavened bread (which could be cooked quickly) and the intent to have the men out early the next morning betrayed Lot's fear for their safety. Lot's worst fears were shortly realized. The perverted citizens (Cf. Jude 7) to the last man closed on Lot's home, calling for the visitors in order to rape them. Even the offer of Lot's virgin daughters did not attract them.[69] When they were on the verge of bursting the door, the visitors sent a

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[66] Sodom seems to be the principal city in the discussion, even though Gomorrah, as the sister city, was to be included in the destruction.

[67] The idea that this story reflects homosexuality is based on the fact that the Hebrew idiom for sexual intercourse is *yada'* (= to know), and in the narrative, the offenders wanted "to know" the visitors. It has been argued by some that this interpretation is unnecessary and that the verb "to know" simply refers to a ruffian suspicion and an attitude of inhospitality. It may well be that to view homosexuality as Sodom's only sin is too narrow (cf. Eze. 16:49-50; Sirach 16:8). At the same time, the fact that Lot's daughters were offered for sexual intercourse, however brutal that may seem, strongly implies that the desire of the ruffians was sexually oriented. The NIV translation, "Bring them out to us so that we may have sex with them," is a very adequate dynamic equivalency, and it is supported by the NAB ("intimacies"), NEB ("intercourse"), NASB ("relations", mg. = "intercourse"), as well as a whole company of other scholars.

[68] The city gate in ancient Canaanite communities served as the "civic center" where the city elders and/or magistrates sat on official occasions, cf. C. McCown, "Gate," *IDB* (1962) II.355.

[69] *Patriarchal Society:* The term "patriarch", meaning father, is especially appropriate for describing the social structure in Abraham's day, cf. Pfeiffer, 28-31. The father was the legal and religious head of the extended family,

blazing flash of light which temporarily blinded them.[70]

The Rescue of Lot

In spite of the unmitigated depravity of his fellow-citizens, Lot found it hard to leave Sodom. His future sons-in-law ridiculed his decision to leave, and when he hesitated, the angels forcibly pulled Lot and his family to safety. Wheedling all the way, Lot begged for a dwelling in another nearby city, reluctant to choose the mountains of his uncle Abraham. His wife, still enamored with the amenities of civilized life, forfeited her own life by disobeying the command not to look back. In the end, Lot was even driven from his new city-home by fear, and his final days were reduced to cave dwelling on the fringes of civilization (19:30).

There seems to be a strong motif in Genesis which contrasts the nomadic life with the sedentary life, the former being the preferred mode. Abraham the nomad is the follower of God *par excellence* while Lot, even though *righteous,* settles for an inferior brand of existence the cities. Early on, the respective lives of Cain and Abel, that is, the agrarian life versus the shepherd life, initiated this pattern. Cain's descendants built cities but were overwhelmed with wickedness (4:17; 10:8-12; 11:1-4). Much later in the history of Israel, a group of reactionaries even attempted to return to a semi-nomadic existence during the divided monarchy (Je. 35:6-10). It is this motif that the NT writer has in mind when he speaks of Abraham as living in tents as a stranger (He. 11:8-10). Even the promised land of Canaan was not a final destiny (cf. He. 11:10, 13-16; 13:14).

1. *The Destruction of Sodom:* The term "overthrew" in 19:25, which quite literally means "turned upside down", might indicate an earthquake. We know that the landscape around Sodom was dotted with asphalt pits (14:10) , and a major earthquake would cause the inevitable fires and their accompanying explosions and burning gasses.
2. *Lot's Wife:* The petrification of Lot's wife may well have been the result of the molten, exploding materials as they rained down on her while she lagged behind. In the NT, her hesitancy to leave the pleasures of her earthly city

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including slaves, and he served as governor, priest and magistrate. Because constituted government was located in small city-states, there was no external constraint upon the authority of the patriarch, especially if his family was nomadic. The patriarch had absolute power over the lives of those in his extended family, indicated not only by the bizarre offer of Lot's daughters to the Sodomites but also in the near sacrifice of Isaac (22:2), the threatened execution of Tamar (38:24), and the proposed execution of Reuben's Sons (42:37). A women was a decidedly second-class citizen whose humanity, virtue, and very life were constantly under threat by the whims of the patriarch. The stories of Hagar (16:1-16; 21:8-21), Tamar (38:1-28), the concubine of the Bethlehem Levite (Jg. 19:1-30) and the sacrifice of Jephthah's daughter (Jg. 11:30-40) testify to the horror that was possible. For a moving examination of these four tragic stories, see P. Trible, *Texts of Terror* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

[70] The Hebrew expression used is a loanword from the Akkadian language indicating a blinding flash, perhaps something like snow blindness, cf. Speiser, 139-140.

became a vivid warning for all believers not to be enamored with the amenities of the world (cf. Lk. 17:28-32).

The Descendents of Lot (19:30-38)

The epilogue to the history of Lot ends in bitter irony. Having departed from Abraham for the city-life of the lush plains, he now cowers with his two motherless daughters in a cave, eking out an existence of alienation. His daughters, in desperation for progeny, succeed in their efforts at an incestuous relationship. The offspring became the nations destined to seduce Israel at Baal-Peor (cf. Nu. 25:1-9) and to carry on the pagan practice of child-sacrifice (Lev. 18:21; I Ki. 11:7).

Genesis 20-22

Abraham and Abimelech (20)

The next historical narrative continues the theological theme of the protection of Sarah through the intervention of Yahweh to fulfill his covenant promises. Moving further south, Abraham took his herds to the Negev, presumably for water and grass. Here the covenant promise, on the very brink of fulfillment, is once more jeopardized by Abraham's repetition of the lie with which he had previously deceived Pharaoh. Abimelech,[71] the local king, chose Sarah for his harem, but in a dream God warned him that if the situation was not rectified, Abimelech would die. Once more, Abraham's folly was counteracted by God's stubborn grace in protecting the covenant promise.

Abraham, the Prophet

When God spoke of Abraham as a "prophet" in 20:7, this may be intended in the broader sense of a spokesman (cf. Ex. 4:16; 7:1). In any case, Abraham lived long before the rise of prophetism as an institution.

God Had Me Wander

In 20:13, the construction "God had me wander" is unusual in that unlike most verbs used with Elohim which are singular, this one is plural. Thus, the answer of Abraham may be rendered "the gods caused me to wander," and if so, he would have adopted pagan language in his acute embarrassment over the lie he had told. In his eagerness to pass the blame elsewhere, he blames it on the gods.

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[71] The name Abimelech means "my father is king." It is quite possibly a dynastic title, similar to "Pharaoh" in Egypt, since it is given to more than one person (cf. Gen. 26; Jg. 9; superscription to Ps. 34).

Isaac is Born (21:1-7)

The suspense that has been building for the reader since chapter 12 finally finds a resolution when, just as Yahweh had said, Sarah became pregnant and gave birth to a son. The child was appropriately named *Isaac* (= he laughs) in keeping with the theme of laughter (cf. 17:17; 18:12-15). Sarah's question, "Who would have said..." is an eloquent commentary on Yahweh's promise. It was Yahweh himself who "had spoken!"

Hagar is Expelled (21:8-21)

While slave wives, under ancient law, might indeed be called upon to bear children due to the barrenness of a free wife (see discussion under chapter 15), if the free wife later bore a son, the slave son had to give place to the free son, and the slave wife was forbidden to attempt to displace the free wife. At a festival in honor of the weaning of Isaac (which would have been when he was about three years old), the seventeen year old Ishmael was emboldened to mock his infant half-brother, an action that Paul later interpreted to be a form of persecution (cf. Ga. 4:29). But Sarah observed this dishonoring display, and she demanded the expulsion of the slave wife and her son. Ordinarily, it was forbidden by ancient law to expel a slave and her child, which probably explains Abraham's hesitation in the matter. However, at God's instruction, Abraham obeyed, for God made it clear that the covenant promises would only be established through Isaac. It was Isaac who was the "seed" of the promise, not Ishmael, even though the covenant blessings would to some measure spill over into Ishmael's life.

As might be expected, Hagar arranged for her son to marry into her own native culture.

Carrying Ishmael

The LXX and the Syriac read that Abraham put the child on Hagar's back, but this obviously causes great difficulty given Ishmael's age. The Hebrew text, which only reads that the bread and water were put on Hagar's back, is to be preferred. The boy apparently was walking with her. There is as yet no satisfactory explanation for the textual discrepancy.[72] The verb "to cast" in 21:15 need not indicate that the boy was being carried -- only that he was being partially supported and half-dragged in exhaustion.[73]

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[72] Speiser, 155.

[73] Kidner, 140-141.

Salvation of Ishmael

It is well to remember that although Isaac was the son of promise, chosen by God's sovereign grace, Ishmael was not excluded from God's grace. While Sarah was ready to abandon the slave wife entirely, God did not share her exclusivity. His care extended to Ishmael as well.

The Treaty with Abimelech (21:22-34)

In a dispute over water rights, Abraham once more had occasion to interact with Abimelech. Abraham complained (21:25)[74] that Abimelech's slaves had seized a well that Abraham had dug (21:30), and the fact that in the treaty ceremony Abimelech came with his general probably indicates that the situation verged on war. It will be remembered from the story of Lot's abduction that war was certainly within Abraham's provenance. While the dispute over water rights is not described until the covenant ceremony, it is likely that this dispute triggered the desire for the treaty in the first place. Abimelech's plea that Abraham would not deal deceitfully with him was no doubt prompted by the one other occasion when he had encountered Abraham, an occasion in which Abraham had lied to him about Sarah.

Of special note in this account is:

Covenant Love

The Hebrew word *hesed*, rendered in the NIV as "kindness" (21:23), is especially descriptive of the loyal, faithful love that proceeds out of a covenant relationship. Throughout the OT, *hesed* is the kind of love that God desires from his people. *Hesed* is to be distinguished from '*ahabah*, the kind of love that chooses without conditions. *Hesed* and '*ahabah* may be understood as covenant love and election love respectively.[75]

Beersheba

The Hebrew word for well (*beer*) coupled with the number seven (*sheva'*) yields a meaning of "well of seven" or seven wells. However, the Hebrew word for "oath" is *shevuah*, and hence Beersheba can mean either seven wells or well of the oath.

El Olam

As a confirmation of the everlasting treaty made with Abimelech, Abraham

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[74] The infinitive construction might indicate that Abram voiced his complaint several times, cf. Kidner, 141, and if so, then Abimelech's response in 21:26 is an evasion.

[75] For an extensive discussion of these two Hebrew words, see N. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1946) 118-182.

invoked God by the name *El Olam*, that is, God Eternal. This is one more in the series of divine names which describes the character of God (cf. 14:18; 16:13; 17:1).

The Land of the Philistines

The Philistines were not indigenous to Palestine, though they provided its name (Palestine is derived from Philistine). They were from the Aegean and came south as one of the militaristic groups of Sea Peoples which invaded Egypt in about the 12th century B.C.E. The Bible cites their origin as Crete (cf. Deu. 2:23; Je. 47:4; Am. 9:7), and it is likely that their migration south was by way of Crete and Cyprus. They settled in the south coast of Palestine, an area which in Hebrew is called the Cretan Negev (I Sa. 30:14). In the OT, the term "Cretan" [Kerethite] is parallel to "Philistine" (cf. Eze. 25:16; Zep. 2:5). The reference to the land of the Philistines in Genesis 21:32, 34 and 26:1, 8, 14-18 is often thought to be an anachronism or perhaps the presence of a first wave of Sea Peoples who migrated south as traders rather than invaders.[76] However, based on Ge. 10:14, it can also be argued that there were two entirely different migrations involved, an early group coming from Egypt (which would be the one referred to in the Genesis narratives) and a later group from Crete (which would be the one referred to in the later history of Israel).[77]

Abraham's Great Test (22)

The account of the binding of Isaac can only be described as a shocking story. Not only had Yahweh required of Abraham that he cut off his past, now he commanded him to cut off his future. For the reader, the introductory phrase "God tested Abraham" makes clear that the monstrous command was a test only, and thus the reader gains a psychological advantage which Abraham did not possess. Yet this sharpens even more the suspense of the story, for Abraham had to face the future without any reassurance. To be sure, the later Christian interpretation was that Abraham believed that God would resurrect Isaac after the sacrifice (cf. He. 11:17-19), and this idea is suggested in the text itself when Abraham instructs his slaves that he and the boy would return (22:5). Yet even this does not reduce the acute tension with which the story vibrates. Several points of special note are:

- *God Tested Abraham:* The term *Elohim* is in the emphatic position in the opening sentence so that the bizarre character of the request is emphasized.
- *Your Son, Your Only Son:* The Hebrew expression *bineka et-yehideka*,

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[76] T. Mitchell, "Philistines, Philistia," *NBD*, 2nd ed. (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1982), 933; J. C. Greenfield, "Philistines," *IDB* (1962) 3.791-792.

[77] R. Harrison, "Philistine Origins: A Reappraisal," *Ascribe to the Lord*, ed. L. Eslinger & G. Taylor (Sheffield, England: JSOT, 1988) 11-19.

