

I

Genesis

"AS OUR IMAGE"—GENESIS 1:1-2:3

IT MAY BE impossible to read the book of Genesis too slowly. There is so much here that rightly slows us down—enigmatic phrases, strange concepts that will become indispensable to our thinking as we continue to read, literary patterns and theological dynamics that will recur again and again, portrayals of God that are utterly unlike the Sunday school pictures we may unconsciously carry in our heads, and some of the richest character studies in the whole Bible. In reading Genesis, we should take our time.

The concept of relationship comes to the fore already in the opening passage and governs its interpretation. It is a mistake to read the passage as though it were intended to be a historical statement about the origin of various species. Those who use it as ammunition for the creationist–evolutionist debate (regardless of which side they may take) miss the point. Rather, this passage is a prose poem, an imaginatively rendered evocation of the Creator's relationship to all creatures, human and nonhuman, and also the relationships among the creatures, with special focus on the human role within the complex created order.

But does humanity represent the pinnacle of creation? This question has new importance for contemporary readers, knowing as we do that humans now exercise unprecedented impact, with geological force, upon the so-called natural world. Our answer depends in no small part on how we read this first passage, and even on where we draw a literary boundary around it. Jewish religious practice, which centers on Sabbath observance, implicitly gives priority to the seventh and final movement of the symphony of creation, the sanctification of the Sabbath (Gen 2:1-3); the seven-day structure of the whole passage would support that understanding. Yet the chapter division assigns those several verses to the second chapter, thus implicitly setting the Sabbath outside the opening scene of the drama.

Chapter divisions were a Christian innovation introduced fairly late in the history of the biblical text—in the thirteenth century, by Stephen Langton, archbishop of Canterbury. In dividing the first two chapters at this point, Langton was making a theological interpretation, implying that the climax and pinnacle of the drama of creation lies in the events of the sixth day:

*And God said, "Let us make humankind as our image, according to our likeness, so they may exercise skilled mastery with the fish of the sea and with the birds of the sky and with the domestic beasts and with the whole earth and with every creeper that creeps on the earth." And God created the human being as his image; as the image of God he created "it"— male and female he created them. (Gen 1:26-27)*

Langton's division was not arbitrary, even if it interrupted the seven-day structure that is clearly basic to the literary unit. Rather, he was reading in accordance with the long-standing Christian theological focus on a question indirectly posed by these verses. Beginning at least with the formative theologian Irenaeus in the second century, Christian theologians of every age have dwelt on the question of what it might mean for humans to be created in (or "as") God's image.<sup>2</sup> That biblical phrasing is potent yet cryptic; in itself, it explains nothing, and perhaps for that very reason has proved to be endlessly intriguing. Yet it is important to notice the disproportion between the vast amount of attention Christian theologians have devoted to the notion of humans as God's image and the little the Bible has to say about it, here or elsewhere. In addition to the three bare references here and two more later in Genesis (5:1; 9:6), there is one in Psalm 8 depicting humankind as "a little less than divinity" (Ps 8:6 Heb., 8:5 Eng.); divine image is not a widespread biblical characterization of human status.<sup>3</sup> The triple mention of it here should probably be seen as denoting a possibility, unique but unspecified, rather than the established and permanent condition of human existence.<sup>4</sup>

One clue to how ancient hearers might have understood this notion lies in the fact that it was common practice in ancient Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia for kings to set up statues (called "images") of themselves throughout their realms (see Dan 3:1-18). Moreover, numerous texts from these cultures refer to the king and sometimes priests as the "image" of a god. The author of this prose poem likely knew of such practices, which continued for centuries and across cultures in the ancient world<sup>5</sup> and continue in some form to the present day. (Witness the gigantic statue of Saddam Hussein erected in 2002 in Firdos Square in Baghdad

and pulled down by American troops a year later.) In response, this text makes the unprecedented assertion that not just a privileged few but all human beings are made in the image of God—male and female alike. This claim of equality and dignity shared by women and men sets a guard against mistreading the “Adam’s rib” story in the next chapter (Gen 2:18–25). Reading the second account of human creation in light of the first, we can see it more accurately. It is not a statement of origins, implying that woman is derivative, a divine afterthought, but rather an imaginative evocation of the possibility for true affinity between woman and man, and between both of them and God.

For contemporary readers, the greatest challenge in the creation story—for some, the greatest offense in the whole Bible—may lie in what comes next, the divine conferral of human dominion, “skilled mastery” with respect to other living creatures. There is no question that the language of human mastery is meant to arrest attention, especially in the final formulation:

*And God blessed them, and God said to them,  
“Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth [erefs] and conquer it;  
and exercise skilled mastery with the fish of the sea and with the birds of  
the sky  
and with every living thing that creeps upon the earth.” (Gen 1:28)*

It has been argued that human exploitation of the nonhuman world finds here its ungodly warrant.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, starting in seventeenth-century England, this verse began to be read by some as endorsing total human control over all nature. That new way of reading coincided with the rise of the new economy of capitalism in Europe, undergirded by an uncritical enthusiasm for the advancement of human knowledge and technical capability, aiming at what was presumed to be human benefit.<sup>7</sup>

The blessing and commissioning of the humans delineates God’s intention for a certain kind of relationship among the creatures. This verse is a key instance of the Bible’s consistent realism, frankly acknowledging the real power that human beings exercise with respect to the nonhuman creatures. The fact of that power is undeniable, although one might think that God would have done well to endow a less assertive creature with such extraordinary tools as the capacity for rational thought and the opposable thumb. But the biblical God is a risk-taker, and the first and biggest risk is creation of this dangerously powerful creature. Still, if we were not powerful, how could we ever serve as the image of God? The crucial theological point is that what we learn about God’s creative intention (1:26–27) conditions our understanding of the permission and responsibility conferred in this blessing. Taking both together, we must ask: How can world-shaping power

be exercised in ways that are consistent with the charge to live as God’s image? Far from being a license to pillage and plunder, to kill and consume without limit, this first imperative addressed to humans conveys both blessing and warning. The blessing upon fruitful relationship is overt; it is reinforced by the following verses, which specify (with a degree of detail that stands out in this first spare chapter) the nature of divinely intended fruitfulness. The food chains are established—and “in the beginning,” they are vegan. All creatures will have enough to eat, and none will eat each other (1:29–30).

The warning implicit in the command is subtle and sobering. It is to be found in the most troublesome phrase in the divine charge: “conquer it”—although virtually every published English translation adjusts the language to mitigate the offense. Yet the common translation “subdue it” also mitigates the warning and blunts the theological point. For when the simple Hebrew phrase is plainly translated, ears attuned to biblical idiom hear a foreshadowing of a key moment in the biblical story—namely, the conquest of the *erets* Canaan, the land of Canaan. Here at the beginning of Genesis, that very common Hebrew noun is used in its wider sense, to designate what we call the planet Earth.

Setting those two divine intentions side by side—the human conquest of Earth and the Israelite conquest of Canaan—we can see that in both cases human agents are charged to represent God’s sovereign presence, to uphold God’s “interests” in a place that belongs fundamentally to God, where God intends humans, other creatures, and the land itself to flourish. God’s first blessing to the humans echoes the blessing already addressed to the creatures of sea and sky: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill . . .” (1:22). So the human exercise of skilled mastery must be intended to reinforce that prior blessing, not to annul it. Yet reading ahead (reading ahead in the Bible is an essential, not a cheat), we will quickly see that humans struggle and often fail to live in ways that realize the divine intention for *erets*-Earth or *erets* Canaan/Israel. Both the struggle and the failure are implicit in the word *conquer*; everywhere that word appears in Israel’s Scriptures, and likewise in the New Testament, it denotes a struggle with those who oppose the intentions of God. Shockingly, the most deeply rooted opposition to God comes from those who are divinely charged to conquer. The books of Joshua and Judges recount at length Israel’s intransigence in the so-called conquest of Canaan, which is itself just the beginning of a long biblical story of disobedience in the land. Israel’s tenure in the land of Canaan is no better than a qualified failure, devolving eventually into exile to Babylon.

