

Bible commentary Week 1

Genesis 1–2

Primordial soup

The poetic statements of God's creativity are like a symphony with a round of applause concluding every movement. Not one, but two dramas of the origin of life are portrayed in the book that is appropriately called Genesis.

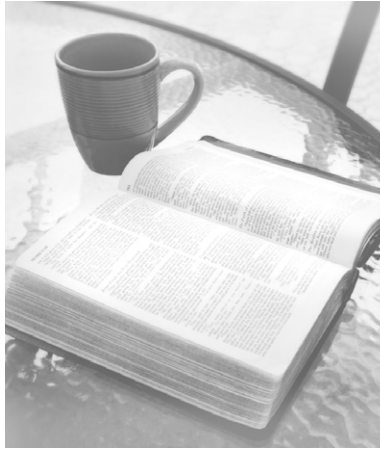
Contrary to later Christian thought popularized by St. Augustine, the Bible does not say that God created the world out of nothing (in Latin *ex nihilo*). Instead, God stirs forth a watery chaos. God stirs the "primordial soup" with the wand of natural law. God separates and names the elements of the universe. In the first presentation, order springs from the chaotic void of foreboding darkness. In the ancient biblical world, the fear of darkness was pervasive. God's swirling creativity is likened to wind sweeping across the deep *tehom*, translated as "waters." It is the "wind of God" (Genesis 1:2) that enlivens creation. Later, Adam receives consciousness as God breathes into his nostrils, *ruah*. In the New Testament, the Greek term for spirit is *pneuma*, also likened to the wind.

Blessings of light

Genesis begins with a praise of light that is carried through the entire Bible. In Genesis 1:3, light splashes forth like photons of God's blessing. Later, in the book of John, Jesus uses the metaphor "light of the world" to describe himself. The prologue of the fourth gospel, in fact, states that the whole of creation was brought about through the Christ. The concluding chapters of Revelation, the final book of the Bible, talk about a sparkling New Jerusalem that is permeated with God's light. Its lamp is the Lamb of God (Revelation 21:22).

At twilight the stars of the Milky Way appear like salt sprinkled on black velvet, a gorgeous sight. In Genesis the stars are not simply swirling in outer space drawn by the gravity of black holes; they are affixed to the architecture of the universe where the heavens are likened to a dome. During the Bronze Age, when this narrative was written, the Israelites probably imagined this dome as metallic orange color.

Contemporary astrophysicists write about the vibrating superstrings of the universe giving structure to the universe. Thus, we can image the firmament as vibrating. God could be likened to an orchestra conductor directing the symphony of creation or choreographing its dance. The music of the heavenly spheres is a manifestation of God's rhythmic love.



Creation of creatures

The sequence continues with the creation of swarms of living creatures, culminating in the designing of the DNA of *homo sapiens*, humankind. Female and male are created (Genesis 1:27). In the Latin Vulgate translation by St. Jerome in the fourth century, humans are said to be created *imago dei*, Latin for "in God's image." One theologian has called this "the original blessing." Jewish commentators speculated that the first pair of humans was created as one entity. Later they were separated, thus having a magnetic attraction to reunite.

The collator of Genesis adds a second drama of creation (Genesis 2:1–3). The newly created earth is described as a parched desert before the fertilizing rains. Like a child making a mud pie, out of the "red earth" (Hebrew *adamah*) God creates Adam.

But a solitary existence is incomplete. God creates animals for Adam. This is followed by the extraction of woman from the male, Eve cloned from Adam. The affirmation of fertility follows. "They shall be of one flesh," says God (Genesis 2:24). Without blushing, sexuality is applauded as a gift of creation. Later in the Bible it is featured in the erotic poetry of the Song of Solomon. It is even likened by mystics to the soul being embraced by God's presence.

In these symphonic narratives on the origin of life, God's seal of approval of the creative process is reiterated in rhythmic fashion. We hear a cacophony of drums and cymbals. Creation is good!

—Herb Smith, professor of Philosophy and Religion,
McPherson College, McPherson, KS

Reflect

1. What actions or words in Genesis 1 and 2 show God's delight in creation?
2. What responsibilities come with being made in God's image?
3. Share some earth caring actions you have taken in the past week, month, or year.
4. What gift of creation are you most grateful for?

Bible commentary Week 2

Genesis 3

A tempting taboo

Right smack in the middle of the garden called Eden, the horticulturalist God plants the tree of knowledge. Not only are Eve and Adam asked not to sink their teeth into its succulent fruit, but there is even a “do not touch” order. The penalty for violation? Death.

In Judeo-Christian tradition, the fruit of this tree has been thought to have been apples, peaches, or pomegranates. Whatever its nature, this fruit was taboo. Taboos, though, foster attraction as well as repulsion. In contrast to the other unnamed trees in this idyllic orchard, this tree must have lit up before the eyes of the newly created couple.

The wise, healing snake

In the midst of this scene comes a walking snake (which is only later cursed to crawl on its belly). Today, snakes are often equated with evil and even Satan. In the Hebrew Bible narratives, however, the serpent sometimes represents healing. Moses is asked to make a bronze snake in the wilderness, which is later kept in Solomon's temple (Numbers 21:9). In the Gospel of John, Jesus is likened to this serpent, in that he is also to be lifted up to save the people (John 3:14–15). Our medical symbol today is represented by one or two snakes twined around a pole.

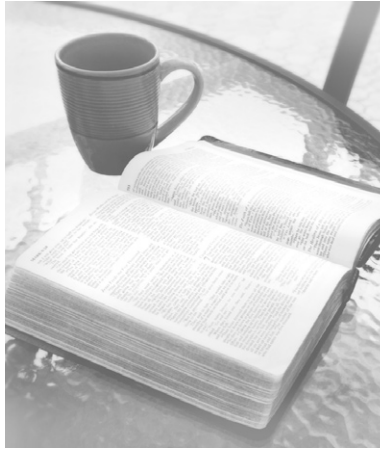
In the Genesis scenario, the snake represents wisdom. The snake claims that God's rule is really based on divine jealousy. If Adam and Eve eat the fruit, they will become like the divine, having ethical knowledge like God.

Yada, yada, yada

Eve, seeing the beauty of the fruit, acts assertively. She eats some fruit and serves Adam as well. Once they perform this momentous action, their consciousness is heightened. The embarrassment of nakedness is followed by the sewing of garments.

The Hebrew *yada*, usually translated “knowledge,” refers to sexual experience as well as intellectual consciousness. The “knowledge” of the tree is associated with sexuality. During the Middle Ages, church doctrine said that the original sin of Adam and Eve was passed to everyone through the act of procreation. This interpretation is not found either in the Genesis narrative or in Paul's commentary on the creation story in 1 Corinthians.