"your son, your only son", is rendered in the LXX as "your son, the beloved one." The carry over of this idea into the NT in terms of Jesus, God's Only Son or God's Beloved Son, is important for the Christian faith. Isaac was Abraham's only son in two senses. In the more obvious sense, he was Abraham's only son because Hagar and her son Ishmael had been driven out (21:8-21). In a theological sense, Isaac was Abraham's only son because he was the son of promise, the only son of Abraham through Sarah (17:19). Christians have long seen the bearing of this story on the gospel. The early fathers saw a direct parallelism in Isaac carrying the wood (22:6) and Jesus carrying the cross (Jn. 19:17).[78]

- *Moriah:* The precise location of Moriah in ancient times is not known, but later in the OT, the site was identified with the temple mountain (2 Chr. 3:1), and of course, in the NT the site is near Calvary.
- *Yahweh-Yireh:* The Hebrew phrase *Elohim yireh* (22:8) anticipates the p1ace name later to be given to Moriah, *Yahweh-yireh* (22:14).[79] The verb is the common Hebrew expression "to see", but it is used idiomatically to indicate selection or choice. Thus, to say that God would "see" the lamb for burnt-offering meant that he would select or provide a lamb. This idiomatic usage yields a play on words with the name *El-Roi*, the God of seeing (cf. 16:13). The final sentence in 22:14 may be rendered either, "On the mountain of Yahweh it will be provided," or "On the mountain of Yahweh it will be seen," or even, "On the mountain of Yahweh it will be made clear," and it is likely that the meanings overlap in an intentional double entendre. Not only did God provide a lamb, he also provided understanding for Abraham when he was on the verge of slaying his son.
- *Mal'ak Yahweh*: The fluidity between the Messenger of Yahweh and Yahweh himself is to be especially noted here (cf. 22:11, 15).
- *God's Two Unchangeable Things:* In reconfirming his covenant promises to Abraham, God took oath upon himself, an act that the writer of Hebrews calls "the two unchangeable things" (He. 6:16-18). The two unchangeable things were God's covenant promise and his oath.

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[78] Maly, *JBC*, 23.

[79] The KJV renders the Hebrew phrase as "God will provide himself a lamb." While this translation accurately reproduces the Hebrew word order, has misled some into thinking that the word "himself" is in apposition to the direct object "a lamb" so that the meaning would be "God will provide himself as a lamb", thus anticipating the death of Christ on the cross. Though well-intentioned, such an interpretation is based on a lack of awareness of Hebrew syntax. The clearest translation should read, "God himself will provide the lamb..."

Genesis 23:l--25:18

The Death and Burial of Sarah (23)

Sarah died at 127 years of age, and in the elaborate customs of the ancient world (cf. II Sa. 1:11-12; 3:31; 13:31; Mic. 1:8), Abraham mourned her death. Because as a semi-nomad he owned no property, he sought to buy a family burial plot from some resident Hittites. (The later Hittite Empire was founded in Asia Minor by Indo-European stock, but the Hittites here are probably traders who had settled in Canaan.) A knowledge of Hittite laws gained from archaeological findings indicates that an individual who wished to buy the entire property of another must render feudal services to the seller.[80] This may explain why Ephron was anxious that Abraham buy not only the cave of Machpelah but also the entire field (23:11).

The extended discussion over the purchase reflects the oriental system of bartering. The Hebrew word *natan* (= to give) as found in 23:11 probably indicates an offer in the context of barter, not a free gift *per se*. (In fact, in oriental barter when the seller offers to "give" you something, it often enough means that the price will be very dear indeed.)[81] In buying land, Abraham would thereby gain a resident status in the land, and the flattery of 23:6 probably betrayed an initial reluctance to grant Abraham this upward mobility. But when the transaction was complete, Abraham gained the first piece of property in Canaan which had been promised to him in Yahweh's covenant. The agreement was reached before public witnesses at the gate of the city, the place where legal matters were settled. This burial plot would later receive the remains of Abraham himself (25:9-10) as well as Isaac, Rebekah, Leah and Jacob (49:29-32).

The Marriage of Isaac (24)

Theologically, the marriage of Isaac serves as a transition between Abraham, the man to whom the covenant promises were made, and his posterity through whom the promises would be established. Like Abraham and Sarah, the wife for Isaac had to be willing to leave her home and go to the land of Canaan.

In this story, which is quite long comparatively speaking, the hand of God is to be seen in terms of providence rather than direct intervention. However, because God works "behind the scenes", so to speak, is not intended to make the events any less divinely directed (cf. 24:7, 12-14, 21, 27, 40, 48, 50, 56).

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[80] M. R. Lehmann, *BASOR* 125 (1953) 15-18.

[81] It may be noted that Jeremiah bought a plot of land for only 17 shekels (Je. 32:9) and Omri paid the equivalent of 6000 shekels for enough land with which to build an entire capital city (I Ki. 16:24). Thus, 400 shekels should be understood as an expensive price, cf. von Rad, 248.

The Oath (24:2-4)

Oaths were the ancient means of impressing solemnity upon matters of serious import. They were often accompanied by symbolic acts, such as, the raising of the hand to Yahweh or the laying hold of some sacred or powerful object (such as today when one may lay his hand on the Bible). The oath which Abraham's slave took was validated by the symbolic gesture of holding the genitals of the patriarch, the symbol of patriarchal potency (cf. 47:29).[82] The setting of the oath bears the marks of a deathbed instruction, an instruction with regard to a matter which the patriarch would not himself have been able to carry out, though Abraham's death is not described until later and Abraham apparently lived another 35 years after Isaac's marriage (25:7-8, 20). Once more, the importance of not returning to Mesopotamia is stressed.

Aram Naharaim

The place to which the slave went to seek a wife for Isaac was in northwest Mesopotamia, near the great bend in the Euphrates River.

Hesed

The important matter of Yahweh's covenant faithfulness (*hesed* = covenant loyalty, or faithful love) is emphasized in the slave's prayers (24:12, 14, 27 = "kindness", NIV).

The Gifts

The lavish gifts, both the personal ones for Rebekah (24:22, 30, 47, 53a) and the gifts for her family (24:53b), were necessary not only as a dowry but to guarantee the authenticity of the slave and his mission. Such giving of bridal gifts is well attested in Babylonian and Assyrian literature.

Rebekah's Consent

That Rebekah should be asked her opinion (24:55-58) was related both to the marriage itself as well as to her legal rights which, according to ancient law, indicated that she could stay at the home of her parents. The marriage arrangement was according to Hurrian law under what was known as a "sistership document" that is, a marriage arranged by a brother.[83] But the slave was eager to be off, and he wished to dispense with any unnecessary delay, a fact that might well be related to his assessment of Abraham's health.

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[82] The Hebrew *yarek* refers to the fleshy part of the upper thigh, the area of the sexual organs, cf. Holladay, 144. See also, M. Pope, "Oaths", *IDB* (1962) 111.576. The Hebrew text of Ge. 46:26 and Ex. 1:5, for instance, reads that the descendants of Jacob came "out of his thigh" (*yarek*).

[83] See full discussion in Speiser, 184-185; cf. Maly, *JBC*, 25.

The Marriage

The legality of marriage in the patriarchal period depended upon the pre-martial transactions described above and the sexual consummation by the couple (24:67). The celebration of the marriage union with a feast eventually became customary, though whether such a gala event was practiced at this early date is not mentioned.

Isaac...in the Field

In 24:63 there appears the Hebrew infinitive *la-suach*, but since it is a *hapax legomenon* (that is, an expression which only occurs once in the Hebrew Bible), translation is pure guesswork. Possibilities are "to chat", "to pray", "to meditate", "to take a walk", "to relieve oneself", but even these may miss the correct meaning altogether.

The Death of Abraham (25:1-18)

It might be assumed that Abraham's marriage to Keturah occurred chronologically near the end of his life, but while this is possible, it is not a necessary conclusion. The verb "took" may be a pluperfect (i.e., "had taken"), similar to the verb in 12:1, and if so, then the marriage of Abraham to Keturah need not have occurred when he was an aged man. In general, the clans issuing from this marriage are to be found in Arabia.

Genesis 25:19--28:9

The Twins, Jacob and Esau (25:19-34)

Nothing is known of Isaac's childhood, and very little about his life, comparatively speaking. In the Genesis narratives, Isaac recedes into the background, and the emphasis shifts rather quickly from Abraham to Jacob. Of note, however, is that the same problem faced Isaac and Rebekah as faced Abraham and Sarah, that is, the problem of sterility. An extensive suspense is not maintained, however, for after Isaac's prayer, Rebekah became pregnant with twins. Judging by the ensuing events, we should probably assume that the boys were fraternal rather than identical twins. If Isaac had been married 20 years when the twins were born (25:20, 26), then Abraham himself lived long enough to see his grandsons (21:5; 25:7)

The Destinies of the Twins

On occasion, the destiny of key figures in God's redemptive purposes is alluded to before their births (cf. Je. 1:5; Lk. 1:15, 41). The prenatal struggle between

the twins anticipated their eventual conflict as nations. Even at birth, this conflict began in at least a symbolic way. Jacob's name *Ya'agov* (= may he be at the heels) yields two meanings, both of which may apply to Jacob's life and character. In a positive way, it may mean, "May he be your rearguard," and the pronoun "he" refers to God. In a negative way, it may be taken in the sense of overreaching or dogging another's steps, and here the pronoun refers to Jacob.[84] Esau's name '*Esaw* is derived from the color red (*admoni'*) which was Esau's complexion as well as the color of the stew for which he later bargained with his brother (25:25, 30). The color red (*admoni'*) is the source of his clan name, Edom.

It is appropriate to repeat here the succinct summaries of Jacob's life by the prophet Hosea (12:3-4,12):

He grasped his brother's heel.
He fled to Aram.
He served as a shepherd to gain a wife.
He struggled with God.
He wept and begged God's favor.
He found God at Bethel.

The Birthright

The ancient world practiced the law of primogeniture, that is, the conviction that the firstborn held the exclusive right of inheritance. As such, the eldest would succeed as head of the clan, and in later Israel, he would receive a double share of the estate (cf. Dt. 21:17). This is the meaning of the term "birthright" in the story. When Esau demanded "some of that red stuff,"[85] his brother Jacob bargained with him in terms of the birthright.[86] Jacob, for his part, required an oath, which made the agreement binding. The selling of the birthright became doubly significant since it was associated with the covenant blessing (cf. He. 12:16-17).

Isaac and Abimelech (26)

For the third time the reader encounters Abimelech of the Philistine country (chaps. 20 and 21). Whether the present figure is the same as previously described or

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[84] Kidner, 151-152.

[85] The Hebrew expression is *ha-adom ha-adom*, and it does not properly mean "stew" but "red". The repetition idiomatically indicates "that red stuff there," and implies that Esau knew it was food, but probably did not know exactly what kind. He may have thought it was blood soup, though in the end it turned out to be lentils, and it is for this reason that Esau may later have said that Jacob deceived him twice--not only in the blessing but also in the "false" soup he exchanged for the birthright (27:36), Cf. von Rad, 266-267.

[86] The Nuzi tablets indicate that under Hurrian law, the birthright was transferable. In one such contract which has been unearthed, the transfer price was three sheep, cf. Kidner, 152.

perhaps a reference to his son is unknown, but in any case, the dynastic name "*Abimelech*" (= my father is king) is applicable. The Genesis writer takes pains to distinguish this episode from the previous ones, even though there are great similarities (26:1).

While in Gerar of the Negev, God appeared to Isaac and warned him not to proceed further south, as had Abraham his father, and Yahweh further confirmed to him the covenant promises. While he lived in the Negev, Isaac adopted the deceit he had learned from his father, and he passed Rebekah off as his sister. On this occasion, however, Rebekah was not actually taken into Abimelech's harem, though such a thought may well have been in Abimelech's mind. When Abimelech saw Isaac fondling Rebekah, he knew she was not merely a sister.[87] Consequently, Abimelech ordered protection for Isaac and Rebekah, perhaps out of memory of the near disaster in the time of Abraham.

As Isaac's wealth continued to grow, he became an object of envy and spite to his neighbors, and this tension grew into yet another dispute over water rights. Abimelech compelled Isaac to move his herds in order to avoid war. Yet in this new location, Isaac still encountered opposition with other desert nomads. The names of the wells he dug reflect this conflict (*Esek* = "contention" and *Sitnah* = "enmity"). Moving on once more, he finally dug a well in peace and appropriately named it *Rehoboth* (= "wide spaces" or "room").

At Beersheba, Yahweh once more reaffirmed the covenant promises to Isaac. While there, Abimelech came to renew the covenant between the clans of Gerar and the clan of Isaac as Abimelech had with Abraham his father (21:22ff).[88]

The marriage of Esau to someone outside the Isaac clan (or outside the parental home where both Abraham and Isaac had taken wives) reinforces the notion that Esau was unfit for clan leadership or to be the heir of the covenant promises. There is some discrepancy to be noted between the names of Esau's wives as given here and the names given later (36:1-3), though this may be due to either alternative names (like nicknames) or to a corruption in the transmission of the text.