The Babylonian exile (586–538 BCE) was Israel’s greatest trauma during the biblical period, and it left scars—painful memories and hard-learned lessons—all over the Bible in the form we now have it. If, as seems likely, this first chapter was composed against the background of exile, then we are justified in hearing both

encouragement and sobering warning in this first charge to conquer the *erevs*. The encouragement, addressed to an exiled people, is that God still has plans for them, a vocation for those who have ears to hear. The warning is that the human project on *erevs*-Earth, like the conquest of *erevs* Canaan, may be disastrously undermined from within the ranks of those who are meant to represent God's interests there.

For readers living in the current Anthropocene era of planetary history, that warning convicts us of the need to change our exercise of Earth-conquering power so that we can realize the blessing by serving as agents of the Creator God's benevolent sovereignty rather than as (in Rosemary Radford Ruether's telling phrase) "the rogue elephant of nature."<sup>8</sup> We are challenged to begin to convert "the jungle into the garden," and more fundamentally, to *be* converted in the exercise of our intelligence, "by understanding the integrity of the existing ecological community and learning to build our niche in that community in harmony with the rest."<sup>9</sup> That is a good working definition of the exercise of skilled mastery, human dominion among the other creatures, in this and every age.

In the institution of the Sabbath, we see another, oblique indication of what it means to be formed in God's image:

God completed on the seventh day his work that he had done, and he desired [*sh-b-t*] on the seventh day from all his work that he had done. And God blessed the seventh day and sanctified it; for on it he had desired from all his work, by the doing of which God had created. (Gen 2:2-3)

Creation's perfection is signaled by the sanctification of time. Sun and moon, created on the fourth day, mark clock and calendar time, with each day essentially like the next. But God's blessing marks day seven (the biblical number of perfection) as a sacred precinct. It stands apart in time, just as the Jerusalem temple stands apart in space. Like the temple, Sabbath is designed for one purpose only, to bring humans into intimate contact with God: "the Sabbath was made for humanity" (Mark 2:27).

The fact that the biblical creation story culminates in the Sabbath has profound implications for our understanding of the human place in the cosmos. This becomes clear by comparing the biblical account with the Babylonian epic of creation, *Enuma Elish* ("When on high . . ."). Exiled Israelites would have heard that already-ancient poem recited at Babylon's great New Year's festival; it was probably chanted as the image of the chief god, Marduk, was carried in procession through the main streets of his sacred city. The Babylonian epic told of a great war among the gods, which ended with the death and dismemberment of the primordial sea serpent Tiamat. The body of the ocean goddess was split open along its length; the belly was made into the face of the earth, the top hide stretched out

to form the arc of heaven. As reparation, the defeated gods were charged to erect on the new earth a great temple to the victorious commander, Marduk. However, once the deities had finished their work, they realized that maintaining the temple and its elaborate sacrifices was going to deprive them of all leisure. So they decided to create a new race, human beings, to do the menial work of the cosmos. The story ends with a great celebratory banquet among the gods, who drank fifty roasts to Marduk as they congratulated themselves on this stroke of genius.

In the Babylonian account, humans were created to serve as slaves, serfs in the earthly fiefdom of the gods. Contrast that with the biblical story, where humans were created to realize their resemblance to God—in part, it seems, through recognizing the sanctity of the Sabbath. We humans began life with a day off, a holiday shared with God. The commandment to observe the Sabbath is the most frequently reiterated commandment in the Bible; Israel is charged to remember and relive, every single week, the day when God "cook a breather" (Exod 31:17) from the exacting effort of creating the world. The blessing of Sabbath is a striking indication of God's desire for a non-utilitarian relationship with the human creature. In contrast to and likely in protest against the ancient Babylonian myth, Israel's new religious insight is that we humans exist purely for the sake of God's pleasure in our company. Historically, Israelites may have been for a time serfs and slaves in Babylonia, but theologically, the status accorded to them and any other human being is entirely different. It seems that from the beginning God intended us to be something more like intimate friends, even family—to use a metaphor developed by Exodus (4:22), Hosea (11:1), Isaiah (1:2), and Malachi (1:6), as well as Jesus and Paul. The blessing and sanctification of Sabbath is the first indication of what it means to think of humans as children of God. I like a parent who delights in a child, God chooses our company for no good reason at all.

## Notes

1. "As our image" is perhaps a more accurate rendering of the preposition *b*, here denoting essence, than the conventional rendering "in our image." See Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 106.
2. See Claus Westermann's succinct history of the exegesis of Gen 1:26-27 in *Genesis 1-11: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984; German original, 1974), 147-55.
3. By contrast to its absence from the Old Testament after Gen 9, the description of humans created in God's image is found in several intertestamental texts (Wis 2:23; Sir 17:3; 2 Esd 8:44) and in the New Testament (1 Cor 11:7; Jas 3:9), and a number of references to Jesus Christ state or infer that he is the perfect image of God (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15; cf. Heb 1:3; John 14:9).

4. See Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 158. For a fuller discussion of creation in the divine image, see Ellen F. Davis, *Scripture, Culture, and Agriculture: An Agrarian Reading of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 53–59.
5. See J. Richard Middleton, *The Liberating Image: The Imago Dei in Genesis 1* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2005), 104–45; and Mark S. Smith, *The Priestly Vision of Genesis 1* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 99–100.
6. An early and much-cited article taking this approach is that of Lynn White Jr., “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science*, n.s., 155, no. 3767 (March 10, 1967): 1203–207. However, there is no strong support for his thesis that the medieval church’s interpretation of Scripture lies at the root of the ecological crisis. As Jeremy Cohen has definitively shown, “rarely, if ever, did premodern Jews and Christians construe [Gen 1:28] as a license for the selfish exploitation of the environment”; see Cohen, “*Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It? The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text*” (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 5.
7. On the scientific, economic, and philosophical shift in seventeenth-century England, and especially the concept of dominion over nature, see Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 164–90.
8. Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (Boston: Beacon, 1993), 88.
9. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 89.

## COMPLEMENTARITY AND RUPTURE—GENESIS 2:4–11:32

AS THE GENESIS narrative unfolds, things become more complicated, both literarily and humanly. The literary complication is that readers must attend to the interactions among multiple plot lines and strands of tradition, discerning patterns that stretch across multiple chapters. The human complication is that the first large-scale pattern that emerges entails widespread rupture, instigated by humans, of the initial harmony in God’s creation.

### *Complementary Sources*

During the twentieth century, many biblical scholars, especially in Protestant traditions, were preoccupied with analyzing the biblical text in terms of the so-called sources that had contributed to its composition. Equipped with colored pencils, college and seminary students were put to the task of marking off the several compositional strands in a given passage: J (Yahwistic / Yahwistic), E (Elohistic), D (Deuteronomic), and P (Priestly). When the pencils were applied to the creation story, the big-picture account of the seven days of creation (Gen 1:1–2:3) was assigned to the P source, and the subsequent “close-up” about the earth creatures (2:4–25) to J. The seam running between these two major sections is quite easy to discern, marked as it is by the use of different divine names (Elohim and YHWH) and different narrative details. For instance, we read that vegetation and land animals were created before humans (1:11–12, 24–25)—or afterward (2:8–9, 19). The existence of different sources, here and elsewhere in Genesis and Torah, is now widely accepted by most critical readers, but the bare fact of their existence is less interesting than the deeper question: What is the effect of their combination in the final form of the text—that is, as we read it now?

For example, what possibilities for insight would be missing if we had only the first creation account and not the second, or vice versa? The advantage of that kind of question is that it requires reflection on the content of the text. A lot of colored pencils and (more regrettably) some Bibles wound up in the trash as a result of the frustration generated when the exercise of dissection was substituted for the actual reading of the text.