When God seeks out Adam and confronts him for his act of defiance, Adam passes the buck of responsibility to Eve. She, in turn, condemns the snake for tricking her. Likewise,



we often fail to take responsibility for our actions.

Instead of applying the death penalty, God penalizes the couple in terms of labor. For Eve, the labor pain of birthing is increased. Adam is sentenced to the sweat and hard labor of agriculture. Eve's punishment was reinforced by Christian tradition. Even after the development of pain medications, it was thought up until the late nineteenth century that women should suffer during childbirth because of the sin of Eve. It is curious that the word sin is never used in the Genesis story. Instead, the issue seems to be the destruction of the primordial harmony into which Eve and Adam were created. After

announcing the punishments for these disobedient children, God now cares for them. Clothing is fashioned from animal skins. These garments symbolize warmth and affirmation. God's love prevails.

Cherubim with flaming batons

Eve and Adam are, however, expelled from the garden. Should they decide to return, the gateway is guarded by angels. These cherubim should not be pictured as apple-cheeked children. They are more accurately envisioned as the sphinx of Egypt or the composite animal creatures that guarded the Assyrian temples. These cherubim guard the garden with a twirling and flaming sword. The primordial harmony of Eden can never be entered again. The naïve innocence of Eden is forever lost—but now the saga of human history begins.

—Herb Smith, professor of Philosophy and Religion,
McPherson College, McPherson, KS

Reflect

1. What signs of God's grace do you see in this story?
2. Why is it so easy to blame someone else for our own wrong choices?
3. We may look back on our own times of innocence and remember stages of life when we have become aware of loss or injustice. Is there something you wish you hadn't found out or wish you didn't know?
4. What important choices did you make this past week?

Bible commentary Week 3

Genesis 6:5–9:17

Impending doom

According to one poll that was released while this essay was being written, approximately 46 percent of Americans believe that the world will face a major catastrophe within the coming decades. Impending doom for humanity? The deluge narrative in Genesis has a contemporary ring. The story of Noah and the ark is familiar even to those who score low on biblical literacy.

In this story, God is pictured as being despondent about human behavior to the point of regretting ever having created humankind. In the midst of this iniquity, one family stands forth as faithfully in fellowship with God. Noah and his kin are saved from the purifying flood. Who was Noah—this man who was “blameless in his generation” (Genesis 6:10)?

A child prodigy

In the Genesis narrative, Noah is the son of Lamech. According to Jewish tradition, Lamech was a mighty warrior who killed his great-grandfather, Cain. Because there was blood on his hands, his wives would not relate to him until, reluctantly, Zillah consents and gives birth to Noah.

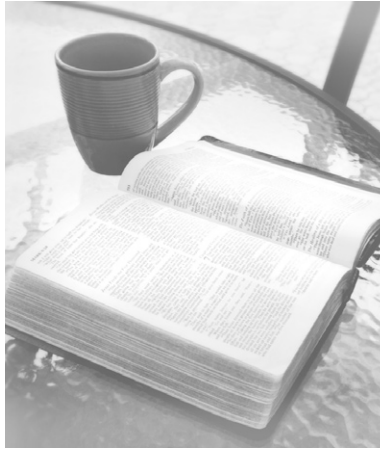
Also according to tradition, Noah was born on the day that Adam died. Upon his birth, the world immediately improved as harvests became more bountiful. Noah is credited with designing the first agricultural plows, sickles, and axes. It is this handyman who will construct the ark to save humanity.

Noah's zoo

Divine architectural blueprints are drawn for an enormous ship to house the entire DNA on earth. From butterflies to antelopes, from ants to buffalos, the ark that Noah the carpenter is asked to build is a zoologist's dream (or nightmare, perhaps). It has three decks. God instructs Noah to make the ship of cypress wood. Some have suggested that it was really acacia. The latter was considered sacred in the ancient Middle East. It was the wood prescribed for the ark of the covenant.

Rabbinical commentaries speculate that the lower level was set aside for the beasts, the middle for the birds, and the upper for the insects and the lodging of Noah's extended family. Some have also suggested that aquatic beasts swam alongside the ark. As for zookeepers? Sources allude to guardian angels herding the animals and providing fodder for them.

As the sluices of the heavens open and the aquifers of the underground are unleashed, rain falls for the proverbial 40 days. Rabbis living in an earlier age suggested that God moved some of the stars of the constellation Pleiades for this flood to occur.



A rainbow in the heavens

When the rains subside and greenery is resurrected from the fertilized soil, Noah, his three sons, and their families alight from their aquatic cabin onto dry land. After a thanksgiving celebration accompanied by animal sacrifices, Noah and his family receive visual assurance of God's new promise. A rainbow shines forth from shimmering violet to verdant green, a bow in the sky above Mount Ararat. Throughout European and Asiatic folklore, rainbows are symbols of assurance. Moreover, in a prehistoric age, they were seen as a literal bridge to the dome of the sky, a colorful ladder to the heavens.

In the New Testament book Hebrews, the rainbow-gazing Noah is paraded as a supreme example of faith. He is called an “heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith” for obeying God (Hebrews 11:7).

But God's spectacular promise is to all creation. The flood of purification is followed by God's re-creation. The renewal of life is affirmed. The rainbow is a symbol of God's constant love.

—Herb Smith, professor of Philosophy and Religion,
McPherson College, McPherson, KS

Reflect

1. Notice God's emotions and actions in this story. How does God change as the story progresses? How do you understand the character of God?
2. What might grieve God's heart in our world?
3. The rainbow is given as a sign of God's promise. What promise do you wish to receive from God?
4. Some people see floods, hurricanes, earthquakes, and other catastrophes as signs of divine judgment. Do you agree or disagree with this view?

Bible commentary Week 4

Genesis 11:1-9

The ziggurat of Babel

During the devastating war in Iraq, U.S. troops were careful not to destroy a stately ziggurat of ancient Babylonian culture from the biblical age. This intriguing structure, which the Israelites may have seen during their exile in Babylon, probably inspired the tower of Babel narrative.

Ziggurats were swirling towers reaching skyward. The word *ziggurat* is derived from *zagaru*, meaning “tall” or “lofty.”