Jacob Steals the Blessing (27:1-40)

The following narrative is divided into four scenes, each with an appropriate dialogue. The theological intent of the story is clear, that is, that Jacob, in spite of his treachery, is to be the son of covenant promise, just as was Isaac and not Ishmael (cf.

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[87] The Hebrew word for "fondle" has the same consonants as the Hebrew word for "laughter" (*tshg*), and there is probably an intended play on words in that Isaac (= "he laughs" or "he amuses himself") was caught amusing himself with his wife.

[88] The name Phicol may also be an official title along with Abimelech, cf. Kidner, 154.

Mal. 3:1-3; Ro. 9:10-13). It is equally clear that all the parties concerned acted without due regard for Yahweh. Isaac, for his part, determined to overrule God's prediction because of his preference for Esau (25:23, 28). Whether or not he knew of Esau's flippant sale of the birthright, the reader is not told, but he must surely have known of the word of Yahweh which came to Rebekah. Esau, for his part, silently agreed to break his oath to Jacob (25:33; 27:4-5). While the cause of Jacob and Rebekah was justifiable, their actions seem to be prompted more by Rebekah's favoritism (25:28) and Jacob's greed than any respect for God himself. Jeremiah, speaking centuries later, uses Jacob as a symbol of rampant deceit (cf. Je. 9:4-6, NIV footnote).[89] Paul was surely correct when he declared, "It does not depend on man's desire or effort but on God's mercy" (Ro. 9:14)!

Isaac and Esau

The first dialogue brings the reader to the period of Isaac's old age. Perhaps Isaac thought he was dying, for the custom of patriarchal blessing was normally pronounced from the deathbed (Cf. 48:9-20; Dt. 33:1). Isaac determined to pass the patriarchal blessing on to his favorite son, Esau.

Rebekah and Jacob

Rebekah, like Sarah in earlier years (18:10), managed to overhear the conversation. She quickly summoned her favorite son and hatched a plot to dupe her ailing husband. It is not improbable that the cunning of Rebekah was the source of Jacob's fraudulent character, not to mention that the characteristic of treachery seems to have run deep in that side of the family (cf. 29:22-25). Rebekah's flippant attitude toward Yahweh is written in bold letters as she appropriated to herself any resulting curse if the trick should be discovered.

Isaac and Jacob

In the third dialogue, Jacob confronted his feeble father in the guise of his brother Esau. Jacob's treachery extended not only to the mockery of his father, but also to the act of lying in the name of Yahweh (27:20). All five physical senses play a part in the scene. Isaac's failing eyes were not dependable, so he was forced to choose between his other senses. His ears told him the son was Jacob, but his touch told him it was Esau. Still undecided, he determined to use other means. Rebekah's culinary skill had perfectly reproduced Esau's familiar meat-dish, and to make doubly certain, Isaac called for his son to come close to bestow a kiss. (Judas Iscariot did not act without precedent!) In the final analysis, Isaac put his faith in his tongue

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[89] The Hebrew text is a play on words and states, in effect, "Everyone is a Jacob," of. R. Harrison, *Jeremiah and Lamentations* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973), 90.

and his nose, for he tasted the meat and caught the scent of Esau's stolen clothes. In this pitiable state of raw deception, Isaac passed on the blessing "before the face of Yahweh"(27:7).

Isaac and Esau

Scarcely had Jacob slipped away when Esau arrived with fresh game. The horror and shock of the truth shook the old man and the young man alike,and the scene is painted vividly in the story teller's rich words, "Isaac trembled violently" and "Esau burst out with a loud and bitter cry" (27:33-34). But the blessing was irrevocable, and tears were to no avail.

The Flight to Northern Mesopotamia (27:41--28:9)

Only out of respect for his ailing father did Esau decline to expunge his brother's name from the history of the family, and even then his forbearance was only intended to be temporary. But Rebekah knew her oldest son, and she also knew that to save Jacob she must lose him. Thus, she approached her nearly-blind husband to induce him to send Jacob north to find a wife. Yet Rebekah was shrewd enough to know that the suggestion must seem to come from Isaac, and not from herself.

Seeking to win favor in some way, Esau took a third wife, though it is doubtful that by this time his efforts gained him any real status. It was too late for Esau.

Genesis 28:10--30:43

Jacob Dreams at Bethel (28:10-22):

As Jacob fled northward at his father's bidding, he encountered one of the most unusual yet specific acts of grace in all the OT, and considering Jacob's character, it was grace indeed! As he slept, he dreamed of a stairway between heaven and earth with Yahweh standing above it, his angelic retinue ascending and descending. In the dream, Yahweh reconfirmed to Jacob the covenant he had established with Abraham and Isaac. Jacob experienced the *mysterium tremendum fascinans*,[90] the mystery, awe and fascination that accompanies a genuine encounter with God. His exclamation, "This. . . is the house of God" (28:17), provided the name of the place, *Bethel* (= house of God).

The kind of pillar Jacob built, a *matsevah* or memorial stone,[91] was later

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[90] This Latin phrase gains its theological prominence from the classic work R. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford, 1950).

[91] For a brief but insightful discussion of the archaeological remains of such stones, see N. Silberman, "Standing Stones: *Masseboth* and Stelae," *BAR* (Mar./Apr. 1989 XV.2) 58-59.

condemned because of its use by the Canaanite nations (cf. Deu. 12:3; 16:22; Ho. 3:4; Mic. 5:13), but here there seems to be no explicit pagan association. The anointing with oil was a symbol of consecration (cf. Ex. 30:22-33). Jacob's promise of tithing was voluntary, though to whom he expected to give it, the reader is not told.

Jacob Acquires Two Wives (29:1-30):

Upon his arrival in Northwest Mesopotamia near Haran, the ancient city in which Abraham had once lived, Jacob had occasion to demonstrate his physical abilities before the eyes of his beautiful cousin, Rachel, by single-handedly moving a heavy stone from the mouth of a well so that she could water her flock. (Jacob's muscular strength perhaps anticipates his later wrestling match with an angel, cf. 32:24-28). Soon Jacob was being hosted by his northern relatives, and he shortly agreed to work seven years as a bride price for the hand of Rachel in marriage.

Leah's Eyes

Laban's two daughters are alternately described, Rachel as beautiful in face and figure, and Leah as having eyes which were *rakot*. This Hebrew description means tender, dainty or sensitive, and while traditionally it has been associated with weakness (either in vision or in color), Many modern scholars define it as meaning "lovely", (see NAB)[92]. If the latter is correct, then the contrast in the girls would have been that Leah had lovely eyes while Rachel had better physical proportions and better facial features.

Laban's Treachery

Jacob at last met his match in deception, and ironically, it was on the side of his family from which he had derived his own devious nature! After seven years of labor toward a dowry, the time of the marriage was finally reached. (Seven years would probably be considered a rather high bride price, and the fact that Jacob was willing to pay it reflects the intensity of his affection for Rachel.) At the marriage festivities, however, Laban brought his veiled daughter to Jacob for the sexual consummation which in ancient times served as the ritual bond of matrimony. It was not until morning that Jacob discovered, to his chagrin, that he had been foisted. He had consummated his marriage with Leah, not Rachel.

When Jacob confronted his new father-in-law, Laban blandly retorted that custom demanded that the older daughter be married first, but if Jacob was willing, he could have Rachel after the wedding festivities were completed in honor of Leah.

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[92] Speiser, 225.

So Jacob agreed, and after the bridal week of Leah, he also married Rachel and began another seven years of service. Later in Israelite law, the practice of marrying two sisters was forbidden (Lev. 18:18)

Jacob's Children (29:31--30:24)

The narrative of the birth of Jacob's first eleven sons must have covered much of the final seven years in which Jacob labored for his uncle. The fact that Yahweh was favorable to Leah in granting her fertility demonstrated his favor toward the disenfranchised woman (29:31).

Leah's First Sons

As common in ancient times, Leah's sons were named out of the circumstances of life that accompanied their birth.

Reuben = "See, a son!" (phonetically, the name sounds like "he has seen my misery")

Simeon = phonetically similar to the verb *shama*, or "he heard"

Levi = related to the verb *lawah*, or "he attached himself"

Judah = related to the verb *yadah*, or "he praised"

Bilhah's Sons

Rachel's barrenness induced a deep jealousy toward her sister, and in her frustration, she gave her slave girl to Jacob so that the slave might bear a child, as Rachel said, "at my knees" *('al-birekay),* an expression that meant she would acknowledge Bilhah's issue as her own. This recalls Sarah's earlier efforts to achieve posterity in the same way according to Hurrian customs (16:1-2). Thus, Bilhah bore two sons:

Dan = from the verb *dananni'*, or "he vindicated me"

Naphtali = "my struggle"

Zilpah's Sons

Not to be outdone by her barren sister, Leah gave her slave girl to Jacob as well. She also bore two sons.

Gad = derived from *bagad*, or "in luck"

Asher = "fortunate"

Leah's Final Sons and Daughter

After refusing to bargain with Rachel for Reuben's mandrakes (an eastern herb

considered in both ancient and modern times to be an aphrodisiac)[93], Leah became fertile again. This time she bore two sons and a daughter.

Issachar = related to the word *sekari*, or "my reward"

Zebulun = related to the verb *yizebbeleni*, or "he exalts"

Dinah = unlike the son's names, Dinah's bears no accompanying explanation though it may be related to the verb *dan*, or "justice" (similar to Bilhah's son Dan)

Rachel's First Son

Finally, Rachel also bore a son, and the reader should probably assume that this was near the end of the second seven year work period which Jacob had contracted with Laban. If Leah bore six sons in seven years, and if she was not able to become pregnant for a period between her 4th and 5th son, as the text implies, then Rachel's child must have been born shortly before Jacob decided to leave Northern Mesopotamia (cf. 30:25). She named him:

Joseph = from the verb *yoseph*, or "may he add", and phonetically similar to the verb *asaph*, or "he removed"; this name possibly anticipates the birth of Benjamin some years later (cf. 35:18).

A Battle of Wits and Magic (30:25-43)

When Jacob prepared to leave Northern Mesopotamia in order to return to Canaan, Laban protested. While Jacob was not a slave to his uncle, it seems that Laban more or less considered him to be a permanent family member and apparently held some kind of legal claim over him (cf. 31:43). Thus, Jacob struck an agreement with his uncle that he would continue to tend the flocks, but under new conditions. To understand the bargain, it is important to note that in the ancient Near East most sheep were white or light gray while most goats were a uniform black or dark brown color. Thus, for Jacob to ask for the irregular colored animals was advantageous to Laban since they were the rarer ones in any case. To insure that Jacob could not breed any of the irregulars with the normal colored animals, the irregulars were separated out and placed under the care of Laban's sons in pasture some three days journey away. The advantage lay totally with Laban, and as Jacob had said, it would be doubly easy to see which animals belonged to which man simply by the coloring (30:33).

Jacob, however, put his trust in the ancient popular belief that visual stimuli

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[93] The Hebrew term for mandrake, *duda'im*, bears erotic connotations, because it phonetically sounds like the Hebrew words *dodim* (= love-making) and *dadim* (= breasts).

during mating could affect the outcome of the offspring. It is unlikely that Jacob's efforts at breeding magic had anything to do with his famous results, and the text is silent on this point, but for whatever cause, an amazing number of lambs and kids were piebald, and by selectively breeding the animals, Jacob managed to build a large herd of sturdy animals for himself. Apparently this procedure continued for about 6 years (cf. 31:41)

Genesis 31-32

Jacob and Laban Part Company (31)

After 20 years in Northern Mesopotamia, the time for Jacob to leave the relatives of his wives had come. Several factors precipitated this parting of the ways. In the first place, Laban's sons were jealous of Jacob because he was growing wealthy and because their attempt to suppress Jacob's wealth had failed (31:1). Second, Laban himself fell into a dangerous mood (31:2). So Yahweh instructed Jacob to return to Canaan, and he promised to go with him.

It is of interest that two more names for God are divulged in this narrative: the "God of Bethel" (31:13) and the "Fear of Isaac" (31:42, 53).

Jacob's Flight South (31:1-21)

Jacob knew his uncle's mood too well to try to leave openly. He had, in the words of Laban's sons, taken the glory of their father.[94]

So Jacob explained to his wives how he had been cheated for 14 underpaid years, not to mention the changing of his wages on numerous occasions.[95] He recounted to them how that God had appeared to him in a dream to inform him that the bargain over the odd-colored animals had indeed turned out to his advantage, and further, that God still remembered the vow he had made at Bethel.

The daughters, for their part, acknowledged that their father was treating them like foreigners in that he had already spent the bride price. Under ancient law, the bride price was given to the bride's father, not for him to spend, but for him to administer in case his daughter was widowed. It was to revert to her children when she died. In essence, Rachel and Leah held their father responsible for breaking the Hurrian family laws of their country.[96]

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[94] The Hebrew word for "glory" (*kabod*) is derived from the word for "weight" or "heaviness", hence the NIV rendering "wealth".