If some readers in earlier generations were frustrated by excessive focus on separating out the strands of the biblical narrative, many others remain anxious about whether the (probable) existence of those strands compromises the authority of the Bible. That anxiety may be largely the result of the cultural distance between modern North American readers and west Asian writers and storytellers active more than two millennia ago. This became evident to me some years ago when for the first time I was working through the biblical creation story with a group of Sudanese teachers, my colleagues and counterparts in Christian theological education. Knowing that most of them had had little exposure to modern biblical criticism, I anticipated that the notion of different sources might seem highly dubious, if not scandalous. But I was wrong. As it turned out, this is exactly what they would have expected, being participants in a still largely oral culture that has preserved and cherished multiple tribal traditions: Shilluk, Dinka, Zande, Nuer, Kakwa, Bari, Moru, and more. I asked a Nuer colleague: "Tell me, do your people have a traditional story of the creation of the world?"

"Certainly!"

Then turning to another: "And what about the Zande story—is it identical to the one the Nuer tell?"

"Of course not."

Fluent as they are in oral traditions that reach back for centuries, if not millennia, these East Africans readily comprehend that Israelites also had different ways of telling stories, long before any of them were written down. Moreover, in their traditional cultures, storytelling is the vehicle whereby all important matters are explored and crucial knowledge passed on; a foundational theme such as creation, then, is bound to yield multiple stories. The Sudanese were not troubled by the differences between the biblical creation accounts, because they instinctively understand that true stories—stories that yield genuine insight—may complement each other in their very differences. Robert Alter writes about the "composite artistry" characteristic of biblical narrative texts, whereby multiple elements of tradition are combined not seamlessly but rather conspicuously, in "a montage of viewpoints arranged in sequence."<sup>1</sup> So, for example, the picture of female and male created together, each with the full potential to live as God's image (Gen 1:27), is complemented by the second story of their creation (2:7, 20–25),

which emphasizes the distinction between the sexes and the divine intention of full mutuality between them.

Modern readers of the Bible are increasingly turning to another storytelling tradition, rabbinic Judaism, in order to become better interpreters. The ancient and medieval rabbis often display a keen eye for pattern, for discerning meaning in complexity. Rabbinic midrash is a traditional genre of short narrative amplifications of the biblical text. The following example, from a fifth-century collection of midrashim, explores the complementarity between the two major sections of the creation account:

*You find that the Holy One, blessed be he, created heaven and earth with wisdom.*

*Rabbi Azariah said in the name of Rosh Lakish:*

*On the first day God created heaven and earth.*

*Five days were left; on one day God created something on high, and something below, the next.*

*God created the firmament on high on the second day; on the third God said,*

*"Let the waters . . . be gathered together" below.*

*On the fourth day "Let there be lights" on high; on the fifth "Let the waters swarm" below.*

*Only the sixth day was left for something to be created on it. The Holy One, blessed be he, said:*

*If I create something on high, the earth will be angry.*

*If I create something below, heaven will be angry.*

*What was it the Holy One, blessed be he, did?*

*God created the human from that which is below, and the soul from that which is on high.*

*Says, "The Lord by wisdom founded the earth" (Prov 3:19). (Midrash Tanhuma to Genesis 2:4)<sup>2</sup>*

Midrashic interpretation is a fundamentally intertextual mode of reading. Here, an insight drawn from Proverbs (quoted as the climactic line) provides the starting point for exploring God's work of creation. Naturally, the two rabbis in whose names the midrash is recorded turn to the first chapter of the Bible. They read it as they might a musical composition, tracing the tensile balance maintained through the first five days of creation, a balance that threatens to break down on the sixth. It is a fraught situation; heaven and earth are not inert objects but rather creatures of God, inherently responsive to their Creator—and therefore potentially disappointed and angry. The creation of humanity resolves the tension, but in order to show how that happens, the rabbis go beyond the

prose poem of Genesis 1 into the complementary narrative of Genesis 2. The latter details how the human was created “from that which is below,” dust from the soil, and “from that which is on high,” the divine breath (2:7). The symmetry of creation achieves its satisfactory resolution and conclusion only when prose poem and narrative are read together as a unified, though not uniform, composition.

The first eleven chapters of Genesis, the so-called **Primeval History**, give a concise yet remarkably full picture of what it means to be human in relation to the God who created heaven and earth. In these chapters, we see for the first time a pattern that occurs repeatedly throughout the book. With each repetition, the pattern gradually becomes clearer; it then appears in more attenuated fashion through the rest of Israel's Scriptures and into the New Testament. Its basic elements may be outlined as follows:

1. *God creates*, initiating a new relational reality—first the world itself, then the human family, then the seed of Abraham, and so on. In each case, the thriving of the new entity involves a complex harmony with both horizontal and vertical dimensions; creatures must interact harmoniously with each other and with God. Further, humans are engaged as partners in maintaining that harmony. God thereby takes a risk, because inevitably . . .
2. *Humans cause a rupture* in the relational reality that God has established. This happens at least four times within the Primeval History itself: Adam and Eve eat from the forbidden tree in the garden; Cain kills Abel; human violence “ruins” the earth and precipitates the flood; and the people of Babel build their presumptuous tower.
3. *Divine judgment and suffering—human and nonhuman—ensue*, sometimes construed as God's “cursing” of the creatures, beginning with the “fertile-soil” (Gen 3:17; 4:11). Never is the suffering confined to those directly responsible for the rupture; it extends through the human community and beyond, often manifesting itself as extreme reactivity, degradation, and dysfunction within the created order, including the heavens and earth. *Why?*
4. *God takes a new initiative toward humans*, creating new kinds of partnerships through which a degree of the original harmony may be restored to the world.

This is the plot line of Israel's Scriptures and the Christian Bible in both Testaments. The pattern is a hopeful one, as judgment and suffering are succeeded by a new divine initiative. Moreover, hope becomes braver with each renewal, for the rupture that precedes has made it clearer than before that the relationship between God and humanity is chosen by God against the odds and maintained in the face of continual threat.

### The Dynamics of Rupture

There is no human life without boundaries, limitations. Even in Eden, which means “delight,” humans are required to observe one divine prohibition:

**YHWH** God issued a commandment to the human: “From any tree of the garden you may freely eat, but from the tree of knowledge of good and evil you may not eat. Indeed, on the day you eat from it, you will surely die.” (Gen 2:16–17)

The prohibition seems not to have been felt as a constraint, until the snake asks that incendiary question:

“Did God really say that you are not to eat from *any* tree in the garden?”

And the woman said to the snake, “From the fruit of the garden's trees we may eat, but from the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden—of that God said, ‘You shall not eat from it, and you shall not touch it, lest you die.’”

And the snake said to the woman, “Of course you are not going to die! However, God knows that on the day you eat from it, your eyes will be opened, and you will become like God [or: like divine beings], knowing good and evil.” (3:1–5)

Contrary to popular lore, the snake is not called “Satan,” or even “the serpent.” It is simply a snake (*nabash*), as distinct from the great sea serpents (*tanninim*, Gen 1:21) created on the fifth day. But the story makes clear that this is not a garden-variety snake: it talks, and it evidently has some form of locomotion other than crawling. Indeed, the story functions in part as an **etiology**, an imaginative “explanation” of how snakes came to crawl on their bellies (3:1:4). Stories of serpents with legs and wings were told in the ancient Near East; perhaps that kind of image hovers in the distant background of this talking-snake story.<sup>3</sup> But there seems to be nothing exotic or even surprising about this snake, clever though it is (3:1). The seeming ordinariness of Eve's exchange with the snake suggests that temptation itself is a routine part of human experience, even under ideal conditions—in Eden. Perhaps that is why the writer slows down over their conversation, to show in some detail how the first humans yield to the temptation that turns them away from God.

When this dialogue between the woman and the snake is read in light of Genesis 1, it is evident that the snake is offering an only slightly indirect interpretation of what it might mean for humans to enact God's image: “. . . and you will become like God” (3:5). It is a poor interpretation, and so this is also our first

encounter with bad theology in the mouth of a biblical character. Yet the woman has misrepresented the divine prohibition: God has forbidden only eating from the tree, not touching it. The difference is not idle. It is fairly rare in biblical narrative for one character to quote another character directly; when that does happen, the quote should be checked for accuracy. Does the woman overstate the limit God has set because she is beginning to chafe at it? A teenager might exaggerate the strictures established by attentive parents; they place certain activities out of bounds, and the adolescent grumbles: "My parents won't let me do anything."