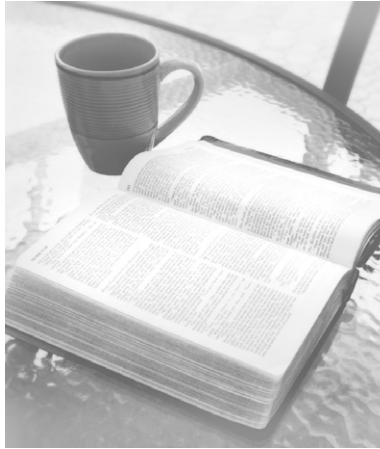
They were sacred monuments with ramps that were meant to reach literally to the heavens. We believe that originally the ziggurats were brilliantly color-coded in seven distinct stories. Each story represented a sphere of the heavens ruled by a major heavenly body, including the sun, moon, and visible planets. Rather than the colorless, barren architecture that is all that remains today, it is believed that the towers had fragrant flowers in verdant gardens planted on different levels. Recall the legendary hanging gardens of Babylon, one of the wonders of the ancient world.

The story of the tower of Babel is thought by some to refer to the temple of Marduk called Etemanaki. This immense structure, upon which the pyramids of Egypt may have been modeled, is described in ancient clay cuneiform tablets. According to Babylonian mythology, Marduk became the chief god in the Babylonian pantheon by defeating the monster Tiamat. It is written that his tower reached heavenward toward the boundless sky called Apsu. Like so many of the world's great religious monuments, it was thought to represent a cosmic mountain rising from a primordial sea.

This was an age in which many believed that Milky Way stars were very close to the earth. The heavenly bodies were thought to hover just above the horizon, perhaps attached to a firmament. To construct a magical stairway to promenade to the abode of the gods was thought to be possible. The ancient Egyptians sometimes even buried a miniature ladder with their pharaohs to help them climb to the stars.

Myriad languages

In the Genesis account, the tower of Babel is viewed as a symbol of exaggerated, unwarranted, and even self-destructive human pride. As an etiological story, one designed to describe the origin of a custom, it is also seen as a narrative to explain the multiplicity of languages. Today there are myriad languages and dialects in our world culture. In China alone there are at least 235 major languages spoken, many unintelligible to one another. During the biblical age,



many Semitic dialects and Afro-Asiatic languages existed.

Thought to have been written during the exile, the period when the Israelites had been carried away by Nebuchadnezzar after the destruction of Jerusalem, this narrative critiques the oppressor. The term *babel*, which inspired the name Babylon, originally meant “gate of God.” In Genesis 11:9 it is interpreted as “confused.” Today we use the term *babbling* to mean incoherent speech. In their culture shock, the captive Israelites might have experienced the foreign language of their captors as babble.

Building for ourselves; building for God

The Babylonians built a tower out of chest-thumping pride. They baked the bricks in the stiflingly hot desert terrain and stacked them high. These religious architects desired to make a name for themselves rather than to honor and glorify God.

This story can also be seen as applicable today. Metaphorically, we build our interior towers of pride, fortified by our own self-effort rather than trusting in God. When we remove these towers, we open the possibility of drawing closer to God. We are asked to build for God's purposes, not our own.

—Herb Smith, professor of Philosophy and Religion,
McPherson College, McPherson, KS

Reflect

1. How is God's point of view different from the goals of the people in this story?
2. Talk about the difficulties and joys of learning another language. If you have experienced another language and culture, how has that enriched your life?
3. The builders ambitiously developed advanced building technology. They had great community spirit. When do ambition, community spirit, and technology become detrimental?
4. Noah's built an ark at God's command. God stopped the building at Babel. Why was one type of building a good thing and the other harmful? How can we tell whether we are building for ourselves or for God?

Bible commentary Week 5

Genesis 12–13

Journeys and blessings

From the historic city-state of Ur (meaning “fire”), situated in what is now Iraq, comes a picturesque travelogue. Abram and Sarai have been living in Haran, along with Abram’s nephew Lot. When Abram is 75 years old, he is called by God to make a pilgrimage. His Near Eastern travel directions come with a blessing: all the families of the earth will be blessed through him (12:1–3).

The blessing promised him is prefigured in a Jewish legend about his childhood. In this tale, Abram is reported to have had an amazing birth. He comes forth from his mother’s womb chanting Hebrew. This child prodigy also has foreknowledge of the laws of Moses, which would only be revealed generations later. The account also claims that at his birth he wore the traditional Jewish skull cap (*yarmulke*) and ate kosher food.

With his entourage of perhaps as many as 70 individuals, this sacred trek over hundreds of miles lands him in Canaan. Here at Shechem, later the capital of northern Israel, Abram receives a revelation at an oracular oak (Genesis 12:6).

In the ancient Near East, certain groves of trees were considered sacred, used for divining the will of God. This grove was prominent throughout early Israelite history. In Genesis 18:1–32, Abram (now renamed Abraham) receives three angels at this same sacred woodland along with a further blessing. Later, while at the oak of Mamre, Jacob is asked to settle at Bethel. He buries foreign idols and ear-rings under the tree before he sets out for Bethel (Genesis 35:1–4).

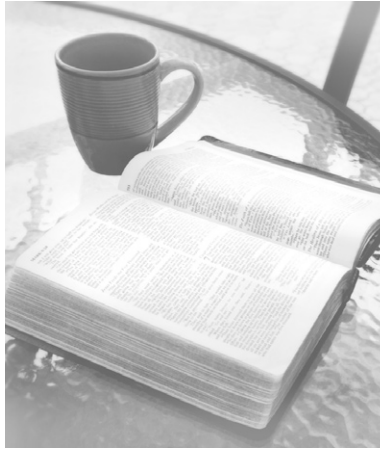
After what must have seemed like an endless journey, Abram arrives in Canaan, where God promises this land to Abram’s offspring (Genesis 12:7).

Conflict resolution

Due to a famine in Canaan, Abram and Sarai sojourn in the land of the pyramids. When they leave Egypt they journey into the Negeb desert and then on to Bethel. Between the villages of Bethel and Ai, the generosity of Abram shines forth.

Lot and Abram both own many flocks and herds and tents, so many that “the land [cannot] support both of them living together” (13:6). Their herders quarrel.

In a patriarchal culture where gray-haired seniority ruled, Abram could have dominated his younger nephew. Lot’s father, Haran (Abram’s brother), had died years earlier, even before his family left Ur. We can surmise that Abram had become a surrogate father to his nephew. (Later in the narrative, he rescues his nephew’s family from the military might of



some eastern city-state rulers.)

On the open range near Bethel, Uncle Abram generously proposes an amicable settlement. Quelling the hot-tempered herdsmen, he calls for a peaceful reconciliation. Lot is presented with the first choice of real estate. Lot astutely chooses the lush plain of the Jordan in the direction of Zoar. It reminded him of the terrain of Egypt after the annual July inundation (thought to be the tears of the goddess Isis) brought fertility to the soil.