[95] The expression "10 times" may be a Hebraic idiom for "time and again", not unlike our English word "several" or "dozen", cf. Speiser, 179, 244.

[96] R. De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Social Institutions* 1 (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), 27; Speiser, 245.

Jacob was wise enough to leave while his uncle was occupied with shearing, a move calculated to give Jacob at least a few days advantage in travel in the event of pursuit (cf. 31:22). Rachel, for her part, appropriated her father's *terapim*. The Hebrew *terapim* refer to small cultic figurines (sometimes shaped as a human) which were used for divination (cf. Zec. 10:2). Laban later refers to them as his "gods" (= *elohim*). This scene belies Laban's earlier use of the name of Yahweh (24:31; 30:27). At the very least, Laban seems to have been a polytheist. Why Rachel took the *terapim*, we are not told. It could have been for religious reasons (35:2-4), but even more likely, it was an effort to reclaim part of her bride price inheritance that her father had spent. The Nuzi tablets inform us that possession of the family gods strengthened one's claim to the family inheritance.[97]

So Jacob crossed the Euphrates and headed south toward the mountains of northern Canaan in the transjordan.

Laban's Pursuit (31:22-42)

It took Laban and his clan several days[98] to overtake Jacob for they had a three day margin to make up. But Jacob was traveling with herds, and Laban's clan traveled light. God, however, warned Laban that he must leave Jacob alone. Thus, Laban was reduced to merely indulging in a harangue with his nephew over the secretive departure, and particularly, over the stolen gods. Rachel managed to keep the *terapim* concealed, and Jacob was able to preserve a bold front. Furthermore, Jacob revealed that he had even gone beyond the call of duty in bearing the loss of any animals from his flock which were killed by predators. Hammurabi's Code of Laws, for instance, provides that the owner of the herd must accept such losses.[99] Later, the Mosaic law provided for the same contingency (Ex. 22:10-13).

A Covenant is Cut (31:43-55)

The final parting of Jacob and Laban is associated with a covenant which they cut together regarding Jacob's wives and family and regarding the boundaries between the two clans. Jacob was bound to protect his wives and to remain exclusively faithful to them. Both Laban and Jacob were to respect the cairn as a memorial of their pact and as a boundary marker beyond which neither would pass.

The oath was sworn in the name of a deity from both sides. A better translation for 31:53 is probably: "The God of Abraham and the god(s) of Nahor -- may the gods

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[97] Kidner, 165.

[98] As with the phrase "10 times", the phrase "7 days" is probably a rounded figure, idiomatically denoting an indeterminate period of time. The journey from Haran to Gilead was considerably more than 7 days, especially if Jacob was pushing herds before him.

[99] *The Code of Hammurabi*, 7266, of. Pritchard, *ANE*, I.166.

of their fathers judge between us."[100] As was customary in many ancient rites of covenant, a covenant meal (31:46, 54) accompanied the erecting of the cairn (cf. 26:30)

Jacob Prepares to Meet Esau (32)

To escape Laban was one thing, but to return to Canaan within the reach of Esau was another. Bethel, the place of Jacob's vow, was in central Canaan, and even though Esau was further to the south, Jacob would be well within striking distance of his vengeful twin.

On the way south, Jacob encountered the angels of God, a meeting which anticipated his upcoming confrontation with the *Mal'ak Yahweh* at Peniel. Also, there may be a word play on the name *Mahanaim* (= two camps). In one sense, the two camps represented Jacob's camp and the angels' camp. In another sense, the name pointed ahead to Jacob's division of his own retinue into two camps (32:7-8).

Jacob's Attempt to Pacify His Brother (32:1-21)

Knowing that his confrontation with Esau was inevitable, Jacob sought to preempt a conflict. He sent a message to Esau, addressing his twin as "lord" (*adonay*) and referring to himself as "your slave" (*ebed*). Esau's response was to muster his clan, some 400 men who were presumably warriors. The absence of any message back to Jacob could only have been received as ominous.

In fear, Jacob divided his people and animals into two camps. In his prayer to Yahweh, Jacob reminded God of his covenant promises which were now in dire jeopardy. He prepared a generous gift for his brother, a gift which would arrive in stages, and sent it on ahead.

There is an intriguing play upon the word "face" in 32:20-21 which does not translate well. It is based upon the rich nuances of the Hebrew word *panim* (= face), and rendered more literally, the message to Esau reads:

> *'Observe, Jacob your slave is behind us,' because he thought, 'I will cover his face with the gift coming ahead of my face, and later, when I shall see his face, perhaps he will receive my face.' So the gift went ahead of his face....*

This play on the word *panim* possibly anticipates the "face of God" at

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[100] The Hebrew *elohim* may be taken as either singular or plural, but the presence of a plural verb ("may they judge") suggests that only the God of Abraham should be understood in a singular way. Given the passages which describe Laban's family in the context of polytheism, there is no reason to believe that his family worshiped Yahweh alone, cf. Kidner, 167.

Peniel.

Jacob Wrestles at Peniel (32:22-32)

In desperation, Jacob sent his wives and children over the ford at the Jabbok stream, a water course running through a deep cleft in the central transjordan. He himself remained alone on the other side. While there alone, a man wrestled with Jacob, a man whose identity only gradually becomes clear. Though not directly called the *Mal'ak Yahweh*, this mysterious figure seems in every way to correspond with what is known of the *Mal'ak Yahweh*. In the fierce struggle, Jacob's hip socket was twisted so that he ever after remained crippled, a grim reminder that the wrestling match was real! But Jacob did not give in until he was blessed.

In this blessing, Jacob's name was changed, like the names of Abraham and Sarah, his ancestors. From the name Jacob ("he grasps the heel") his name was changed to Israel ("he struggles with God"). Jacob named the location *Peni El*, a word meaning "face of God", for there Jacob saw the face of God but was spared.

The Israelite practice of not eating the tendon attached to the hip socket is not to be found in the Mosaic law, but it does appear in Rabbinic Judaism.[101]

Genesis 33-36

Jacob Returns to Canaan (33-35)

Soon after the encounter at Peniel, the approaching company of Esau's clan came into view. In orderly procession, Jacob approached his brother and presented his vast family and clan. Once again, Jacob's words recalled the play on the word "face" (33:10; Cf. 32:30; Heb. text in 32:20-21). Esau had indeed accepted Jacob's face, and for Jacob to see the face of his brother was like seeing the face of God at Peniel. Jacob's wrestling with the Mal'ak Yahweh was a microcosm of his wrestling with his brother Esau.

Still referring to Esau as "my lord" (*adonay*) and to himself as "your slave" (*ebed*), Jacob deftly managed to avoid combining his clan with that of Esau. He sent Esau on ahead to Mt. Seir to the south, promising to follow at a slower pace. However, the old Jacob was still lurking in the bosom of the new Israel. When Esau was safely on his way south, Jacob turned back to the north toward Succoth. (Succoth is to the north of the Jabbok stream in the transjordan). Jacob crossed the Jordan and camped near Shechem, a city in Canaan proper about a day's travel north of Bethel. Here he bought a plot of ground and set up an altar, calling it *El Elohe Israel* (=

[101] Kidner, 170.

"God, the God of Israel" or "Strong is the God of Israel")

The Rape of Dinah (34)

It would seem that Jacob's attempt to settle in central Palestine reflected a procrastination in his divine call to return to Bethel, a procrastination that spelled disaster for his family. Jacob apparently lived for several years in this area without going to Bethel, for Dinah, who would have been not more than 7 years old at Peniel, is a young woman in this narrative. It is not improbable that Jacob's attempt at integration with the Canaanites served as a stern warning to later generations of Israelites when they entered Canaan in the exodus and conquest.

The account itself is brutal and treacherous. Dinah, the only girl among Jacob's children, was raped by the son of the local ruler.[102] However, the father of the young man made a serious attempt to rectify a bad situation. He offered an unlimited bride price as well as concessions in trade, property and societal merging. Jacob's sons, however, had learned well from their father (who had learned well from his mother). In a bold lie, they agreed to the bride price on the condition that all the males of the city submit to circumcision. Their ulterior motive, of course, was to cripple the city-state' s defense.

Circumcision in the ancient world was primarily a rite of passage, performed upon males when they reached marriageable age and reflected in the Hebrew word for father-in-law (*hoten* = the circumciser).[103] Ancient methods of surgery were primitive (cf. Ex. 4:25-26), and the period of greatest discomfort would have been on the third day. Thus on the third day, two of Dinah's full brothers, Simeon and Levi, led in the massacre of the Shechemites. They pillaged and looted the town, stealing both the herds and the women.

Jacob Returns to Bethel (35:1-15)

Once more, God instructed Jacob to go to Bethel. This time, as much out of fear of the Canaanites as out of the spirit of obedience, Jacob complied. He required a purge of the various household gods (such as Rachel's *terapim*), and also of the earrings which served as fetishes in deference to the gods in order to ward off evil.[104] Arriving at Bethel, Jacob reconstructed his altar. The covenant was reconfirmed to

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[102] The interpretation that this was a rape is based on the Hebrew verb *lagah* (34:2), which often carries the idea of being seized. However, if the verb is not taken with such a strong nuance, and inasmuch as Dinah stays at the young man's home (cf. 34:17, 26) and there is no overt indication of forcible abduction, then it is possible to interpret the passage as a case of fornication rather than rape.

[103] J. Hyatt, "Circumcision," *IDB* (1962) I.629.

[104] Maly, 36; Kidner, 174-175; it should be noted that decorative jewelry was not taboo *per se* (cf. 24:22), only when it was associated with pagan superstition.

Jacob, as it had been to Isaac and Abraham before him.

Jacob's Clan Sojourns in Canaan (35:16-29)

Continuing south toward Ephrath (near Bethlehem), Jacob suffered the death of Rachel in childbirth whom he buried along the way. Rachel's implicit prayer at the birth of Joseph ("may he add") was now answered, but her name for the new son, *Ben-Oni* (= son of my trouble), epitomized the terrible *cost*. Jacob's renaming of the boy gives a more positive note *(Binyamin* = son of my right hand). The 12 sons were now complete, and forever after, the number 12 would symbolize the fullness of the people of God, whether the 12 tribes of Israel, the 12 apostles of Jesus or a symbolic multiplication of the number 12 (cf. Re. 7, 14)

Moving yet further south, Jacob revisited his parents' home near Hebron. Rebekah was presumably already dead by this time, and Isaac died shortly after. He was buried in Machpelah by his sons Jacob and Esau (49:30-32)

The Clan of Esau (36)

Due to their huge herds, Esau and Jacob agreed to live apart, Jacob in Canaan proper and Esau to the southeast of the Dead Sea. However, their kinship was never completely forgotten (Nu. 20:14; Dt. 23:7; Ob. 10-12). The mention of Eliphaz and Teman (36:11) might possibly suggest a connection between the land of Edom and the story of Job (Jb. 4:1). The phrase "before any Israelite king reigned" (36:31) suggests to many scholars that the final literary form of Genesis post-dates the Israelite monarchy.[105] The most conservative interpretation sees this verse as a reference to a future eventuality only,[106] and a moderating position views the passage as a possible later addendum intended to bring an old document up to date.[107]

Genesis 37-38

Joseph, the Dreamer (37)

With the Joseph stories, the reader of Genesis moves into the fourth cycle of the patriarchal narratives, So far, the covenant promise to Abraham was reconfirmed to only one male offspring in the family line. It was confirmed to Isaac, not Ishmael or the children of Keturah; it was confirmed to Jacob, not Esau. However, with the birth of the 12 sons of Jacob the covenant ceased to be individualized, and the

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[105] E. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 120-121; Speiser, 281.

[106] This viewpoint suggests, on the basis of the promise in 17:6, 16, that the eventual period of Israel's monarchy is prophetically anticipated, cf. Archer, 156

[107] Kidner, 15-16, 178.

assumption may be drawn that it was to be applied to the clan as a whole from this point onward. Not until the time of Moses would there be any further direct intervention of God through theophany and the *Mal'ak Yahweh.*

God had already revealed to Abraham his intention that the chosen clan was to live under foreign domination for four centuries (15:13-16). The Joseph stories reveal how this prediction was fulfilled.

Joseph's Dreams (37:1-11)

Joseph succeeded in alienating his entire family from himself. Some of his half brothers were angry at him because he was a "tattle-tale". The others were angry at him because he was favored by Jacob over them all, a favor which was particu1arly epitomized in the gift of a special robe.[108] His father was insulted and his brothers were jealous because Joseph described his dreams dreams which pictured his parents and his brothers bowing in homage.

Joseph's Brothers Sell Him into Slavery (37:12-28)

Jacob sent Joseph to report on his brothers, who were grazing their flocks some distance away. The anger of his brothers spilled over when they saw Joseph, and they determined to murder him then and there. Only Reuben's reluctance stayed their hand temporarily.