One of best biblical interpreters of any age, the eleventh-century rabbi known as **Rashi**, interprets the story along these lines. With a keen eye for other biblical verses that may amplify our understanding of this one, he observes:

She added to what was commanded; therefore she was led to *diminishment* [cf. Deut 13:1 Heb., 12:32 Eng., "All this word which I command you, preserve it in order to do it; do not add to it and do not diminish it"], of which it is said, "Do not add to his words" (Prov 30:6).<sup>4</sup>

The full text of the passage from Proverbs is relevant:

*Every saying of God is tried [like silver];  
it is a shield to those who take refuge/shelter in it.  
Do not amplify his words,  
lest he take issue with you, and you are proved deceitful (Prov 30:5-6)*

Rashi follows traditional rabbinic practice of reading any part of Scripture in light of the whole; he has, in modern terms, an intertextual method. From Deuteronomy and Proverbs he learns that adding to the saying of God ironically leads to *diminishment*: the woman's exaggeration causes her to lose some of the joy of Eden. Moreover, as Rashi brings those instructions, addressed to readers in the second person, to bear on the Genesis narrative, we may hear their imperatives addressed to ourselves with respect to our own work of interpretation, warning us not to make casual additions, lest we be "proved deceitful."

At this point, the biblical narrator makes an unusual move that underscores the consequential character of this conversation. Normal narrative practice is to report only externals, words and actions, and to let us imagine what biblical characters are thinking. But here the narrator moves inside the woman's head:

The woman saw that the tree was good for eating and that it was appealing to the eyes and that the tree was desirable for gaining insight, and she took

from the tree, and she ate. She gave also to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. (Gen 3:6)

We who have read the composite creation story can see that there are points of connection and telling difference in what the woman sees and tells herself. The opening phrase indicates that she is (unwittingly?) imitating God at the creation of the world, seeing some created thing and judging it to be "good [or: beautiful]." Yet it is evident also that there is some distortion in her perception, when compared with the description of what God did:

YHWH God caused to spring forth from the soil every tree, desirable in appearance and good for eating. (2:9)

The woman makes the further judgment that the tree is "desirable for gaining insight." One could also translate that more strongly: it is "to be coveted [h-m-d]"; the same word, denoting intense and sometimes illicit attraction, is used in the tenth commandment (Exod 20:17; Deut 5:21).

The woman's reasoning might sound innocent, even noble, yet any of us who have ever talked ourselves into something we knew to be wrong recognize how such logic works: she is giving herself permission to violate the limit God has set. This approach is directly contrary to core biblical statements about how humans gain the insight the woman wants to claim:

The fear of YHWH is the beginning of knowledge. (Prov 1:7)

The beginning of wisdom is fear of YHWH, and knowledge of the Holy One is insight. (9:10)

From that perspective, it is impossible that this woman or anyone else could gain *reasonable* knowledge of self and world—the biblical understanding of wisdom—apart from a humble, supple yielding to the will of God ("fear of YHWH"). We are never told directly how the humans in the garden are meant to achieve such knowledge; perhaps they are to learn directly from God, on walks "in the breezy time of day" (Gen 3:8). Instead, they take a shortcut, and what they gain when their eyes are opened is cheap knowledge: "They knew that they were naked" (3:7). Insight does not grow on trees.

It is probably no coincidence that the first violation of the divine will concerns eating, the first need to be met by any human society. This woman and man constitute not just a family but all human society *in nuce*, and their decision to eat against the limit God has set casts a pall on all future history. Shame and blame are fully evident for the first time: the man and woman hide from God;



the woman blames the snake: the man blames her for her action and God for her existence (3:8–12). Created to be in full mutuality, the woman and the man now coexist in relationships of unequal power (3:16). Further, the natural order is itself disrupted. The soil, the substance from which human life is drawn and on which it depends, is “cursed” (3:17–18), and the primary forms of productivity and creativity for man and woman—farming and childbearing—become fraught with pain and anguish. Thus, man and woman “fall” into the disharmonious world that is all too familiar to us.

How much does gender matter in this story of the first transgression? The question reflects more than a purely modern concern. Two later biblical writers insist that the woman was more to blame than the man:

Adam was not misled, but the woman, having been misled, entered into transgression. (1 Tim 2:14)

In a woman was sin’s beginning: on her account we all die. (Sir 25:24)<sup>5</sup>

This view that the woman bore the primary guilt was reinforced in later centuries by artists, most famously Michelangelo, who rendered Eve as a beguiling seductress in league with the snake. It comes as something of a surprise, then, to realize that the story receives little subsequent attention within Scripture, and that apart from these two instances, the woman’s role is not mentioned at all. Hosea observes in passing that the Israelites, “like Adam, transgressed a covenant” (Hos 6:7). When Paul writes that it was “through one person [that] sin entered into the world,” he names Adam specifically (Rom 5:12)—on this point, the antitype of Jesus, “for just as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive” (1 Cor 15:22). Hosea and Paul are not deliberately exonerating the woman; they simply refrain from introducing a gender distinction that Genesis itself does not emphasize. If any gender observation is relevant here, it is probably that the storyline—the woman eats first and then gives the fruit to the man—accords with ancient custom; it was Israelite women who were primarily responsible for preparing and serving food.

### *Judgment and Renewal*

The rupture introduced into the created order in the third chapter of Genesis escalates with the murder of Abel (Gen 4:1–16) and the violence of Lamech (4:23–24). As humans continue to multiply and fill the earth (5:1–6:1), God is moved to a new way of seeing the world that contrasts sharply with how God saw it on the sixth day of creation:

YHWH saw how great was the evil of humans on the earth, and that every impulse conceived in their hearts was purely evil, all the time. And YHWH regretted that he had made the human on the earth, and he was grieved to his heart. And he said, “I am going to wipe out the human whom I made from off the face of the fertile-earth—including human and beast and creeping thing and birds of the sky—for I regret that I made them. . . . *The earth was brought-to-ruin* before God; the earth was filled with wrongdoing. God saw the earth—look, *ruined!*—for *all flesh had ruined its way* upon the earth. And God said to Noah, “An end to all flesh has come before me, for the earth is filled with wrongdoing because of them—and now *I am about to bring-them-to-ruin*, with the earth.” (Gen 6:5–7, 11–13)

Two points are especially notable here. First, there is no discernible separation between humanity and physical environment; ruinous human behavior manifests itself immediately and fully in the ruin of the earth. This is one instance of the Bible’s consistent realism about the human situation; our own generation is regrettably equipped to judge its accuracy here. And second, a related point, the scene gives insight into an understanding of sin and punishment that is common in the Bible yet quite different from our own. We normally think of sin and punishment as two entirely different things: however just God’s punishment may be, it is separate from and external to human sin. Yet here the fourfold repetition of the verbal root “ruin” (*sh-b-t*) suggests another way of conceiving their relation. Through the ruinous behavior of “all flesh” (the presumed focus is on humans), the earth itself is brought to ruin. That fact is fully established *before* God announces the intention to bring them all to ruin. Thus, the divine punishment is not externally imposed but rather internally related to the sin. The divine action simply brings to completion or makes fully visible the ruination that humans have already wrought.

No sooner has the humanly driven ruination been realized in the flood than God begins again, taking the initiative toward restoration of the world, including humankind. The story now invites us inside the divine mind and heart—again, an extremely rare narrative move—to show exactly what motivates God at this liminal moment:

YHWH smelled the savory scent [of Noah’s sacrifice], and YHWH spoke to his heart: “I shall not again curse the fertile-soil on account of the human being, for the impulse of the human heart is evil from youth onward. And I shall not again strike every living thing, as I have done.