Abram’s judgments show wisdom and generosity. What a model for us to emulate!

An inspiring faith pilgrim

Abram’s obedient faith pilgrimage has often become a model for individuals who feel called into the ministry. Like Noah, Abram is honored for his faith in the New Testament book of Hebrews (Genesis 14:1–24; Hebrews 11:8). He caravans a long distance from his homeland to a foreign land, not knowing where he is going.

Rabbinical commentary interprets the travelogue of Abram and Sarah allegorically as a spiritual journey. The journey is symbolic of God’s call for us to leave the usual, the familiar, the status quo, and to venture forth in mission. We obey despite the ongoing anxiety of uncertainty. Abram and Sarai are prototypes for the adventure of faith.

—Herb Smith, professor of Philosophy and Religion,
McPherson College, McPherson, KS

Reflect

1. Compare Abram and Sarai’s story with the tower of Babel story from Genesis 11:1–9. When is leaving a blessing? When is it not? What kind of greatness does God want us to seek?
2. Abram and Sarai journeyed long distances. Abram made peace rather than insisting on the best land. What actions show our trust in God’s care and provision?
3. Abram and Sarai received promises of blessing: blessings of descendants, land, and relationship with God. What blessings do you seek on your spiritual journey?
4. Martin Luther King Jr. said, “Faith is taking the first step even when you don’t see the whole staircase.” What did Abram and Sarai see by faith? When have you been called to step out in faith?

Bible commentary Week 6

Genesis 16:1–17:22; 18:1–15; 21:1–7

Father Abraham has no sons

Many of us are familiar with a camp song with the endlessly repeating lines: “Father Abraham had seven sons. Seven sons had father Abraham.” The great patriarch would have seen this song as derisive. The aged Abram was childless.

Ironically, a Jewish legend claimed that at the birth of Abram, an astrologer announced that his descendants would be numerous. This prophecy is later confirmed in Genesis, in the city of Haran, where God proclaims that through Abram all nations will be blessed (12:3b). Later, in Hebron, the future capital of the young King David, Abram is told to gaze in all directions. God proclaims that Abram’s descendants will be as numerous as “specks of dust on the earth” (13:16).

Contrast this scene of exhilarating promise with another legendary story about a despondent Abram lying in his tent at night. He is all too aware that he is an octogenarian with a wife who is beyond childbearing years.

In the midst of this despondency, Sarai proposes a solution. During their sojourn (Genesis 12:10–20), she had acquired an Egyptian slave-girl named Hagar. After they had lived in Canaan 10 years, she suggests that her husband lie with Hagar.

In effect, Sarai upgrades Hagar’s status from handmaiden to wife. In an age when men were often victims of warfare, polygamy was an accepted norm. Hagar becomes a surrogate childbearer for Sarai and gives birth to a son named Ishmael (Genesis 16:16). An angel proclaims that Ishmael will be a “wild ass” of a man. Scholars note that the term was not intended to be derogatory: it simply meant “Bedouin tent dweller.”

What’s in a name?

Thirteen years after the birth of Ishmael, when Abram is one year shy of the century mark, God appears to him and makes a new covenant. This covenant includes a change of nomenclature. Abram’s name becomes elongated to Abraham, meaning “ancestor of multitudes.” Likewise, Sarai is recast as Sarah, meaning “princess.”

From the nineteenth to the seventeenth centuries BCE, the royal title “Abrahama” was written on cuneiform clay tablets. The Arabic *raham* means multitude. Abraham here is treated by God as if he were royalty. Appropriately, Sarah’s name also takes on the charm of royalty.

During the biblical age, new names were sometimes given at coronation ceremonies. Gideon became Jerubbaal (Judges 6:32). Jedediah became the more familiar Solomon (2 Samuel 12:25).

At the time of the writing of Genesis, it was believed that the meaning of a person’s name (given on the eighth day after birth) became incorporated into the soul of that person. In Egyptian

culture, one of the coronation names of a pharaoh was kept secret so that one could not harm him by using it inappropriately.

The change of names for Abram and Sarai in a sense changed their being. Sarah becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son. In the midst of this unlikely scene, hilarity is order of the day. The child is appropriately named Isaac, meaning “laughter.” The long-awaited promise of God is fulfilled.

Cutting the deal

At the renaming ceremony of Abraham and Sarah a ritualistic surgery becomes the physical mark of the covenant (Genesis 17:9–14). At that time, circumcision was already a custom in Egyptian and other cultures. Today among Jews an individual called a *mohel* performs the ceremony with another person holding the infant sitting on a chair designated for the prophet Elijah. Abraham supposedly used a flint knife to circumcise all male members of his household, including slaves. (Genesis 17:23–27).

Why circumcision? Some scholars say that the shedding of blood was to ward off demons (see Exodus 4:24–26). Others note that the act of cutting was intrinsic to the making of covenants during the biblical age. Sometimes participants in the treaties walked through animals that were severed in two. Supposedly, anyone breaking the covenant would be treated like that sacrificed animal. Making a covenant was literally to “cut a covenant.”

The covenant is sealed. God’s promise to the aged Sarah and Abraham is fulfilled. Abraham now has two sons.

—Herb Smith, professor of Philosophy and Religion,
McPherson College, McPherson, KS

Reflect

1. Think of your life in three stages: childhood, youth, and adulthood. Think of one everyday blessing and one surprising blessing for each of these stages.
2. Abram and Sarai were given meaningful new names. Do you consider your own name a blessing? Why or why not?
3. In many African cultures, children bring social status and carry family lineage in ways reminiscent of Abraham and Sarah’s time. What role do children have in a North American setting? In your family? In your congregation?
4. In *Abraham: A Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths* Bruce Feiler says, “The Abraham I long for would be a bridge between humanity and the divine, who demonstrates the example of what it means to be faithful but who also delivers to us God’s blessing on earth. . . this Abraham is not a Jew, Christian, or Muslim.” How might a new look at Abraham bring the blessing of peace among peoples?