Reuben had good reason to be cautious. In the first place, he was already in disfavor with Jacob (cf. 35:22). Secondly, as the eldest son in the clan he would be ultimately responsible for the death if it occurred. It is reasonably conjectured that he felt the saving of Joseph might prove to be the grounds for a reinstatement into his father's favor.[109] However, when Reuben was gone, they quickly sold Joseph as a slave to a caravan of Ishmaelites.[110]

The Cover-up (37:29-35)

Reuben was shattered when he discovered what his brothers had done, but there was nothing he could do to rectify the situation. The brothers then took Joseph's special robe, which they had stripped from him earlier, and saturated it with goat's

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[108] The Hebrew word *passim* used to describe Joseph's special robe is a word found elsewhere only in II Sa. 13:18-19 where it describes the robe of a princess in the family of David. The traditional translation "coat of many colors" is based on the LXX and the Latin Vulgate, but this may be entirely erroneous. Guesses as to the actual meaning have resulted in translations which refer to the length of the robe and/or the length of the robe's sleeves, cf. C. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *The Pentateuch*, trans. J. Martin (rpt. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1971), 1.335. Based on an Akkadian etymology, the robe might have been richly ornamented, cf. Speiser, 290. Whatever the meaning of the word, the point is that the robe was a distinctive gift that set Joseph apart from his siblings.

[109] Kidner, 182.

[110] Apparently, the names "Ishmaelites" and "Midianites" are used interchangeably, as in Jg. 8:22-24.

blood to deceive Jacob into thinking that Joseph had been attacked by a wild animal. There may well be a deliberate irony here in that Jacob had also deceived his father with a goat (27:11-17, 21-23).

Jacob's grief was inconsolable. He would not be comforted until the day of his death.[111]

Joseph Arrives in Egypt (37:36)

In Egypt, Joseph was sold into the household of Potiphar,an Egyptian official.[112]

The Problem of Levirate Marriage (38)

The story of Tamar is one of two accounts of levirate marriage to be found in the OT.[113] Several ancient cultures practiced levirate marriage, a custom designed to perpetuate the name of a deceased husband and to keep his property intact so that it could be passed on to the next generation. Mosaic law also stipulated such practices (Dt. 25:5-10). When a man died without leaving a child, it was the obligation of his brother or nearest kin (*go'el*) to marry the widow. The first child of this second union was reckoned to the deceased husband, and the child would receive both the family name and the property of the deceased.

Judah's Marriage (38:1-5)

Little information is available regarding the wives of the 12 patriarchs with the exception of Joseph (who married an Egyptian, 46:20) and Judah (who married a Canaanite, the daughter of Shua). Earlier, special care was taken to obtain wives for the covenantal Sons from the clan in Haran (chaps. 24 and 27:41--28:2). Now, however, such efforts are not made, and the reader can only guess as to the racial background of the wives which the 12 patriarchs obtained. To Judah there were born three sons, Er, Onan and Shelah.

The Problem of Heirs (38:6-11)

Er, Judah's firstborn, committed an unnamed wickedness for which Yahweh

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[111] This is the first reference to the Hebrew *sheol,* the place of the dead. While sometimes translated as "hell", the word *sheol* should not necessarily be associated with punishment. Rather, the concept of *sheol* moves fluidly between the ideas of the grave, the underworld and the state of death, cf. D. Innes, "Sheol", *New Bible Dictionary*, 2nd. ed. (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1982), 1103.

[112] The Hebrew word rendered "official" *(seris*) technically means "eunuch", but the word broadens out to include the general notion of a court official, cf. Holladay, 260. Many court officials, especially those responsible for royal harems, were indeed eunuchs. Potiphar, because he had a wife, was probably not a eunuch.

[113] The other account is the story of Ruth. The term "levirate" derives from the Latin *levir* (which translates the Hebrew *yabam* = brother-in-law), cf. Vaux, 37; Pfeiffer, 88.

executed him. (The reader would doubtless like to know more, of course, inasmuch as the whole history of Abraham's extended family is a story of poor judgment, treachery and deceit. What singled out Er's wickedness above that of the rest of his family must have been severe indeed!) Onan, whose obligation it was to raise up a son for his deceased brother through levirate marriage, stubbornly refused to do so.[114] His sin was not withdrawal *per se* but his breaking of the levirate law. Accordingly, Yahweh executed him as well. This left Shelah, and in fear that something might happen to him, Judah procrastinated the levirate marriage obligation of his third son.

Tamar's Ploy (38:12-19)

Determined to achieve a son for her deceased husband, it eventually dawned upon Tamar that Judah was thwarting her. She therefore decided to take matters into her own hands. Changing her widows clothes, Tamar disguised herself as a cult prostitute.[115] Judah encountered her on his way to a sheep-shearing and secured her services by offering collateral[116] which guaranteed the later payment of a goat. In this way, Tamar achieved a levirate pregnancy through her father-in-law.

Judah's Dilemma (38:20-23)

Judah, for his part, sent a goat so as to receive back his collateral, but the cult prostitute was no where to be found. Consequently, Judah determined to keep the matter as quiet as possible.

Tamar's Near Execution (38:24-30)

When Tamar's pregnancy began to be apparent, Judah was informed. The natural conclusion was that the pregnancy was by prostitution since Tamar was legally being kept for Shelah but had never been given to him. As the head of his clan, responsible for all judicial pronouncements, Judah sentenced Tamar to execution by burning. But before the execution could be performed, Tamar produced Judah's cylinder seal and staff, indubitable proofs that Tamar had become pregnant through her father in-law. He could only admit that she was in the right.[117] At the time

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[114] It is worth noting that the Hebrew text may be translated "...whenever he lay with his brother's wife" (NIV). The older KJV rendering "when he went in unto his brother's wife" leaves one with the impression that the avoidance of conception occurred only once. However, Onan repeatedly refused to give his deceased brother an heir.

[115] Most of the religions of Canaan were fertility cults, that is, cults in which the fertility of land or animals was thought to be directly related to the fertility of the gods. Sacred prostitution was the common ritual which by imitative intercourse attempted to induce the gods to mate and so insure the fertility of one's farm or herds. The chief service of the cult prostitute was to offer his or her body for ritual intercourse, cf. O. Baab, "Prostitution," *IDB* (1962) III.933.

[116] The collateral of a seal (a cylindrical seal, not a signet ring) and a staff (which was probably engraved with a name, cf. Nu. 17:1-5) were sure marks of identification.

[117] The Hebrew word *tsedegah* (= righteousness) means to be in the right or to have a just case, cf. Holladay, 303

of the birth, Tamar bore twins, one of whom became the ancestor of both David and Christ (cf. Mt. 1:1, 3, 6,16).

Genesis 39:1--41:45

Joseph is Accused of Attempted Rape (39)

In Egypt, Joseph had been sold into the household of Potiphar, a high official in the Pharaoh's court. Under Yahweh's blessings, Joseph eventually became Potiphar's personal attendant, who gave him stewardship over the entire household. While in this position, Potiphar's wife determined to seduce the new slave.[118] At first, Joseph refused her with diplomacy, but day by day she continued her urging. When at last she caught him alone, she seized his robe. Joseph fled the house, leaving his robe behind him.

In her frustration at being foiled, Potiphar's wife turned to spite. She accused Joseph of attempted rape, and even submitted his cloak as proof. The protest of innocence by a slave against the testimony of Potiphar's wife would bear little chance of acceptance, and Joseph was quickly dispatched to the prison. The fact that Joseph was not immediately executed perhaps betrays a hint of suspicion in the mind of Potiphar himself. In the prison, Joseph once more gained respect with the help of Yahweh.

The Prison Dreams (40)

In prison, Joseph met two prisoners of the royal court, the cupbearer and the baker. Each of the new prisoners had a dream on the same night. When Joseph had heard their troubled thoughts, he assured them that God could reveal the meaning of the dreams.

In his interpretation, Joseph used a carefully chosen phrase which, depending upon the way it was turned, could mean more than one thing. In 40:13 Joseph told the cup-bearer that in three days "Pharaoh will lift your head", and in 40:19 Joseph used the identical words to explain the baker's dream (*yissa* phareoh et-rosh'ka). The phrase "to lift the head" is idiomatic in Hebrew for the concepts "giving attention to", "giving comfort and pardon to" and "beheading". Joseph adeptly captured all three ideas. The cases of the cup-bearer and the baker would be reviewed (cf.especially 40:20). For the cup-bearer, the phrase is explained to mean restoration. For the baker,

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[118] The Hebrew expression *yepheh-toar weyepheh mar'eh* ("well-built and handsome", NIV) is a characteristic way of describing both men and women in the OT. Quite literally, it means "beautiful of form and beautiful of sight", but depending upon whether it refers to men or women, it carries the idiomatic value "well-built and handsome" or "shapely and beautiful".

the phrase is explained to mean decapitation.[119]

Joseph had hoped, of course, for his own case to be reviewed, and he requested the cup-bearer that if the dream came to pass as predicted, the cup-bearer should plead for him. Though the dreams indeed were fulfilled, the cup-bearer quickly forgot his fellow inmate.

The Rise of Joseph in Egypt (41:1-45)

Two years later, Pharaoh also had a disturbing dream (more like a nightmare). Two points of interest in regard to his dream are the reference to the cows emerging from the Nile, where cattle like to stand nearly submerged to escape the heat and flies, and the reference to the sirocco, the hot, dry, desert wind well-known in the East. After failing to gain an interpretation from his experts in magic, the cupbearer suddenly remembered Joseph. After the cup-bearer had reviewed Joseph's expertise in dream-interpretation, Pharaoh recalled Joseph from the prison. In accordance with Egyptian customs (and in contrast to Semitic customs where shaving usually indicated mourning, humiliation or the termination of a vow), Joseph appeared before Pharaoh clean-shaven.

After first disclaiming any personal credits for dream interpretation, Joseph warned Pharaoh of a severe famine to occur within a matter of seven years. Coupling the interpretation with wise advice, Joseph urged Pharaoh to take precautions against this impending distress. Accordingly, Pharaoh appointed Joseph himself to administrate the national economy as he had advised. No one like Joseph could be found who had the "breath of the gods" in him.[120] All people in Egypt were ordered to submit to him.[121] Pharaoh made Joseph second in rank only to himself, and he gave to Joseph the royal signet ring[122] a gold chain, special clothing and a chariot. Furthermore, Joseph was given an Egyptian name and an Egyptian wife.[123]

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[119] Speiser, 308.

[120] The Hebrew phrase *ruah elohim* (41:38) may be translated as either the "wind" or "breath" or "spirit of God" or of "the gods". It seems unlikely that Pharaoh would have been a worshiper of Yahweh, and thus the best translation should probably reflect polytheism on Pharaoh's part.

[121] The Hebrew text of 41:40 literally reads "kiss you upon your mouth" (*al-pika yissag*). This is idiomatic for either kissing the dust upon a command or giving the kiss of homage due to royalty, hence, "submit".

[122] The Hebrew word is not the same as that for the cylinder seal of 38:18.

[123] Potiphera means "he whom Re has given" (Re being the sun god of Egypt). On, the city of Joseph's wife, is the same that is later called Heliopolis (city of the sun) by the Greeks. Asenath, the name of Joseph's wife, means "belonging to [the goddess] Neith".

Genesis 41:46--44:2

Preparation for the Famine (41:46-57)

The precise setting of the great famine within known Egyptian history can only be guessed. Famines of this sort were frequent enough in the ancient world, and there is no certainty as to which Pharaoh or dynasty was in control during the Joseph stories. None of the hieroglyphics decipered to this point have even yielded the name "Joseph". Most scholars favor a date in the Hyksos period (1710-1549? B.C.E.), a period when semi-nomads from Asia invaded the eastern Delta region and set their capital at Avaris, gradually extending their power until they controlled both Lower and Upper Egypt. However, the question is still under debate, and hopefully any forthcoming evidence of antiquity will yield more certain information.[124]

The Years of Abundance (41:46-52)

As vizier of Egypt, Joseph made the best of the first 7 years of abundance. He stored vast quantities of grain to be used later.During this time, he fathered two sons. Manasseh, a name that is related to the Hebrew verb *nashah* (= to forget), reflects Joseph's emotional recovery from his traumatic childhood. Ephraim, a name that is related to the Hebrew verb *parah* (= to be fruitful), reflects Joseph's rise in Egypt.

The Years of Famine (41:53-57)

When the 7 years of abundance were over, Joseph used the stored food to supplement the sparse produce of the land during the famine. Furthermore, surrounding nations also came to Egypt to buy staples.Thus, the stage was set for Israel to descend into Egypt, as God had predicted to Abram (15:13-16).

Joseph's Brothers Seek Grain in Egypt (42:1-38)

From this point onward in the Genesis narratives, the focus of the Joseph stories shift from Joseph's relationship with Egypt to Joseph's relationship with his family.