*All the remaining days of the earth—seedtime and harvest,*



*and cold and heat,  
and summer and winter,  
and day and night—  
they shall not cease.” (Gen 8:21-22)*

An alert reader should be puzzled. The same reason given here for divine forbearance was cited earlier as the reason for the ruinous flood: the evil conceptions of the human heart, which grieved YHWH to the heart (6:5-6)! So now, when YHWH speaks to “his” own heart, it is as though the Divine is trying to appease that aggrieved organ, to convince it to show mercy to this admittedly disappointing creature. This is hardly the response to Noah’s sacrifice that we might have expected. Smelling the delicious odor offered by one of the few humans who have proved obedient, YHWH might have said, “I shall not again curse the fertile-soil on account of the human being. . . . That first lot was forfeit, but now we have some good stock. Everything will go well from now on.” But instead of romantic optimism, God’s statement is one of utter realism: “This is how humans are.” The same “evil impulse” that pained God enough to destroy the world is now the very thing that moves God to forswear total destruction.

A second and older ancient Near Eastern flood story may help us make sense of this theologically. The Arrahasis Epic is the earliest version of the Mesopotamian “primeval history,” dating to the early second millennium BCE. Its basic plot elements may be outlined as follows:

- Shortly after the creation of the world, the great gods press the minor gods into forced labor: digging canals, heaping up mountains. When the minor deities rebel, the gods agree to create a new labor force—humans, fashioned from clay and the flesh and blood of a slaughtered deity—to carry on the necessary work.
- As the humans multiply, their increasing noise disturbs the gods, who attempt to reduce the population through plague, drought, and famine, but the humans are repeatedly warned and saved by Enki, god of the great deep. The gods then determine to send a flood, a seven-day deluge. Enki warns the human Arrahasis (“Exceeding-wise”) to build a boat, which saves his family and various animals and birds. The flood wipes out the rest of humankind.
- Now left without sacrificial offerings, the gods become hungry and thirsty. When they discover that a few humans have survived, they make a truce with them, hanging a bow in the heavens as a sign. They pledge never again to destroy the earth—and they establish permanent hedges against the “problem” of human overfertility: barrenness, infant mortality, and celibate priestesses.<sup>6</sup>

The Genesis narrative stands as a strong counter-text to the older story, offering a very different interpretation of divine intention and response to human beings. In contrast to the utilitarian view taken in the Arrahasis Epic, Genesis’s claim is that humans were part of God’s original intentions for the world. YHWH is grieved by humans’ wrongdoing, whereas the Mesopotamian deities take an arbitrary dislike to the natural (if unforeseen) human function of multiplying—the very thing that in Genesis they are divinely commanded to do (1:28). The final movements of the two stories epitomize their essential difference: in the Arrahasis Epic, the gods make a truce that entails the suppression of human fertility, while in the biblical story, God renews a commitment to the perpetuation of human life on earth:

And God blessed Noah and his children and said to them: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth.” (Gen 9:1)

The flood story in Genesis ends with God taking a very consequential step beyond mere truce: *Be fruitful*

God said to Noah and to his children with him, “Look, I myself am about to establish my covenant with you and with your seed after you, and with every living creature that is with you—that is, the birds and the domestic beasts and every wild animal of the earth along with you—from all who came out of the ark, including the animals of the earth. I shall establish my covenant with you, so that all flesh will not again be cut off by the floodwaters; there will never again be a flood to ruin the earth.” God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I am setting between myself and you and every living creature that is with you for endless generations: my bow I hang in the clouds.” (Gen 9:8–13)

The covenant with Noah is the enduring sign of God’s willingness to work with the concrete, flawed reality of human nature: “the impulse of the human heart is evil from youth onward.” The bright bow of colored light in the clouds signals God’s preference for relationship, however troubled that may be, over the more peaceful option of solitary mastery of the universe. As the biblical story continues, it becomes evident that covenant is like a sea wall, under constant assault from waves of human wrongdoing, time and again in need of strengthening and repair. The stories of the ancestors that follow the Primeval History show further development in the covenantal relationship between God and humans, and how that touches and shapes particular human lives.

*What do we make of this in this time*

## Notes

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5. For this translation, see Patrick W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, Anchor Bible 39 (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 343.
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## BEGINNING WITH BLESSING—GENESIS 12–50

BIBLICAL THEOLOGY BEGINS with Genesis, and  blessing is one of its core concepts. For modern Westerners, blessing might be an offhand response to a sneeze, but the Bible views it as the main thoroughfare for traffic between God and the creatures, both human and nonhuman. Accordingly, the story of Israel's first ancestors reads like a primer on the complex dynamics of blessing, which prove to be both messy and transformative for human lives.

*Beginning Again*

The dynamics of blessing first come to the fore with the calling of Abraham, but they should be viewed against the background of the pattern of divine blessings and curses we find in the opening chapters of Genesis:  The Primeval History (Gen 1–11) includes a total of five specific pronouncements of blessing, along with four curses. These blessings and curses form part of the pattern outlined in the preceding section, in which God's creative initiative is disrupted by human action, and rupture is followed by divine judgment and suffering. The blessings and curses within the Primeval History fall into two eras, before and after the flood:

**Blessings****Curses***"In the beginning"*

1. Gen 1:22 (God blesses the sea and sky creatures)
2. Gen 1:28 (God blesses the human)
3. Gen 2:3 (God blesses the seventh day)

*Harmonious relationships ruptured*

1. Gen 3:14 (God curses the snake)
2. Gen 3:17 (God curses the fertile soil)
3. Gen 4:11 (God curses Cain)

*A new beginning (post-flood)*

4. Gen 9:1 (God blesses Noah and his children)
5. Gen 9:26 (Noah blesses YHWH, God of Shem)

4. Gen 9:25 (Noah curses Ham's son Canaan)

The Bible never defines blessing, but as we can see from this pattern, each major divine initiative is attended by multiple blessings. God blesses fish, birds, humans, the seventh day of creation; reciprocally, Noah blesses God. Blessing is fundamentally an act of acknowledging the essential goodness of the other's being; it is a commitment of one's will to the flourishing of the other. Conversely, every rupture in the created order is accompanied by a curse. Although cursing does not terminate the existence of the other, it marks creaturely existence as troubled. The final curse in this first general part of world history is of Ham's son Canaan, which is followed by the troublesome construction of a tower on the plain of Shinar, in Hamite territory (11:1-9). At this point, blessings outnumber curses five to four, a lead that is only slightly encouraging, but enough to move things to a new stage. God takes a completely new initiative, calling Abraham and Sarah out of Hamite territory, to go to the land of Canaan.

This new part of the story is inaugurated with another divine pronouncement of blessings and a curse. The blessing of Abraham is fivefold, corresponding numerically to the five blessings of the Primeval History:

And I shall make you into a big nation, and I shall *bless* you and make your name big—and be a *blessing*! And I shall *bless* the ones-*blessing*-you, and the one-re-willing-you I shall *curse*, and through you all the families of the fertile-soil [*adamah*] will experience *blessing*. (Gen 12:2-3)

The phrasing of Abraham's fivefold blessing is distinctive. Other passages refer to "all the peoples of the earth" (Gen 18:18; 22:18), "the families of the earth" (Zech 14:17), "the families of the nations" (Pss 22:28 Heb, 22:27 Eng; 96:7), or "the families of the [various] countries" (Ezek 20:32). But this formulation, "the families of the *adamah*," echoes the creation story, when the first human was

created from *adamah* (Gen 2:7). Abraham is commanded to "be a blessing!"—the Hebrew verb is an imperative—to the peoples of the *adamah*. This is a moment of new creation. Just as God commanded the creatures to come into being in the first days of the world, so now Abraham is charged to *be* something that did not previously exist: blessing embodied, a channel for the enriched existence of a whole world of families. The fact that here blessing is evoked especially in the families' relation to *adamah* hints at something that will become clearer as the biblical story continues beyond Genesis—namely, that the Bible does not envision human flourishing apart from the flourishing of the fertile earth on which all life depends.