Bible commentary Week 7

Genesis 21:8–21

Exile for Hagar and Ishmael

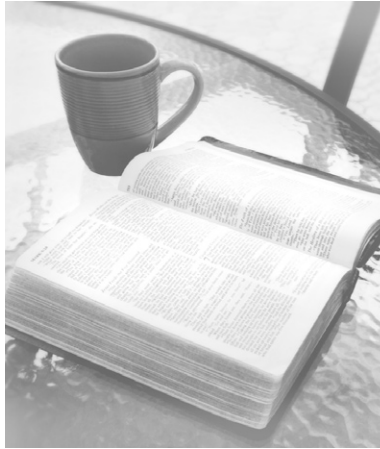
As Isaac grows and is weaned, a celebratory feast is held (Genesis 21:8). In an age of high infant mortality, Isaac has succeeded in surviving the precarious months of early childhood. With Sarah now more confident of his survival, her hot jealousy toward Hagar and Ishmael becomes inflamed. She asks her husband to cast them out of the household. In this demand, she refers to Hagar no longer as wife but again as slave. The consequence of this change would have been in more than the name. This demotion of status would preclude any inheritance for Ishmael as the firstborn of Abraham. In the midst of this familial conflict, God comforts Abraham, assuring him that Ishmael will become a great nation. Abraham presents Hagar with bread and a skin of water for her journey into exile. We can imagine him grieving as the silhouettes of mother and child dissolve into the horizon of the desert landscape.

Ishmael will return to his father only upon the occasion of Abraham's burial at Machpelah Cave near Hebron (Genesis 25:9). Perhaps the earlier foreboding comment at Ishmael's birth—"he shall live at odds with all his kin"—was the understandable anger of a child rejected by his father. Throughout the tale of this dysfunctional family, the comfort of God's blessing becomes the major theme of hope. Earlier God comforted a despondent Hagar (Genesis 16:10). God's promise is reiterated again and again (21:13, 15–19). God's love is extended to the powerless, the outcast, and the homeless. The very name *Yishmael* in Hebrew in ancient Semitic culture meant "God has heard."

Ishmael in Islam

Interestingly, within Islamic tradition, Ishmael, not Isaac, is the featured son of Abraham. In the Qur'an, God asks Abraham to sacrifice Ishmael. In the stories attributed to the reception of Mohammed, God explicitly provides for Hagar and her progeny.

In the biblical account, when Hagar and Ishmael venture forth into the wilderness and their throats are parched, God directs them to a well. In the Islamic saga, Ishmael's heel, kicking in desperation, causes refreshing waters to flow forth from the Zamzam Well. Today followers of this faith tradition locate the source of this water in Mecca. It is frequented annually by millions of pilgrims wearing white garments during the Hajj. Its brackish liquid is thought to have medicinal qualities. During the extended yearly ritual in Mecca, pilgrims also run frantically between two hills called Marah and Sara, imitating Hagar questing for water for her son.



It is also believed that the holiest shrine of Islam called the Kabah was built by Ishmael when he was with his father, Abraham. This large cubicle containing a meteorite stone covered with a black linen cloth was thought to have been originally built by Adam and later rebuilt by Ishmael.

The legacy of Ishmael

In the biblical narrative, what happens to Ishmael? Genesis says that he lives in the wilderness of the northern Sinai Peninsula. His mother arranges for an Egyptian woman from her heritage to marry him. Jewish tradition calls her Meribah, though

she is also called Isa and is said to be from Moab.

As for Ishmael's descendants, twelve tribes claim him as their primary ancestor (Genesis 25:16). In Judges 23:24, these Ishmaelite tribes are identified as the Midianites. The biblical genealogy lists Midian as Ishmael's half-brother. In an upcoming session, we will see that it is a trading caravan of Ishmaelites who buy the abandoned Joseph from his brothers. Ironically, they are the ones who save this central figure in the drama of Jacob's family.

Where else do we hear of the offspring of Ishmael? Approximately five hundred years after the Abrahamic saga, there is a poignant story of a refugee Israelite seeking labor in the Sinai. He falls in love with the daughter of a Midianite priest who lovingly brings him water at a well. The woman: Zipporah. The refugee: Moses.

Today Islam claims Mohammed's ancestry through Ishmael while Judaism features Isaac. Would that there be reconciliation today between the progeny of Abraham. The sibling rivalry echoes through 27 centuries.

—Herb Smith, professor of Philosophy and Religion,
McPherson College, McPherson, KS

Reflect

1. As you read the scripture text, who were you most concerned about? Why?
2. What surprises you about God's actions in this story? Abraham's actions?
3. When have you cried out to God and found rescue? What difficulties have made you wonder if God hears your cries?
4. Read Psalm 4:1–2 as a lament similar to Hagar's cries in the wilderness. What word or phrase stands out to you?

Bible commentary Week 8

Genesis 25:29–34; 27:1–28:9

Wrestling in the womb

The Hebrew Bible is peppered with stories of sibling rivalry. Yet, in the midst of brokenness and even hostility, God's light shines through. As Andrew Greely writes, "God draws straight with crooked lines." As the Genesis saga continues, Isaac travels to his father's ancestral lands and marries his cousin Rebekah. They experience twenty years of barrenness, but finally Rebekah becomes pregnant with twin boys.

A struggle between the brothers begins in the womb (Genesis 25:22). It is prophesied that they will represent two different cultures. Eventually this would become Israel and its southeastern neighbor Edom (today Jordan).

The first child to come forth is red and hairy. In parts of the ancient Near East—Egypt, for example—red was the foreboding color of evil. This firstborn son was named Esau. Clutching on to the heel of his brother came Jacob, whose name means "the supplanter." The Hebrew *Ya'qobh* has also been interpreted as "God protects."

The hunter and the mama's boy

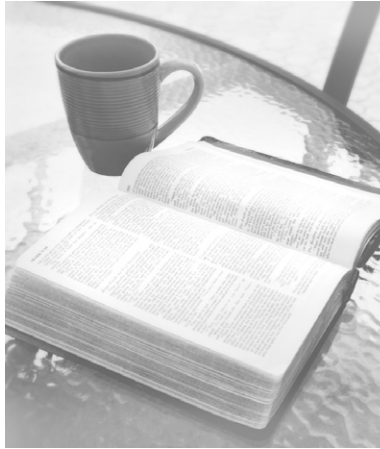
After they are grown, the story goes that Esau, the skilled hunter, comes in from the fields as the more domestic Jacob is cooking. The delicious, appetizing aroma of lentil soup permeates the tent. Esau announces that he is famished, which sets the stage for a deal that would have ramifications for generations. Foolishly Esau agrees to sell his birthright for a bowl of stew.

The legal repercussions of this momentous bargain are unclear. Middle Assyrian laws mandated a double portion of inheritance for the firstborn, as did numerous other Mesopotamian texts. Some Egyptian laws also mandated primogeniture. However, in the Hebrew Torah, among the six hundred thirteen laws of Sinai delivered to Moses, nothing is said.