The Brothers Go to Egypt (42:1-5)

The famine had reached Canaan, and Jacob's family, still living in central Palestine, was affected. Accordingly, Jacob determined to send a caravan to Egypt to buy emergency rations. He did not send Benjamin, however, and there is more than a hint that he did not trust the character of his sons. No suggestion as to Joseph's fate

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[124] For brief discussions of the question, see: Pfeiffer, 144-149; R. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 169-171.

had ever surfaced, but Jacob was not about to let the disaster repeat itself with the only surviving son of his beloved Rachel. More than likely, Jacob's sons would have joined other caravans headed south for the same purpose, for it is unlikely that 10 Hebrews would have been granted an audience with the vizier of Egypt in and of themselves.

The Accusation of Treachery (42:6-17)

When they confronted Joseph, the brothers bowed low to the ground, thus fulfilling Joseph's youthful dreams (37:5-10). It is not surprising that Joseph was unrecognized. He was much older, and his clothing, lack of facial hair and use of an interpreter seemed to place him firmly in an Egyptian context. The accusation that they were spies, while only a stratagem, nevertheless reflects Egypt's traditional fears for national security.[125] Joseph's demand to see his younger brother provided a test for the other brothers to prove their honesty in the family story they had told. Joseph's use of the oath formula in connection with someone besides Yahweh, which implies the divinity of Pharaoh ("as surely as Pharaoh lives"), would in the later history of Israel become repulsive, but here it is given without comment.

The Terms for the Sale of Grain (42:18-26)

Using the stratagem as a basis to keep the brothers firmly tied to Egypt, Joseph required them to bring their youngest brother and to leave one of their present number in custody. As the brothers discussed their plight in their own language, they were unaware that Joseph perfectly understood. Determined to keep the subterfuge intact, Joseph struggled to control his emotions as he listened. His secretive instructions to return each one's money demonstrates that he was not being merely vindictive. If that had been the case, he could have destroyed his brothers in whatever way he chose. Instead, his stratagem served to guarantee that his brothers would return, while at the same time it gave him time both to consider his own feelings and to reevaluate their character.

The Return to Canaan (42:27-38)

On the return trip through the Sinai desert, one of the brothers discovered his money in his sack. In total perplexity, the group arrived home to recount to Jacob their strange dilemma and to protest their innocence. One can well imagine Jacob's lack of trust in his sons' story. When they opened their grain sacks and every brother discovered his own money in his sack, they were stunned. Jacob's response clearly demonstrates his suspicions of his sons. In his mind, they were lying about their trip

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[125] The translation, "You have come to see where our land is unprotected" (42:9, NIV), renders the literal words, "You came to see the nakedness of the land."

to Egypt and the purchase of grain. (Could they possibly have burglarized a caravan, or even worse, massacred one?) Furthermore, he could only assume that they were lying about the absence of Simeon and the need to take Benjamin. Possibly Jacob suspected that the whole affair was a treacherous ruse to narrow the inheritance factor among the brothers by the murder of the others. His words, "Everything is against me," portrays a truly broken man. Though Reuben offered his own Sons as surety of their honesty,[126] Jacob stubbornly refused to release Benjamin.

The Brothers Return to Egypt (43:l--44:2)

The brothers were in an impossible situation. On the one hand, their father obviously did not believe them, and therefore he refused to release Benjamin. On the other hand, they could hardly return to Egypt without him, or the vizier would conclude that they were spies indeed and would not only execute Simeon but more than likely execute them all. Consequently, they waited nearly two years (cf. 45:6) until only the threat of starvation forced a course of action.

The Resolution to Return (43:1-14)

With starvation on the horizon, it was Jacob himself who precipitated the return to Egypt. Once more, however, his sons protested that Benjamin must go with them. When Judah added his guarantee to that of Reuben, Jacob finally acquiesced. A gift was arranged to give to the vizier[127] and also a double payment to cover both the first and the second supply of grain. Jacob's use of the name *El Shaddai* (cf. 17:1-2) possibly reflected his belief that the outcome of this trip would be decisive for the fulfillment of the covenant promises. If the trip failed, the covenant itself would fail.

The Second Trip (43:15-25)

Bringing with them Benjamin and the double payment, the brothers once more descended into Egypt. There, they were obliged to prepare for a dinner with the vizier himself, and their fears mounted as they speculated on the cause. Hurriedly, they explained to the steward their account of the strange reappearance of their money after the first trip, possibly assuming that this might be the underlying reason they were to meet the vizier. They had brought Benjamin to prove their honesty, but all their efforts would be in vain if they were then accused of thievery. However, the steward assured them that money was not the problem, and he released Simeon to them from custody. In perplexity, they prepared to meet the vizier with their gifts.

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[126] The offer of Reuben's sons reflects the patriarchal social standard in which the authority of life and death lay in the hands of the head of the clan.

[127] Gifts, as such, were both important and necessary. They were an expected courtesy when one approached a person of rank (cf. 1 Sa. 16:20; 17:18). Such a practice is alluded to in Hebrew wisdom literature (of. Pro. 18:16).

Joseph Arranges Another Scheme (43:26--44:2)

At the dinner, Joseph made inquiry regarding the family affairs of the brothers, questions that would have been expected given that the whole point of the test of honesty rested on the accuracy of the family story which the brothers had earlier related to Joseph during their first visit. Barely controlling himself, Joseph managed to retain his secretive front. It no doubt helped that each part of the group, the Hebrew brothers, Joseph and the Egyptian attendants, ate in partial segregation, Joseph because of his rank and the others because it was ritual1y taboo for Egyptians to eat with Hebrews.[128] Finally, Joseph indicated that the brothers could be given the grain as requested and sent on their way. However, once more he secretly instructed his steward to return their double payment, and further, to put his own silver goblet in Benjamin's sack.

Genesis 44:3--47:26

The Arrest (44:3-34)

Joseph had carefully engineered his scheme so as to once again put his brothers in as nearly the same position as they had been so many years before when they had sold him to the Ishmaelites. While each brother's money was returned to his sack, this factor did not enter into the arrest. It was the divination cup[129] that became the central issue now, and Benjamin was found with it. The convenient solution to the problem would have been for the brothers to deny any connection with the theft and to leave Benjamin to bear the consequences. It is precisely this potential escape route that Joseph apparently wished to create for his brothers in order to test them. In this way, he would know for certain that either his brothers had reformed their attitudes or had remained constant in their treacherous tendencies.

The Brothers' Guilt (44:3-17)

The brothers refused to leave their younger brother to bear the penalty alone. When they confronted Joseph, their admission of guilt carries a double meaning (44:16). Not only had they been caught with the cup, they all knew that they were guilty of Joseph's blood, and implicitly, they recognized that somehow this event was

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[128] R. Nixon, "Joseph", *NBD*, 2nd ed., 619.

[129] A divination cup was a special utensil in which objects were thrown or liquid was poured. The pattern formed by the objects or the way in which the liquid was disturbed in the cup by the objects was interpreted so as to predict the future (not unlike reading tea leaves). Such a practice was widespread in ancient times, cf. Rad, 392. The author in Genesis makes no moral comment on the practice, though in later times, such divinations were severely condemned (cf. Lv. 19:31; Dt. 18:10-13). Joseph's adoption of Egyptian magic must not be removed from its setting in a pre-Mosaic era when there was as yet no clearly defined law from Yahweh.

connected to the former event (cf. 42:21-22, 28; 44:18-20, 27-29). Though Joseph gave them yet another opportunity to escape and to leave Benjamin behind, they refused and corporately accepted the blame.

Judah's Plea (44:18-34)

Judah's intercession is a masterpiece of tact, sensitivity, pathos and implicit repentance. The frequent use of "my lord" and "your servants" demonstrates how well Judah knew that he was interceding before a powerful superior. By offering himself instead of Benjamin for slavery, Judah showed his willingness not only to save his younger brother but to expiate his own crime in selling Joseph, for the plot to sell Joseph had been Judah's (cf. 37:26-27). With this, Joseph knew his brothers had changed. They had passed the test!

Joseph Reveals Himself (45:1-28)

At Judah's plea, Joseph broke down completely. Expelling from his court all but his family, Joseph revealed his identity to his stunned brothers.

The Character of Salvation-History (45:4-8)

The content of Joseph's assessment of divine providence is one of the most important theological statements in the entire book of Genesis, for it describes the nature of the history of God's salvation. Joseph's explanation hinges on the phrases "you sold me" and "God sent me". Human depravity in no way deters the purposes of God. Rather, God bends the very circumstances of history to his own purposes. This theme undergirded many if not most of the patriarchal stories narrated thus far, including those of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and now Joseph. The importance of the idea is doubly emphasized in that it is later repeated (50:18-21). As an idea, it forms the structure upon which the major events of biblical history rest, including the slavery of Israel in Egypt, the transition from a tribal league to a monarchy, the exile and eventually the events in the life of Jesus. Even the betrayal of Jesus by Judas and the crucifixion arise out of God's providential use of human depravity and the freedom of history (Ac. 1:15-20; 2:22-24; 4:27-28; 13:27-30). Paul's great conclusion that "in all things God works for the good of those who love him, and who have been called according to his purpose" has its roots in Joseph's assessment of divine providence (Ro. 8:28-30)

The Invitation to Jacob (45:9-20)

Joseph instructed his brothers to bring their father and the entire clan to Egypt

due to the severe famine. He determined to settle them in the land of Goshen.[130]

The Brothers Return Home (45:21-28)

Jacob could hardly believe his ears when his sons returned home with their story. Only the accompanying lavish display of gifts convinced him that his sons told the truth.

The Descent Into Egypt (46:l--47:l2)

The descent of Israel into Egypt continues the fulfillment of God's predictions to Abraham (cf. 15:13-16).

Jacob's Vision (46:1-4)

Once more God revealed himself to Jacob to assure him that the move to Egypt was within the divine purposes. As Jacob passed through the Negev, he rebuilt the ancient altar of his father Isaac. Here God spoke to him, not by theophany but by vision, saying, "I am *El*, the *Elohim* of your father." There is a double meaning in the phrase, "I will surely bring you back." Not only would Jacob be buried in Canaan (50:12-14), his descendants would ascend from Egypt in the exodus.

The Family of 70 (46:5-27)

The listing of the Israelite clan members falls naturally into the Leah and Rachel groups. This listing of those who descended into Egypt is clearly connected with the listing of those who later came out from Egypt in the exodus (cf. Nu. 26:4b-51). The number 66 is derived by subtracting from the number 70 the deceased Onan and Er, by subtracting Joseph and his two sons who were already in Egypt, and by adding Dinah. The total number of 70 became the traditional way of describing the group (cf. Deu. 10:22; Ex. 1:5).[131]

The Family Arrives in Egypt (46:28--47:l2)

The prejudice of the Egyptians against shepherds may merely be the common bias of urban people against their rural counterparts. Jacob, for his part, shows the imperviousness of old age. He was not intimidated at confronting Pharaoh, and

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[130] Goshen has not been attested as yet in ancient Egyptian records. However, since it was apparently the intermediate meeting place between Joseph and his father (46:28-29), we may assume that it was in the eastern delta region. The facts that it was actually reckoned within the borders of Egypt proper, that it was suitable for grazing (46:32-34; 47:4-6), and that it was identified as the "district of Rameses" (47:11) all seem to point to the eastern delta region, cf. see discussion in T. Lambdin, "Goshen", *IDB* (1962) II.442.

[131] It may be noted, however, that the Ex. 1:5 passage reads "75" in the Qumran scrolls and the LXX, and this is followed by Stephen in Ac. 7:14, cf. J. Hyatt, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 57.

unabashed at pronouncing blessing upon him.

The Administration of Joseph During the Famine (47:13-26)

The practice of selling one's livestock, land and even liberty was common enough in antiquity. In the Mosaic code, it was regulated by laws of redemption (cf. Lv. 25:14ff.). There is a manuscript discrepancy to be noted in 47:21. If the Masoretic Text is followed, then the population was moved to the cities so as to be near the grain storage centers and to enhance distribution. If the Samaritan Pentateuch and the LXX is followed (which most scholars consider correct), then the populace became serfs of the Pharaoh, as they had bargained for earlier (47:19). This would not have been as drastic a change as might be supposed, since Pharaoh was considered to be a god in any case, and such a policy would only make effective in practice what was already effective in theory.

Genesis 47:27--50:26

The Oath of Joseph (47:27-31)

Near the close of Jacob's life in Egypt, he called upon Joseph to take an oath regarding the place of his burial. Jacob was concerned about the covenant promises. He determined not to be buried in the Mesopotamia of his ancestors nor in the new Egyptian home of his family. Canaan was the land of the covenant promise, and there with the remains of his ancestors at Machpelah Jacob insisted that he was to be interred. The oath symbol of holding an object of potency (in this case, the dying patriarch's genitals) insured that Joseph would do his father's bidding.