As soon as Abraham is charged to embody blessing, the narrative takes a turn that indicates he is not yet capable of doing that, even for his own family. He and Sarah go down to Egypt, where for his own protection he passes her off as his sister when the powerful Pharaoh takes a fancy to his beautiful wife (12:10-20). As it happens, Pharaoh's whole household suffers from the deception, as does, presumably, Sarah herself. Abraham has to grow into the blessing he bears for his own seed, a family that will one day become a people; likewise, Abraham must grow into his capacity to channel blessing to all the other families of the *adamah*. Abraham's growth is traced through his lengthy saga, and especially in two important stories where divine speech focuses attention on Abraham's unique role as the global conduit for blessing. In the first, YHWH has determined to wipe out Sodom and Gomorrah for their outrageous behavior:

YHWH said, "Am I to conceal from Abraham what I am about to do—and yet Abraham will surely become a nation great and powerful, and through him all the nations of the earth will experience blessing?! For I have come to know him, so that he may command his children and his household after him, and they will keep the way of YHWH, doing righteousness and justice, so that YHWH may bring upon Abraham what he said concerning him." (Gen 18:17-19)

Now Abraham, who up until this point has never asserted himself toward God, let alone *against* God, stands up boldly on behalf of the hypothetical innocents who might be found in that doomed place. The scene is familiar to anyone who knows the market-bargaining culture of the Middle East, from ancient times to the present—where, it is sometimes said, the buyer pays a tenth of what the seller asks and five times what the item is worth, and both are gratified. Abraham is a good bargainer and gets God all the way down to ten innocent Sodomites (18:32)—although, since not even that many decent folks can be found, destruction proceeds.

The second time YHWH evokes Abraham's role as a channel of blessing appears at the end of the grueling story of Abraham on Mount Moriah, when he holds a slaughtering knife over the bound body of his own son, ready to bring it down. Then the angel, the manifest presence of YHWH, speaks:

Do not lay your hand on the lad, and do not do a thing to him—for now I know that you fear God, since you did not withhold your son, your one-and-only, from me. . . . Just because you did this thing and did not withhold your son, your one-and-only, I shall certainly bless you and greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the sky and as the sand that is on the shore of the sea, and your seed will possess the city-gate of their enemies.

And through your seed will all the peoples of the earth experience blessing, because you heeded my voice. (Gen 22:16–18)

There might seem to be no way of reconciling these two portraits of Abraham: first standing boldly before God, arguing for the guilty strangers in Sodom, and then submitting without protest to the death of his own innocent son, the child promised and given by YHWH—the one who is to carry the blessing forward. Yet blessing is the point of contact between the two apparently contradictory stories. They show the two sides of Abraham's faithfulness, the totality of which qualifies him to "be a blessing." The first story demonstrates Abraham's unstinting commitment to seeking blessing for the nations, even the worst of them, even to the point of fundamental challenge to God: "Shall not the Judge of all the earth do justice?" (18:25). The second story reveals Abraham's unstinting devotion to YHWH— withholding nothing, even when what YHWH asks makes no sense at all, when it seems certain to undo everything they have created together.

Paradoxically, it is the first story that makes the second necessary. For if Abraham's challenge of God were the end of the story of these two covenant partners, then we might think that it is Abraham and not YHWH who does the key strategizing about how the world ought to operate: "All right, so there weren't ten decent Sodomites; next time, maybe I'll ask for just two." The second story explores the extreme moment of covenant relationship, to which many believers must finally come, when there is no longer any possibility of human strategizing.

Some construe the agonizing story of the binding of Isaac as intended to promote "absolute and unconditional obedience" as a religious virtue.<sup>1</sup> However, that interpretation is unsatisfactory on two grounds. First, we are specifically told that "God rested Abraham" (22:1), and the logic of the larger narrative suggests that there is no reason to test Abraham's obedience; old as he is, he has left his home place of Haran at YHWH's call, evidently without resistance. Second, if

it is purely out of obedience that Abraham submits to God's command, then his willingness to submit is monstrous. As we know from the trials at Nuremberg and the My Lai massacre in Vietnam, absolute obedience may be rendered in ways that are morally blind, cowardly, criminal. Why is that not the case here? Because the capacity for which Abraham is being tested is not mindless obedience but rather its opposite—namely, heartfelt trust. Indeed, God has good reason to wonder about Abraham's capacity for trust: Abraham's willingness to pass off Sarah as his sister and see her go into the harem of a powerful ruler, not once but twice (12:10–20; 20:1–18), suggests that he does not trust God to see them through; he is looking out for himself.

But still, one has to ask: Does the test itself suggest that God is untrustworthy? What kind of god would devise this appalling test? There are just two possible answers, and both are difficult. First, a god who is sadistic, who takes pleasure in human agony—but that answer is biblically impossible. If YHWH is a sadist, then the rest of the Bible is a lie. Accordingly, this story is never adduced in Israel's Scriptures as giving evidence of God's character. That leaves only one viable answer: The kind of god who would devise such a test is a god who has a stake in this relationship with Abraham. God claims to "know" him (18:19), a term that suggests profound intimacy, sometimes (elsewhere) of a sexual nature. The metaphor of marital intimacy may be helpful for thinking about how Abraham and God are together even on Moriah, just as long- and deeply married people are together in the worst moments of the life they share. As in marriage, the key issue in this story is not obedience but trust. The divine partner needs to know the fullness of Abraham's commitment to what they are doing together, because now the whole divine plan for blessing the world depends upon Abraham. Only the unprecedented magnitude of the enterprise they have undertaken together explains the need for this unparalleled test.

Isaac is the child of this union between God and Abraham, the miraculous child of the promise of "seed" and perpetual blessing. Strangely, that is why Abraham is ready to do what God asks, even to the point of taking a knife to his child. In the ghastly silence on Moriah, Abraham trusts God totally with the life of the child they share, the life that God has given. In the midst of this life-shattering thing that he does not understand at all, Abraham knows only this: life and life with God are the same thing. Abraham is incapable of choosing survival—even his child's survival—over life with God. For better, for worse, it is simply too late for him to make another choice.

Abraham's story asks very much of readers, coming as it does nearly at the beginning of the Bible. Maybe the difficulty is necessary, if we who might count ourselves as Abraham's seed are to understand what it could mean to be mediators of blessing for the world. We must come before God in two postures and pray in

two modes: first, standing up boldly on behalf of those who are alienated from God, begging God's mercy upon them, and second, turning to God in hard-won trust, affirming that what God asks of us is necessary, although it may cost us "not less than everything."<sup>2</sup>

### *Sacrifice and Transformation*

Contrary to popular opinion in our own time, blessing does not simply descend from on high and alight upon some chosen individual. Rather, as Genesis shows, humans are actively involved in transmitting divine blessing from one generation to another. Yet is characteristic of the Bible that the story does not begin with a golden age or even a "high-functioning" family. Instead, Genesis establishes that God works blessing through elements of human character and experience that are far from ideal. Rather than choosing noble individuals, God seemingly chooses people who are susceptible to being changed by what God does in their lives. Blessing, or the potential for blessing, is not a reward for good character and behavior, but it may over time transform character, eliciting noble behavior that dignifies human existence. Yet as we shall see here, transformation does not happen without pain. The men and women who struggle with and over the blessing transmitted through Abraham's line invariably sacrifice some of their own desires and happiness, knowingly or not, for the sake of the blessing they serve. In the generation following Abraham, this is most evident in the story of Rebekah and her favorite son, Jacob.

Rebekah is the most developed character among Israel's matriarchs; perhaps it is no coincidence that she alone among the women of Genesis is the recipient of her own distinctive blessing. Rebekah receives her blessing immediately after she has resolved to leave her ancestral home of Haran on the Euphrates and travel far west, to Canaan, to marry a man she has never met. Contrary to custom, she is not simply *given* in marriage. Her parents consult her own wishes about going off with Abraham's servant:

"Will you go with this man?" And she said, "I will go." (Gen 24:58)

That might have been Abraham's answer when YHWH first said to him, "Get you going" (12:1). And notably, closely echoing the angel's words of blessing to Abraham on Mount Moriah, the blessing of Rebekah that follows anticipates fruitfulness in the face of hostility:

You are our sister. Become thousands of myriads,  
and may your seed possess the city-gate of those who have them.  
(24:60; cf. 22:17)

Like Abraham, Rebekah waits very long—twenty years—for a child (25:19, 26). When at last she conceives, the pregnancy is complicated, so this exceptional woman, unlike others before or after her, takes the initiative to seek an oracle from YHWH. The answer she receives is perfectly ambiguous:

Two peoples are in your belly, and two nations will be separated from your body.