In the Genesis story, no mention is made of property. What was at stake was perhaps far more important: the destiny of Jacob, Esau, and their offspring. The main lineage of the family of Abraham would proceed through Jacob, later called "Israel," rather than through Esau. The theme of the younger son becoming more favored is found widely in the Bible: see, for example, the narratives concerning Abel, Joseph, David, and Solomon.

A deathbed blessing

The second major episode in the rivalry takes place when the centenarian Isaac, failing in eyesight, is about to give his paternal blessing. Before blessing his favored firstborn son, Isaac



sends him forth to hunt and kill some game and prepare it as a savory meal.

Rebekah, however, favors Jacob; she is also disgruntled with her daughters-in-law, Esau's Hittite wives. She plans a deception. In so doing, she follows in the tradition of other assertive women in the Genesis accounts (Eve and Sarah). Such behavior was unusual for this patriarchal culture.

Some scholars are so struck with the behavior of these women that they surmise that a sizeable portion of Genesis was written by a woman. They speculate that she would likely have been a person of

high rank in the court during the reign of Solomon or shortly thereafter.

Rebekah has Jacob disguise himself as Esau, bring his father a meal, and accept the blessing of his father Isaac. Interestingly, rabbinical commentators say that the garments of Esau that Rebecca put on her favorite son, Jacob, were the same ones that God gave to Adam and Eve. Rabbis have also proposed that Jacob really did not want to deceive his father and that he wept in his disguise. They claim that it was out of obedience to the fifth commandment later received by Moses ("Honor your father and your mother"—Deuteronomy 5:16) that Jacob carried out this fateful charade.

What were the repercussions of Jacob taking the birthright and blessing from his sibling? Enmity, strife, and a brother bent on blood revenge. But, stay tuned—God's reconciliation will shine forth in a magnificent story of forgiveness.

—Herb Smith, professor of Philosophy and Religion,
McPherson College, McPherson, KS

Reflect

1. Pick a character from the Bible story. What choice or action can you understand? What surprised, irritated, or disappointed you about that character?
2. When has selfishness separated people you know? How has family selfishness affected your own life?
3. In what ways do you compete with your siblings or others close to you?
4. What kind of blessing do you wish from your parents? What words and actions from parents and mentors have been life-giving to you?

Bible commentary Week 9

Genesis 32:1–33:17

Jacob and Esau, part two

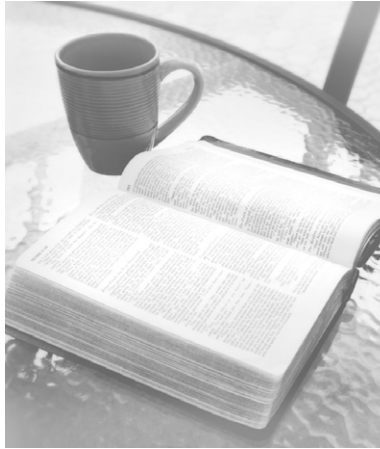
Jewish folklore says that the most terrible episode in their ancient history was not the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar, but was rather the translation of the Hebrew scriptures into Greek. Why? For the first time non-Jews could learn of the foibles of the matriarchs and patriarchs. The Jacob and Esau cycle of stories must have been an embarrassment to early Jews. The very figure who is called “Israel,” through connivance, twice deceives his brother. Nonetheless, this intriguing saga, with its naked honesty, reflects the human condition, warts and all. God’s reconciliation blossoms forth despite the thorns of arrogance and deception.

Besides his two Hittite wives, Esau marries a third woman, an Ishmaelite. Perhaps identifying with the rejected son of Abraham, he takes Mahalath, daughter of Ishmael, as his bride (Genesis 28:9). Jacob is sent forth to the ancestral homeland of Paddan-aram to marry one of his uncle Laban’s daughters. On this long journey from Beer-sheba he has a vision. A ladder with angels on its rungs is seen ascending from the earth to the heavens. After waking, Jacob renames the location Bethel, meaning “the house of God” (Genesis 28:16–17).

After arriving in Haran, he marries not one, but two, of Laban’s daughters. Both Leah and Rachel are accompanied by handmaids Zilpah and Bilhah. Jacob is a prolific father with eleven sons and a daughter. What started out as a simple quest for a bride turns out to be a twenty-year sojourn in Haran. But the legacy of his deception lingers on. There is enmity between Jacob’s and Laban’s households. Jacob decides to return home, but must have been hyperventilating with anxiety as he approached the land of Edom. Esau had promised blood revenge. As an appeasement gift, Jacob sends messengers with an assortment of goats, ewes, rams, camels, cows, bulls, and donkeys.

Wrestler with a swagger

That evening, having crossed the stream called Jabbok, the most definitive event of Jacob’s life unfolds. Sleeping apart from his wives, maids, and children, a nightmare wrestling match ensues. His opponent forces his hip socket out of joint. Nonetheless, the now limping Jacob holds his opponent until he is blessed. This mysterious wrestler then renames Jacob “Israel,” meaning “striven with God.” Who was this opponent? Medieval rabbis said it was the infamous demon Samuel, the guardian of Edom. Others said it was the archangel Michael because 20 years earlier Jacob failed to pay tithes at Bethel.



Still others say that it was the personification of Esau taking revenge. Could it be that it was really an internal struggle in the soul of Jacob, initiating a transformation in his life? During the biblical age, the holy sabbath began not in the morning but at nighttime when God’s healing was manifested during sleep.

Injury to the thigh sinews can sometimes tighten the tendons with muscle spasms. This can make one appear to swagger as one walks. In this case, the swagger of Jacob was hardly defiant confidence. Esau was coming to meet him with 400 men in his cadre (Genesis 32:6). The silhouetted

figures of Esau’s party must have looked more like ten thousand to the tunnel vision of Jacob. As the limping Jacob sees his brother coming, he positions his family in order of importance. The maids and their offspring go first, followed by Leah and her children, and finally by Rachel and Joseph (Genesis 33:2). But instead of a bloody confrontation, the unexpected happens.

Broken heart, whole heart

Esau initiates the encounter. He runs to Jacob and embraces him. They both weep. Twenty years of righteous anger melt away in cathartic release. God’s love traverses two decades of broken tragedy. Grace and reconciliation prevail. Jacob sees in his forgiving brother “the face of God” (Genesis 33:10). A Jewish proverb says that the only whole heart is a broken heart. Edom forgave Israel; Esau mended the heart of Jacob. And perhaps we can imagine that after the salty tears of healing, Jacob no longer walked with a limp.