There is some question about how the final phrase should be translated. The Hebrew consonants can be read as either *rosh ha-mittah* (= head of the bed, so NAB, KJV, NASB, NEB) or *rosh ha-matteh* (= top of the staff, so LXX, NIV). If the former, the description probably means that Jacob gave a gesture of mute appreciation to Joseph's oath.[132] If the latter, then the description probably means that Jacob leaned heavily upon his staff, the symbol of his pilgrimage.[133]

The allusion in He. 11:21 is taken from the LXX, where Jacob's covenant vision in the oath and the blessing of Joseph's children are reckoned by the author as the evidence of his covenant faith.

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[132] See the comment and footnote regarding 24:2-4 on page 53.

[133] Speiser, 356-357.

The Blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh (48:1-22)

At the time of his father's death, as was customary in the patriarchal culture, Jacob determined to give his patriarchal blessings to his sons.[134] In addressing Joseph, he reviewed the covenant promises which were reaffirmed by *El Shaddai* at Bethel (Luz is the older name of Bethel, of. 28:19; 35:6). Next, he formally announced the adoption of Ephraim and Manasseh as his own sons, explaining that this was due to the abrupt death of Rachel when Benjamin was born which prevented her from bearing any others. This adoption would have great bearing upon the future of the clan, for although the nation would always be spoken of as the 12 tribes, in actual fact 13 clans are accounted for. Joseph's two sons would both be reckoned for extensive land inheritance in the exodus and conquest, while Levi, the priestly clan, would only receive the privilege of living in special towns within the clan holdings of the others (cf. Nu. 35:1-5; Jos. 21:1-42).

The Adoption Symbol

The gesture of taking children upon one's knees (48:12) was an adoption symbol within Semitic culture. Rachel adopted the issue of Bilhah as her own by this method (30:3, Hebrew text),[135] and Naomi did the same with the son of Ruth (Ru. 4:16, Hebrew text). Joseph later used the same gesture to adopt his grandchildren (50:23).

The Invocation

Jacob used three titles by which he invoked the blessing of God. Each of them recall the stages of God's self-revelation. He was the covenant God of the fathers, he was the Shepherd who guarded Jacob and he was the *Mal'ak Yahweh* (Angel of the Lord) who delivered.

The Reversal of Blessing

A repeating pattern appears in Genesis regarding the patriarchal blessing. Abraham's oldest son was not the covenant son; neither was Isaac's oldest son the covenant son. While no one is here excluded from the covenant, still the pattern of a reversal of blessing resurfaces, and in a two-fold way.

First, the blessing that would ordinarily have gone to Jacob's oldest son, Reuben, is conferred upon Joseph's sons. Reuben had evidently forfeited his right to

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[134] Kidner, 212. 4

[135] The question, "Who are these?" (48:8) seems to be more than simply an inquiry as to identity. It also appears in the blessing of Jacob by Isaac (27:18), and it probably serves as a formal introduction to the patriarchal blessing, perhaps even a traditional part of the ritual, much as similar questions would later become part of the passover ritual (Ex.12:26-27)

the firstborn's blessing in Jacob's eyes by his incest with Jacob's slave wife Bilhah (cf. 35:22; 49:4). This, at least, was the traditional understanding of the nation in later centuries (cf. I Chr. 5:1-2). The blessing of the firstborn usually carried with it the best portion of the inheritance plus an equal share with the other brothers of what remained. Thus, if there were two sons, the older would get two shares and the younger only one. By adopting the two sons of Joseph and conferring upon them the rights of the firstborn, Jacob effectively gave to Joseph a double share in the patriarchal blessing, and in essence, he replaced Reuben with Joseph (48:15a,20)[136]. The juxtaposition of the singular "your name" (referring to Joseph in 48:20) and the plurals for "you" and "your" (referring to the boys in 48:21) make clear that the blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh was the conferring of the rights of the firstborn upon Joseph.

Second, Jacob also reversed the blessing of Joseph's two sons so that Ephraim, the younger, instead of Manasseh, the older, would be given the firstborn's rights. In the later history of the nation, Ephraim would become the prominent tribe in the northern nation of the divided monarchy, so much so, that to speak of Ephraim was to speak of the northern nation Israel.

The Blessing of Jacob's Sons (49:1-28)

Jacob's blessing of his sons is set forth in Hebrew poetry, that is, a structure based upon the parallelism of ideas. His dying words are intended to be taken as prophetic, for this is the significance of the introduction, "Gather around so I can tell you what will happen to you in days to come." Addressing each of his sons in turn, he gives words of destiny, promise and judgment - both blessings and cursings. The juxtaposition of the names Jacob and Israel (49:2, 7, 24) in poetic parallelism will be a recurring pattern in the prophetic literature of much of the OT.

Reuben (49:3-4)

Reuben's pronouncement is a shattered hope. His potential for excellence was ruined by his unbridled passion (cf. 35:22). Like water, Reuben could be moved from placidity to uncontrolled turbulence.

Simeon and Levi (49:5-7)

The second and third of Leah's sons are treated together, probably because they were the instigators of the butchery at Shechem (of. 34:25ff.). The meaning of the Hebrew word *mekeroteyhem* is uncertain. It may refer to swords as weapons or to

[136] Maly, 44.

the knives used for circumcising.[137] The prediction that they would be scattered anticipates Levi's lack of land inheritance in Canaan as the priestly clan and Simeon's eventual absorption into Judah (cf. Jos. 19:2-9; 15:20-32). That Simeon was absorbed into Judah early on is also suggested by the absence of his name in the listings of Judges 5 and Deuteronomy 33.

Judah (49:8-12)

Judah, in contrast to most of his brothers, is praised as a warrior and a leader. This extended prediction of leadership anticipates the Davidic era but extends beyond it. From Judah would eventually come one to whom rulership over the nations truly belonged. Ezekiel makes a cryptic allusion back to this promise and interprets it in messianic tones (cf. Eze. 21:25-27), and Christians have long seen in the verse an anticipation of Jesus the Messiah. 49:11-12 are poetic images of the golden age in which vintage is abundant.

Zebulon (49:13)

Zebulon's eventual land inheritance near the sea during the conquest of Canaan is predicted (cf. Dt. 33:18-19).

Issachar (49:14-15)

Issachar would be forced to submit to an overlord in order to remain in his inheritance, though the precise fulfillment of this prediction is unknown. It may probably be assumed to have special reference to Issachar's subjugation by Canaanites sometime during the period of the tribal league.

Dan (49:16-18)

The calling of Dan to provide justice was, like Reuben, destined to be a shattered hope. The cryptic prophecy of 49:17 perhaps anticipates the migration and idolatry of Dan in Judges 18.

Gad (49:19)

In the Hebrew text, this verse is a series of puns playing upon the sound of the name Gad (*Gad gedud yegudnu wehu' yagud 'agev.)* With inheritance in the transjordan, Gad fulfilled his destiny as a desert raider and as one to be raided by other desert clans (cf. Dt. 33:20)

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[137] J. Myers, *I Chronicles* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1965), 35-36.

Asher (49:20)

Asher's inheritance was to be in the fertile area of western Galilee (Dt. 33:24-25).

Naphtali (49:21)

The meaning of the prophetic oracle over Naphtali is uncertain.

Joseph (49:22-26)

Though Jacob had already blessed Joseph's two sons, he did not hesitate to bless Joseph as well. The translation is uncertain, and it may yield metaphors of either plants or animals in 49:22 (see NIV footnote). The profusion of divine names describing God as the protector of Joseph is similar to those used in 48:15-16. Of the 12 sons, only Judah's blessing is any where near to Joseph's in length and affirmation.

Benjamin (49:27)

The warlike clan of Benjamin is fully attested in the period of the tribal league, when during the civil war Benjamin twice defeated the other 11 tribes in pitched battle (cf. Jg. 20:19-21, 24-25). A special forces group of left-handed warriors was also developed within the Benjamin clan (cf. Jg. 3:15; 20:15-16).

The Death of Jacob (49:29--50:l4)

At the time of his death, Jacob reiterated to his sons what he had told Joseph earlier (47:29-30), that is, that he wished to be interred in the cave of Machpelah with his ancestors. When Jacob had passed away, Joseph had his father embalmed, a process that, depending upon the period of Egyptian history, took from 30 to 70 days.[138] After the period of embalming and mourning, Joseph took leave of Pharaoh to go up with his family and a large retinue of Egyptians to the cave of Machpelah for the burial of Jacob. After the burial, they all returned to Egypt.

Joseph Reassures His Brothers (50:15-21)

Joseph's brothers reverted back to their earlier fears when Jacob died (cf. 42:21; 43:18; 44:13; 45:3). But Joseph, magnanimous to the end, repeated his perspective of salvation-history (cf. 45:4-8). Only God could right wrongs. Even the evil schemes designed by humans were instruments of God for a greater good. Finally, the proper response to evil is kindness and forgiveness.

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[138] Maly, 45.

Joseph Dies (50:22-26)

The book of Genesis closes by pointing beyond itself to the future. Joseph's dying request was that his bones would accompany the clans which would depart from Egypt in the exodus, and his wish was fulfilled by Moses and the people of the conquest (cf. Ex. 13:19; Jos. 24:32). The author of Hebrews in the NT reckons this final request of Joseph as an indication of his faith toward the future (He. 11:22).

A Theological Epilogue

The Theology of Genesis

As both a summary and a conclusion to this study of the Bible's first book, it will be well to assess the theology of the whole after having examined each of the distinctive parts. As the first book of the Hebrew Torah, Genesis sets the stage for the entire OT. Even beyond that, Genesis and the OT were adopted by Christians from the very beginning. While neither Jesus nor the NT writers regarded the OT writings as God's last word, they did not hesitate to regard them as God's first word (cf. Ro. 15:4). They not only quoted from them, they alluded to them copiously. The consistent conviction of NT believers was that their faith was one with that of OT believers. To be sure, the title "Old Testament" presupposes a "New Testament", but between the two there is the Christ event which holds them together. The NT faith is inevitably an OT faith. OT faith is not merely background or "local color" for the NT faith. The NT itself treats the OT as theologically normative, though we must add that Jesus consciously set himself above the Jewish Scriptures as God's fuller revelation. Thus, the book of Genesis is extremely significant inasmuch as it records the beginnings of sacred history -- a history in which God created and maintained the universe and in which he began the process of redeeming his people from their stubborn waywardness.

Genesis as the Pre-History of a People

In a special sense, Genesis is the prologue to the history of Israel which properly begins with the exodus. The stories of the patriarchs are centuries older than Moses and the exodus, and they were more than likely a part of the tribal lore of the slaves in Egypt. However, the bringing together of these stories into a unified whole gave to the fledgling nation a sense of manifest destiny and historical perspective. The God of the exodus was not some strange new deity, but the God of the fathers (Ex. 3:5-6, 15; 4:5). The move from Egypt to Canaan was a return to the ancestral home which God had promised to the covenant sons, Isaac and Jacob (Ex. 2:23-24; 6:2-8; 33:1; Dt. 1:6-8).

The Generations

A recurring term in Genesis is the word *toledot* (= generations, variously rendered in the NIV as "account", "written account", "lines of descent" and "order of birth"). This word, punctuating the Genesis record some 13 times, means "origin", "line of descendants" or "history", and it is used either to round off a collection of stories already recounted[139] or to anticipate a collection of stories about to begin[140] (2:4; 5:1; 6:9; 10:1, 32; 11:10, 27; 25:12-13, 19; 36:1, 9; 37:2).

Sacred History

The concept of sacred history, as it appears in Genesis, was radically different from the religious beliefs of the other peoples of the ancient Near East. The gods of the Mesopotamians and the Canaanites were gods of nature, personifications of the mysterious forces of thunder, rain, fertility and so forth. The pagan festivals were the reenactment of sacred myths in which people celebrated the never-ending cycles of life, death and rebirth in nature, the change of the seasons and the fertility of the soil.

The patriarchs, by contrast, came to know God by his mighty acts within history, his self-revelations and interventions. Yahweh had made himself known through a series of extraordinary events and self-disclosures. God himself interpreted and anticipated history so that his people could understand its meaning (6:5-7; 11:5-9; 12:1-3;15:13-16; 16:9-12; 18:20-21; 25:22-23; 26:2-5; 28:12-15; 35:9-12; 45:4-8; 50:19-21).

The attention in all these Genesis narratives focuses on the action of Yahweh. In the annals of other nations of the Near East, the national histories tell of the glories

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[139] It is possible that each of the *toledot* of Genesis functions as a colophon, that is, as an inscription placed at the end of a series of narratives following the pattern of a literary form common to many Mesopotamian tablets, R. Harrison, "Genesis," *ISBE* (1982) 11.436-437. If so, there are eleven distinct literary units (or tablets) in Genesis characterized by this form:

Origins of the universe (l:l--2:4)
Origins of humankind (2:5--5:2)
Family of Adam (5:3--6:9a)
Family of Noah (6:9b--10:1)
Table of Nations (l0:2--11:10a)
Family of Terah (11:10b-27a)
Family of Abraham (11:27b--25:12)
Life of Isaac (25:13-19a)
Family of Isaac (25:19b--36:l)
Life of Esau (36:2-9)
Family of Jacob (36:10--37:2)

These *toledot*, which possibly had an independent existence as cuneiform tablets, may have been brought together and rounded off with the Joseph narratives to create what we know as the Book of Genesis. The author-compiler is unnamed, but if this approach has merit, there is no reason why the author-compiler could not have been Moses, to whom Genesis has been traditionally ascribed.