One nation will be mightier than the other nation, and the elder the younger will serve. (Gen 25:23)

No one can know from the oracle's opaque grammar whether the elder will be subordinate to the younger or vice versa. Thus, the two sons are set up to contend for their father's blessing. The twins will indeed be "separated" by their different interests and abilities, as well as by the differentiating affections of their parents:

The boys grew up, and Esau was a man expert at hunting, a man of the open field, while Jacob was a person of integrity [*ish tam*], dwelling in tents. Isaac loved Esau, for he had a taste for wild-game, while Rebekah loved Jacob. (25:27–28)

The phrase *ish tam* is unusual and hard to interpret. *Tam* elsewhere designates a "blameless" person of perfect moral integrity (Ps 37:37; Ps 101:2; Prov 29:10; etc.). One might question how well such a description fits Jacob, who in the very next vignette takes advantage of Esau's impetuosity and hunger, so that the elder brother trades his birthright for a bowl of beans (Gen 25:29–34). Esau is a man of the field and of the moment, who focuses on immediate desires and satisfactions. Jacob, by contrast, is a social being, a tent dweller. The sense in which he has integrity—*we* might say, he "has it together"—will prove over many years to be his ability to not be distracted from the blessing, to live in anticipation of it and struggle for it (Gen 32). Later, his integrity will mean living under its pressure in ways that prove useful to God and serve to perpetuate the life of his family and people.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the lone hunter, the rover Esau, Jacob is embedded in community, first and last; this will prove important for his role as bearer of the blessing.

As Isaac's death approaches, Isaac and Rebekah each seek to direct the divine and paternal blessing to a different favored son. Isaac summons "*his* son, the big one" (27:1) and sends him out to get some fresh game:

"Make me something tasty, such as I love, and bring [it] to me and I will eat, so I may bless you before I die." Now Rebekah was listening as Isaac spoke to Esau his son; and Esau went to the field to hunt game to bring.  
(Gen 27:4–5)

Rebekah repeats to “Jacob *her* son” (27:6) what Isaac has said, but with one telling addition of her own that makes clear what is at stake: “. . . so I may bless you *before YHWH* before I die” (27:7). And with the imperative “*listen to my voice*,” she issues her own “command” (27:8), which mimics the one Isaac has given and thus directly undermines it:

Go now to the flock and get me from there two good goat kids; so I may make them into something tasty for your father, such as he loves, and you will bring it to your father and he will eat, so that he may bless you before he dies. (27:9–10)

Jacob objects, knowing how risky is the ploy of imitating his hairy brother:

“What if my father feels me, and I become in his eyes as one who misleads, and I bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing?” And his mother said to him, “On me be your curse, my son! Just *listen to my voice* and go, get for me.” (Gen 27:12–13)

Rebekah redirects the blessing to “her son” by taking his curse upon herself. Does she know what that might mean for her? In fact, she will lose her favorite child, the boy who lived in her tent and learned her cooking skills and some of her shrewdness. After successfully perpetrating the scam, when her less favored son Esau is ready to kill Jacob, she issues the command one last time:

And now, my son, *listen to my voice*. Get up and flee to Laban my brother in Haran, and stay there a few days until your brother’s rage subsides. (27:43–44)

Rebekah says “a few days,” but in fact, she will never see Jacob again. As a young woman, Rebekah showed some of the same courage as Abraham. Now, like him, she must be willing to give up her beloved child for the sake of the blessing—and this time, the parental sacrifice is accepted.

Starting with Abraham and Rebekah, those who work to transmit the divine blessing inevitably make sacrifices for it, whether or not they are its direct bearers. They forfeit their personal desires; sometimes, they are changed almost beyond recognition. Jacob himself is the outstranding example of the transformed bearer of the blessing. This is most evident on his journey back to Canaan after many years in Haran, when he fords the Jabbok and wrestles with “a man,” injuring his hip but persisting until he receives a blessing, and with it a new name, Israel (“He struggles [with] God”)—“for you have struggled with God and with people and

have proved able” (32:29 Heb., 32:28 Eng.). The man who now returns to Canaan is very different from the young man who left. All the memorable stories about clever, aggressive Jacob predate the encounter at the Jabbok, where he receives the blessing he previously tried to steal. He limps on from there, simultaneously crippled and elevated. Henceforth, the narrative shows not Jacob the heel-grabber, out-smarter, or self-aggrandizer but rather Israel, a man now transformed into a human institution. He is responsible for preserving a family that in Egypt will multiply into a people; his ordinary human passions, even his parental feelings, must be subordinated to the demands of their future.

We see how much Jacob has changed when his daughter Dinah is sexually compromised by Shechem, a Canaanite prince. Strikingly, Jacob does not react to the crime, although in that culture it defiles her (34:5, 7) and degrades the family’s honor (34:31). Youthful Jacob forcibly defended his honor against the unfair treatment of his father-in-law Laban (29:25; 30:29–30; 31:36–42). Yet now he keeps quiet (34:5), and even listens to the Canaanites’ plea for intermarriage and peaceful alliance with Jacob’s extended family (34:8–11). Then, when his sons Simeon and Levi wreak a furious slaughter on the whole city (34:25–29), Jacob reviles them:

You have stirred up trouble for me, making me stink among the inhabitants of the land, among the Canaanites and Perizzites, and I am few in number, and they will gather against me and strike me, and I will be annihilated, I and my house! (Gen 34:30)

Jacob speaks, not as a dishonored father, but as the patriarch of a nascent and vulnerable people.

Some years later, on his deathbed, Jacob will curse his sons’ fierce anger (49:7), which is the dangerous counterforce to the blessing he embodies for the sake of “all the families of the fertile-soil” (12:3). He himself dies in service to that blessing. Having reluctantly followed his favorite sons, Joseph and Benjamin, down to Egypt, he dies on foreign soil—a terrible misfortune for anyone in the ancient world. But that does not happen before he has conveyed blessing to Pharaoh himself (47:7, 10). Whether or not Pharaoh understands the significance of the act, it is a sign that God’s intention for the flourishing of all peoples is beginning to be fulfilled.

### Joseph and His Brothers

The need for a profound change of character manifests itself also in the next generation of those who bear the blessing. Jacob’s three eldest sons disqualify

themselves by violent or stupid actions: Simeon and Levi in taking vengeance for the dishonor to their sister (Gen 34:25–29) and the firstborn Reuben in sleeping with his father's concubine (35:22). Therefore, the blessing passes to Jacob's fourth-born, Judah, whose own past behavior is problematic. He is the one who devised the scheme to sell young Joseph to the Ishmaelites (37:26–27)—an improvement over his brothers' plan to kill that "insufferable pip-squeak,"<sup>24</sup> but hardly commendable. Immediately after that episode, the story of Joseph is interrupted by another story that shows how, some years later, Judah is transformed through the agency of his daughter-in-law Tamar, the bad-luck lady who was married to two of his sons, and widowed of both. Despite the customary practice of marrying the widow to the dead man's brother, Judah is unwilling to risk his third and last son. So he puts Tamar on ice in her father's house—until she disguises herself as a prostitute and gets herself impregnated by her unwitting father-in-law.

Tamar serves the blessing by bringing Judah to self-recognition, as signaled through repetition of the key word *n-k-r*, "recognize." As pregnant and unmarried Tamar is led out to be executed for dishonoring the family, she sends this message to her father-in-law: "Now recognize—whose seal and cords and staff are these?" (38:25)—showing the tokens she received from the man who impregnated her. Judah "*recognize[s]*" the tokens he left with the presumed prostitute and says, "She is more in the right than I am" (38:26). Judah and his brothers had used the same confrontational word when they brought Joseph's bloodied coat to their father Jacob: "Now recognize—is it your son's coat or not?" (37:32). The reader, knowing more than either character in the story, should also recall a third scene, when the young Jacob disguised himself to get the blessing intended for his hairy-handed brother, and the old, blind Isaac "did not recognize him" (27:23). Tamar forces self-recognition upon Judah the schemer and liar, son of Jacob the schemer and liar. It is not a coincidence that the place where the disguised Tamar encountered Judah is called *Pe'ah Eynayim* ("Eye Opening," 38:14). Tamar performs the essential prophetic task of giving sight to the morally blind?