—Herb Smith, professor of Philosophy and Religion,
McPherson College, McPherson, KS

Reflect

1. Think of Jacob and Esau. Who needed to seek forgiveness? Who needed to extend grace? Why are both actions important?
2. Describe Jacob’s mood as he prepared to meet Esau. When have you needed to prepare for a major life-changing event?
3. Jacob told Esau, “For truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God.” Who is the face of God to you?
4. Do you agree that the only whole heart is a broken heart? When has brokenness led to wholeness in your own experience?

Bible commentary Week 10

Genesis 37

The Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy declared that the story of Joseph is the most inspired story in all world literature.

A favored child

Even though many parents believe that they are relating to their children equally, preferential treatment is not uncommon. This is emphatically so in Jacob's extended clan. His favorite wife, Rachel, has been barren for six years. In the seventh year, she becomes pregnant at last and delivers a son, Joseph. Born with the good looks of his attractive mother, this favored child experiences loss at an impressionable age. When he is eight, his mother dies giving birth to his brother Benjamin. Bilhah, Rachel's maid, becomes Joseph's surrogate mother.

Rabbinical tradition notes that father Jacob gave Joseph excellent schooling, perhaps not available to his other sons. According to Hebrew legends this precocious youth was schooled by the angel Gabriel and became multi-lingual, mastering 70 languages.

Sibling rivalry

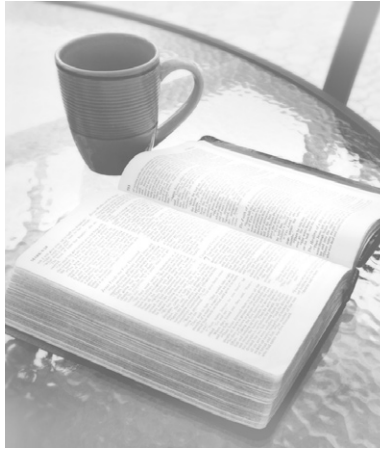
Jacob also favors Joseph with a special "long robe with sleeves," the proverbial coat of many colors. Some commentators say that this type of robe would have been the equivalent of a royal garment—perhaps prefiguring Joseph's later role in Egypt. Others note that the Hebrew word for the robe refers, surprisingly, to the apparel worn by royal women. In one of the soap opera scenes of King David's family, his daughter Tamar wears such a garment (2 Samuel 23:18).

However the garment is styled, it increases the flame of jealousy burning within the souls of his brothers. Joseph pours kerosene on this fire by tattling on his siblings. Genesis says only that Joseph brought a "bad report" of his brothers to his father. According to rabbinical tradition, Joseph tells Jacob that his brothers have abused animals, tearing their limbs.

The last straw for the brothers is Joseph's naïve arrogance in sharing his dreams with them. In one dream his sheaf of grain stands upright while his brothers' sheaves bow down before it. In another dream the sun (presumably his father), moon (his mother) and 11 stars (the number of his brothers) bow before him. Even Jacob rebukes his favored son for sharing this "center of the world" imagery.

Violence and slavery

One day Jacob asks Joseph to visit his brothers who are pasturing the flock in the countryside. Jealousy now comes to a climax. Traveling from the Valley of Hebron beyond Shechem



to Dothan, Joseph is accosted by some of his brothers, who intend to kill him.

Reuben, the eldest, intervenes. He suggests throwing Joseph in a pit, thinking that he will return to retrieve Joseph and restore him to their father. His suggestion was not as odd as it may seem to us today; such cisterns, designed to store rainwater, were also sometimes used as prisons. Centuries later the prophet Jeremiah suffered that dungeonlike fate (Jeremiah 38:6). Legend has it that the naked Joseph was clothed by the angel Gabriel or Michael with a garment from the garden of Eden and fed food from the heavens.

Then along comes a trading caravan of Ishmaelites. Joseph's pit was at Dothan, located along a trading route from Syria to Egypt. Laden with gum, balm, and resin, these merchants pay a hefty sum for the handsome lad of seventeen. Reuben returns to the cistern too late to rescue Joseph. In a traditional mourning ritual, he tears his garment in grief.

As for Joseph's designer coat, his brothers dip it in the warm blood of a slaughtered goat and then return it to their father who is now convinced that his favorite son is dead. In Jewish tradition at the death of a close relative, one tears one's shirt on the side of the heart. Father Jacob tears his garments, puts on sackcloth, and weeps.

But grief will not have the last word. God's love turns tears to laughter. The caravan traders sell Joseph in Egypt. Stay tuned—a glorious family reunion awaits us.

—Herb Smith, professor of Philosophy and Religion,
McPherson College, McPherson, KS

Reflect

1. How did favoritism shape the events of this Bible story? Explain why Joseph was either fortunate or unfortunate to be the favored child.
2. All of us have experienced the pull and tug of family tensions or conflicts in the workplace. Compare your life to today's story. What similarities, if any, do you see?
3. Describe situations where you have seen people plotting against or gossiping about someone who is universally disliked. Have you tried to stop people or gone along? How do you feel about your choices?
4. Think of your growing-up years. What examples of preferential treatment made you angry at home or at school? How did you respond when you saw favoritism?

Bible commentary Week 11

Genesis 39–41

In Europe during the medieval period, the doldrums of everyday life were spiced with the pageantry of drama. In the cobbled streets of England, France, and Spain, biblical plays were performed. The most popular of these plays were stories about Joseph.

Prologue: Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery. The Ishmaelite / Midianite traders sell him again. But—serendipity! His new owner is none other than Potiphar, the captain of the Egyptian guard. In this foreign land, God is still with him, blessing all of Joseph's efforts. Potiphar promotes Joseph to the position of overseer of his household.

Illuminated by God's light

Four times in the Genesis narrative, Joseph is called handsome. Rabbinical commentators claimed that his face was illuminated like a lamp, brighter than the midday sun. This was probably a metaphor intended to signify God's presence. The metaphor of light signaling the divine occurs several times in the Bible: Moses wears a veil after experiencing God's glowing presence on Mount Sinai; Jesus becomes luminescent at his transfiguration.

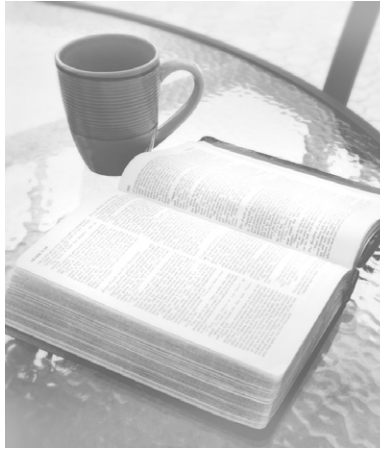
The blessings that Joseph experiences, unfortunately, soon become mingled with intrigue. The wife of Potiphar has her eye on him. Unrequited love sometimes turns bitter; after she is rebuffed by the righteous Joseph, she lies about his supposed advances. Into prison he goes.