[140] For reservations about the *toledot* theory described in the above footnote, see Kidner, 23-24.

of the nation and her military victories. No defeats were recorded. In the stories of the patriarchs, the success of the clans depended upon the grace of God. The Genesis record quite graphically depicts the failures of the patriarchs. Some of the patriarchs were little more than scoundrels. Yahweh is the one who did great things, and he kept his promises in spite of the patriarchs more than because of them. Thus, the history of Genesis is sacred history.

Etiology

Etiology is the use of a story to explain an ancient name, place or custom.[141] When the Israelites made the trek from Egypt to Canaan, they encountered a variety of place names in the land of promise that recalled particular events in the Genesis record. Also, certain customs had been handed down for generations. Many of the stories of Genesis are etiological in nature, that is, they give historical explanations as to why certain places and people were named as they were (32:1-2, 7-10; 17:17; 18:11-15; 21:3-7) or why certain practices were observed (32:32). These stories would have given the nation in the exodus a special sense of identity, and particularly, they would have assured them that the land of Canaan was rightfully theirs since it was the land of their ancestors. The power to name persons, objects and places was for the ancient person equivalent to holding power over that which was named, since the name was inextricably bound up with existence. Thus, to know that Jacob named Bethel (28:16-19) and Peniel (32:29-30), for instance, or that Abraham and Isaac named Beersheba (21:27-31; 26:32-33) would have enabled the Israelites in the conquest to regard these places as their own.

Creeds

Because Israel's faith was grounded in history, her creeds were historical in nature rather than abstractions of theology. They did not begin, "I believe in God, Maker of heaven and earth...."; rather, they began, "Yahweh freed us from the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage...." (Ex. 20:1; Dt. 5:6; 6:21; Ps. 81:10). One of the oldest creeds, which the Israelites recited after entering the land, stressed that the patriarchs themselves did not see the fulfillment of the promise for numerous progeny and full possession of Canaan (Dt. 26:1-11). This recitation was to remind them that the proper fulfillment of the covenant in Genesis was accomplished in the exodus from Egypt and the conquest of Canaan.

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[141] Some scholars use etiological literary criticism to suggest that answers to questions were invented by writers much later than the events they describe and thus are ahistorical. That is not the way the term is being used here. Rather, etiological motifs assist in interpreting a passage without injuring its historicity. For a fuller discussion of etiology, see J. Priest, "Etiology," *IDBSup* (1976) 293-295.

Genesis and God

Inasmuch as Genesis is the beginning of sacred history, it is the beginning point of the understanding of God. Many of the primary characteristics of the Divine Nature are first introduced in this book.

I/Thou

From the outset, God is pictured as personal and living. He is not an "it" as though he were a force within nature. He is strictly a "Thou" when humans speak of him, and an "I" when he speaks of himself. Humans, who were created in the divine image, share this same personal character in that they, too, are in the "I/Thou" category.

Creator

While the poetic character of the creation chapters in Genesis restricts the reader from a precise scientific analysis of the creation, at the same time it affirms emphatically that the universe did not appear by chance. It came into existence at God's initiative. The verb *bara'* (= to create) is used exclusively of God, and there is no suggestion of pre-existing material. Poetically, the description of the creation is simply, "And God said, 'Let there be' - and there was...." Word and event are inseparable in the Hebrew mind. The Word of God was not merely the abstraction of an idea, but the incarnation of an event. The Hebrew noun *dabar* (= word) means not only "a word" but "a thing", "an affair", "a matter" and "an event".

Sovereign

The Genesis record consistently asserts that God is the master of history, time and space. Sometimes he invaded history with obvious miracles (particularly in the birth of Isaac, 15:1-6; 17:1-2, 17-18; 18:10-15; 21:1-2), and at other times he remained hidden in the outworkings of providence (as evidenced in the Joseph theology, 45:4-8; 50:19-21). Furthermore, while there is a freedom to history, the purposes of God were surely to be worked out within history (15:13-16; 25:23).

Monotheism

The question of monotheism does not specifically arise in Genesis, at least in the way it does in the latter part of Isaiah. While Terah and Abraham were originally pagans (cf. Jos. 24:2), the Genesis account does not dwell upon this fact. To be sure, there are both explicit and implicit references to other faiths and other gods (11:4; 31:19, 30, 53; 35:2-4; 38:21; 41:38). On occasion, magic and superstition enter the narratives (30:27, 37-43; 41:8; 44:5, 15). However, these occasions are incidental, and the text has little to say about the reality or non-reality of such deities. The

overwhelming testimony is that Yahweh God is the true divine reality.

At the same time, the appearance of the *Mal'ak Yahweh* (16:7-11, 13; 18:1-2, 13, 17-26, 33; 28:13; 31:11, 13; 32:24, 30; 48:15-16), the reference to the *Ruah Yahweh* (1:2; 6:3) and the use of plural pronouns to refer to God (1:26; 3:22; 11:7) hint at a complexity to God's nature that is not fully defined.

Self-Revelation

While humans were created with an awareness of the Divine Reality in the beginning, their rebellious flight away from God ended in the disastrous deluge of Noah. It is in the life of Abraham that God took the initiative to disclose himself. Such self-disclosure was progressive. The modern reader should not expect the patriarchs to know God to the same degree as the people of the exodus, the community who heard the classical prophets, or above all, the believers who know of Jesus Christ. God's interaction with the patriarchs was the beginning of his self-disclosure, not the fullness of it. Nevertheless, in the various names for God in Genesis there is reflected the growing awareness of God's character and being:

- *Yahweh* (God's personal name, the content of which would not become apparent until later, of. Ex. 3:13-15; 6:3)
- *El Elyon* (God Most High, 14:18-20)
- *El Roi* (God of Seeing, 16:13)
- *El Shaddai* (God Almighty, 17:1; 48:3)
- *El Olam* (God Eternal, 21:33)
- *Yahweh-Yireh* (the LORD who sees, provides or makes clear, 22:14)
- *Phahad Yitsehag* (Fear of Isaac, 31:42, 53)
- *El Elohe Yisrael* (God, the God of Israel, 33:20)
- *El Bethel* (God of Bethel, 35:7)
- *Avi'r Ya'agov* (Mighty One of Jacob, 49:24)
- *Roeh* (Shepherding One, 48:15; 49:24)
- *Even Yisrael* (Rock of Israel, 49:24)

Covenant

A *berit* (= covenant) is a solemn promise made binding by an oath before God or the gods. The oath might be either a verbal formula or a symbolic action. Covenant was at the core of ancient Near Eastern civilization, and it figured significantly in everyday existence as evidenced by its frequent appearance in the patriarchal narratives (14:13; 21:22-24, 27-32; 24:2-9; 26:26-31; 31:43-54; 47:29).

Covenant was the primary vehicle which Yahweh God used to establish his

relationships with the patriarchs. Based upon his earlier promises, God formally entered into covenant with Abram by using an ancient ritual of covenant making (15:7-21). He instructed Abram in the proper ritual for perpetuating the covenant among his descendants (17:1-14). It was the patriarchal covenant that provided the basis for the exodus itself (cf. Ex. 2:24; 6:2-5; 33:1-2; Dt. 9:5).

The accounts of the covenant which God made with the patriarchs show that the initiative for covenant lay with Yahweh. Covenant was Yahweh's gift. It came by divine prerogative and as a product of sovereign grace. It was by the covenant that Yahweh came into relationship with the patriarchs and created a bond of communion. The covenant was God's way of affirming his continued faithfulness to his promises (cf. Dt. 4:31; 8:18). Thus, when Israel came to Sinai during the exodus, they were already conditioned to respond to the God who revealed himself by covenant.

Holy Love

Genesis reveals God in his essence as both love and holiness. God is love, but his love exists in tension with his holiness, and neither must be emphasized to the exclusion of the other. God's holiness is his sacredness, awesomeness, majesty, otherness from creation and moral perfection. As such, God is separate from all that is unclean and sinful. In Genesis, the demonstration of God's holiness in a moral sense is to be seen in his curse upon the snake (3:14-15), in his expulsion of the human and his wife from Eden (3:16-24), in the cursing of Cain (4:9-14), in the great deluge (6:1-3, 5-7), in the destruction of Sodom (18:20-21; 19:24-25) and in the execution of Er and Onan (38:7-10). His holiness in the sense of the Wholly Other is to be seen in his creative activity and in the majesty of his self-revelations to the patriarchs (15:12, 17; 28:16-17; 32:30).

Divine love, on the other hand, is clearly demonstrated in the hints toward redemptive hope (3:15; 49:10), in Cain's protection from unlimited vengeance (4:15), in Noah's gracious preservation (6:8), and above all, in the election of the patriarchs. Such election love was not grounded in the worthiness of its object, but in the essential nature of the God who extended it. Abraham the pagan as well as Jacob the deceiver were objects of this election love. God's love was of such a nature that he could be expected to spare even the wicked for the sake of the righteous (18:23-32). Furthermore, the character of his love is demonstrated in his compassion toward the helpless Hagar (16:7-14; 21:15-20)

Both the holiness of God and the love of God worked together to change the character of those whom God chose. It was the cognizance of God's loving justice that effected the reformed attitudes of Joseph's brothers (42:21-22, 28; 44:16, 18-34; 50:16-18).

Genesis and Humans

Not only is Genesis the beginning point of the understanding of God, it is the beginning point of the understanding of humanness. The theology of the early chapters asserts that humans are not what they were created to be. They were created in the image of God, partners complementing each other and fulfilling each other (1:26-27; 2:18, 20-25). Human nature was not something to be overcome, as in Greek philosophy, in which material things were inherently evil. Rather, all of God's creation was "good" (1:4, 9, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). However, the first humans were created to be responsible to their Creator, and God placed before them a test of their responsibility (2:16-17). In their failure and disobedience, the first humans marred the image of God in themselves and opened the path to mutual exploitation, corruption and despair (3:7).

The Human Dilemma

The human dilemma is first of all a breaking of fellowship with God. Sin entered human history by a free decision of the first humans. It produced a passing of blame (3:12-13), an upsetting of the ecology (3:17-18), an alienation from God (3:22-24) and a trail of disaster (chapters 4-6). Human potential, developed in the civilized arts and crafts (4:20-22), was a mixture of benefit and distortion. It could serve in the building of an ark for God or the building of a ziggurat in defiance of him. The deluge in the days of Noah epitomized the human estrangement from a holy Creator and the justice which depraved humanity deserved. The development of human society into a patriarchal culture demonstrated that the male and female egalitarian partnership which God created had degenerated into an institution in which the woman, far from being a counterpart to the man, had become a means to an end, the production of children. She was dehumanized as property and exploited through polygamy.

Grace and Faith

It is within this human dilemma that Yahweh began his redemptive work by calling a pagan to forsake his old country and to journey to a new one (12:1). It began with the promises of divine grace in which Yahweh demonstrated his faithfulness by fulfilling his covenant to Abraham (21:1). However, the redemptive work of God was not to be hurried, and it was not without human difficulty. Yahweh called upon those whom he chose to trust him to the point of believing against the probable (15:2-6; 17:15-21; 18:10-15). He tested Abraham's faith, not only by requiring that he cut off the past, but by demanding that he surrender the future (22:1-2). In all this, the promises which were fulfilled to the patriarchs were not the ultimate fulfillment of the covenant (15:13-16). They were the building of a reputation in the memories of

those whom God chose so that they could understand that Yahweh was to be fully trusted to complete his word, regardless of how dim the prospects. In this is the revelation of divine grace and the response of human faith.

The ultimate aim of the covenant promise went far beyond Abraham's family so as to embrace the nations of the earth (12:3; 18:18; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14). While the grace of God begins in the particular, it points beyond to the universal.

The Meaning of Genesis for the People of Faith

The Genesis stories have become indispensable to the people of faith. To the nation Israel, the patriarchal accounts are the background and foundation for their existence (cf. Jos. 24:2-4; Psa. 105:7-25; Ho. 12:2-5, 12; Mal. 1:2-3). Yet this sacred history is not only the history of the natural descendents of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, it *is* the sacred history of all who have faith in Jesus Christ (cf. Ac. 7:2-19; Ro. 4:16-25; Gal. 3:6-9, 16-18, 29). Genesis sets the stage for the redemptive work of God in Jesus our Lord. All God's promises have their "yes" in Christ (cf. II Co. 1:20). The creation and subsequent marring of the creation becomes the background against which is painted the hope for a new creation, one never to be marred or distorted (cf. Is. 65:17-25; Rev. 21-22). In the meantime, God still calls upon his people to live by faith as aliens in a world of distortion (cf. He. 11:8-22). Like Abraham, God's people are still sojourners until they arrive at the city which God has prepared for them (cf. He. 13:14; Rev. 21:10-14).