The lengthy tale of Joseph (Gen 37–50) may be seen in its entirety as a story of character transformation. Although Judah, not Joseph, is the primary bearer of the ancestral blessing and the progenitor of future kings, Jacob's eleventh son keeps the whole family alive in a time of severe famine in Canaan. As with Jacob, personal ambition and distinctive abilities, parental favoritism and divine favor combine to make Joseph "a successful man" (39:2; cf. 39:3, 23). Yet the young Joseph suffers two terrible downfalls, first when his jealous brothers throw him into a pit in the wilderness (37:24), and later when he is thrown into prison ("the pit," 40:15) over his supposed assault on Potiphar's wife. Although the accused Joseph represents himself as an innocent victim (40:15), the narrative

casts a shadow of doubt on that claim. In Canaan, the young Joseph taunted his brothers with his dreams of dominance, arousing their hatred as well as the annoyance of his doting father (37:8–10). Does this strikingly handsome man (39:6) knowingly rationalize the besotted Egyptian woman, especially in coming to do his work on a day when "not a single one of the people of the house was there in the house" (39:11)?

From the time Joseph is brought to Egypt, the narrator emphasizes that YHWH is with him (39:2–3, 21, 23), blessing Potiphar's house on his account (39:5). But only in prison does Joseph begin to acknowledge the power of God working through him, specifically in the interpretation of dreams (40:8). When Pharaoh summons the now-famous dream interpreter out of prison, Joseph emphasizes that the dreams are disclosing what God is "hurrying to do" (41:32; cf. 41:16, 25, 28). His most moving testimonies to the action of God—and at the same time, the strongest indications of his own character change—appear some nine years later, when his brothers have come from famine-ravaged Canaan to buy food in Egypt. They do not recognize the mature Joseph, and no wonder: He is approaching the peak of his power in what was at first "the land of [his] degradation" (41:32). Joseph has consolidated under his control all the grain supplies in Egypt; as the famine deepens, he will acquire for Pharaoh all the land that formerly belonged to peasants, along with their labor (47:20–21). His personal story has come full circle from the day when he was thrown in the pit and sold as a slave bound for Egypt.

Joseph as the agent of Egypt's enslavement represents the direct inverse of Israel's later enslavement in Egypt. Slavery and compulsory servitude managed by one of Israel's most important ancestors—this is a shocking image, another element of the Bible's persistent and disturbing realism, for slavery was endemic to the ancient world. The image of Moses the liberator of slaves is more compelling, but we must not overlook this disconcerting portrait of Joseph. Is it a reminder that the concentration of power always has a deleterious effect on community, that no pair of powerful hands is completely safe? Or is it a kind of trickster image, in which the character who represents the socially disadvantaged group outsmarts the powerful? The image of Joseph bringing Egyptians into debt slavery challenges all ideologies that support slavery or the maintenance of any permanent underclass. Contrary to received wisdom both ancient and modern, that scenario shows that there is no natural or ethnic distinction between those who wield massive social and economic power and those who are subjugated; their positions are wholly contingent upon historical circumstances. In due course, the power balance can and will shift; in the terms of our narrative, that will happen soon enough, when "a new king arose in Egypt who did not know Joseph" (Exod 1:8).



But for now, against this background, we witness an incomparably powerful man revealing himself to his brothers, weeping and speaking to them of God's larger plan for the family:

I's this  
John  
First  
of  
a Roman

I am Joseph your brother, whom you sold into Egypt. And now, don't be upset and don't let it be cause for anger in your eyes that you sold me here, for it was to sustain life that God sent me before you . . . God sent me before you to make a covenant for you on the earth and to create life for you as a large community of survivors. So now, it was not you who sent me here, but God, who made me a father to Pharaoh and a lord to his whole house and a ruler in the whole land of Egypt. (Gen 45:4–5, 7–8)

It will be another seventeen years before Joseph's climactic exchange with his brothers, after their father has died. Then, fearing that the dreaded paycheck has finally come due, the brothers beg forgiveness. In response, Joseph once more talks theology through his tears:

“Don't be afraid—I am I in the place of God! You planned evil against me, but God planned it for good, so he might act as on this day, to keep alive a great nation. And now, don't be afraid; I myself shall support you and your little ones,” and he comforted them and spoke to their heart. (50:19–21)

This momentous encounter between Joseph and his brothers brings closure to the themes of sibling rivalry and the mystery of divine favoritism that are so prominent, almost from the beginning of the book. That God does not seem to show equal favor to all is one of the abiding scandals of the Bible. Cain is the first to make this embittering discovery; contrary to popular belief, the narrative does not tell us that Cain brought a sacrifice that was in any way unworthy of YHWH (4:3–5). Nonetheless, Cain's violent reaction to disappointment issues in the murder of his innocent brother, his own alienation from God, and perpetual exile, a life of wandering (4:14). At the other end of Genesis, with its history of troubled families, is Joseph, another brother, who is in some ways a variation on Cain.<sup>6</sup> He, too, suffers as a result of favoritism—in this case, Jacob's devotion to him. His brothers' envy and his own gloating lead to near murder (his own), as well as involuntary departure from his homeland. In Egypt, Joseph receives God's favor and gradually matures into a man who merits it. He forgives his thoroughly guilty brothers and keeps them alive, along with the whole nation of Egypt. Thus, Joseph proves to be an important agent of the Abrahamic blessing for “all the families of the fertile-soil” (12:3). Joseph's transformation is the final instance of the governing pattern of Genesis, where God works repeatedly through badly

damaged relationships, opening up new possibilities for the restoration of harmony among the creatures—even human beings. Joel Kaminsky comments insightfully: “Reconciliation does not necessarily entail full erasure of the past or newly perfected characters. Rather, it involves a commitment to live the relationship differently than one did in the past.”<sup>7</sup>

Christian readers of Genesis may also see an important connection between this first explicit biblical story of forgiveness and the theology of the New Testament. In a probing study Jon Levenson shows how the story of Joseph's simulated death and the continued life of the family is “a turning back of the very real and deadly forces of adversity”; thus, it resembles a motif found in both Testaments, the resurrection of the dead.<sup>8</sup> Viewed in that light, the Joseph tale is the first instance of a connection between resurrection and forgiveness of sins. That connection is drawn more explicitly (although not explained) in John's account of the resurrected Jesus appearing to the disciples in a locked room and saying, twice, “Peace be upon you,” and then declaring, “If you release the sins of any, they are released for them; if you hold on to anyone's [sins], they are held” (John 20:19–23).

### Notes

1. See Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988), 152.
2. T.S. Eliot, “Little Gidding,” in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1958), 145.
3. See Ellen F. Davis, “Job and Jacob: The Integrity of Faith,” in *The Whirlwind*, ed. S.L. Cook, C.L. Patton, and J.W. Werts (New York: Sheffield Academic, 2001), 100–20.
4. Joseph's brothers viewed him, according to Thomas Mann, as *ein unaustrichtlicher Bengel*—rendered into English here as suggested by Brevard Childs. The phrase appears in Mann's novel based on the biblical story, *Joseph und seine Brüder*, 4 vols. (Frankfurt: Fischer Taschenbuch, 1991), 2:9; available in English as *Joseph and His Brothers*, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Knopf, 2005).
5. In the Gospel of John, when Jesus has opened the eyes of the man born blind, the man says, “He is a prophet” (John 9:17).
6. On the relationship between the stories of Cain and Joseph, see Matthew R. Schlimm, *From Fratricide to Forgiveness: The Language and Ethics of Anger in Genesis*, Siphru 7 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 169–79.
7. Joel S. Kaminsky, *Yet I Loved Jacob: Reclaiming the Biblical Concept of Election* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007), 72.
8. Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 122.