Nocturnal theater

But even in prison Joseph triumphs. According to Jewish tradition, during this time Joseph fasted often and even celebrated the sabbath years before it was revealed to Moses. His management skills again come to the forefront, and he is put in charge of all of the prisoners. Finally, his intuitive genius in dream interpretation becomes his ticket to freedom.

Jewish psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud wrote that dreams are a "royal road to the unconscious." Jewish tradition says that a dream without interpretation is like a letter unopened. For Joseph, dreams were a royal road to understanding God's presence in the future. During his prison sentence, Joseph interprets the dreams of the chief cupbearer and of the baker of the Pharaoh. Later, when Pharaoh himself is perplexed by his dreams, the thirty-year-old Joseph is called for.

Many believe that this period in Egyptian history was one of Hyksos, or Near Eastern, domination. The pharaohs of this era were thought to have come from the land of Canaan. Thus, there would have been ready acceptance of the Semitic Joseph.



Legendary commentary has Pharaoh seated on a golden throne with 70 steps ascending to the top. Guests would climb the number of steps according to the number of languages that they spoke. Multilingual Joseph ascends to the top. He is again clothed by the angel with a heavenly garment.

The favor of the king

Joseph profoundly impresses Pharaoh with his dream interpretations, predicting seven years of plenty for Egypt followed by seven years of famine. He skyrockets to the position of viceroy to the king. A golden chain is hung around his neck, and he is paraded

around in a chariot (horses were brought to Egypt by the Hyksos). Pharaoh removes his signet ring, an ancient equivalent of the credit card, and puts it on Joseph's finger.

At the age of 30, Joseph marries Asenath, the daughter of the priest of On. According to legend, the city of On, later called Heliopolis by the Greeks, was the city where Moses would be educated. It was the Oxford of Egypt. Blessings flow forth with the births of their sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

The eternal presence of God

From the coat of many colors to the pit of nakedness and abandonment to the fine linen of the Nile, Joseph has come full circle. As Psalm 139 states, whether in darkness or light or in the farthest limits of creation, God is there. For our hero, whether abandoned in a pit in the desert or named secretary of state of the Egyptian empire, God is present.

—Herb Smith, professor of Philosophy and Religion,
McPherson College, McPherson, KS

Reflect

1. What qualities made Joseph a good leader? How did God's steadfast love make a difference in Joseph's life?
2. Ponder the ups and downs of Joseph's life as you complete the following sentences.
 - If I were Joseph, I would grieve . . .
 - If I were Joseph, I would rejoice . . .
3. Identify your own areas of leadership by thinking about ways that you use your abilities and inspire others. Think of situations in which others count on you or look to you for leadership.
4. Joseph dreamed and interpreted dreams. What wisdom or wholeness has come to you through dreams?

Bible commentary Week 12

Genesis 42–46

Famine in the land

The southern part of the land of Israel resembles the Badlands of South Dakota. The lunarlike landscape, honeycombed with caves, experienced periodic droughts. Without sweet, fertilizing rains, crops failed and famine followed. This is what Jacob and his extended family experience. Finally, Jacob sends 10 of his sons to Egypt to purchase grain from the Egyptian storehouses. He keeps only Benjamin, the sole remaining son of his beloved wife, Rachel, at home with him.

Paybacks

The donkey caravan from Canaan is met by brother Joseph, unrecognizable in his role as viceroy to Pharaoh. The time for payback has arrived. Perhaps in revenge, Joseph treats his brothers harshly and calls them spies. He sends them to prison for three days. After bringing them out, Joseph agrees to let them take grain home but insists that they leave one brother with him. He also orders them to return to him, bringing with them their youngest brother. Throughout this negotiation, Joseph pretends not to understand the Hebrew language that they speak among themselves.

Arriving back at their father Jacob's tent estate, they convince the reluctant patriarch to part with Benjamin. Jacob also sends them back with gifts of ointment, honey, aromatic resin, and pistachio nuts for this enigmatic official.

Again meeting Joseph, the brothers prostrate themselves before his regal presence. But when Joseph sees his brother Benjamin, he cannot control himself and rushes off to a private chamber to weep. After he composes himself, he returns and hosts them for a meal.

The brothers are seated by birth order, an ancient Near Eastern custom. Extra helpings are piled on the plate of Benjamin. When they are about to leave, Joseph's silver cup is slipped into Benjamin's sack. Genesis records that Joseph used this cup for divination. The Talmud writes that the Israelites themselves used special vessels with guardian angels portrayed on them to help them discern God's will. Joseph sends his steward after them to accuse Jacob's sons of theft and retrieve Joseph's precious cup. The brothers again return to the city; Joseph says that he will pardon them all, except for Benjamin, who must now remain with him as his slave.

A happy ending

At this point, Judah steps forward with a heroic offer. Knowing that the loss of Benjamin will kill his father, he asks to take Benjamin's place as the viceroy's slave. At that point, Joseph can contain himself no longer. He unveils his identity.



The poignant word rings forth: "I am your brother, Joseph." Joseph convulses in tears of reconciliation with his brothers. They kiss. Joseph tells his shamefaced siblings not to be distressed. They are not to wallow in self-rejection and regret for selling him. Joseph proclaims that God's providential love has prevailed. Jewish psychiatrist Viktor Frankl, a victim of the Nazi concentration camps, writes about God's providence despite tragedy. He says that what appear

to us in our lives to be broken, crooked lines are, from God's higher dimensional perspective, lines that flow smoothly.

Joseph invites his extended family to settle in the land called Goshen, an area in the Nile Delta which has some of the richest soil in the world. When the centenarian Jacob hears the incredible news, rabbis tell us that refreshment was the order of the day. The ashes of mourning are washed from his wrinkled forehead. He trims his beard. The fine linen robes sent from Egypt now make him seem years younger. Wagons laden with gifts are received. His granddaughter Serah (Asher's daughter) begins to play her harp in joy.

As Jacob's family arrived in Goshen, the chariots of Joseph are already there to meet them for the ultimate family reunion. Ah, reconciliation is fragrant! The genius mathematician Blaise Pascal wrote that the story of Joseph is a prototype for the forgiveness manifested in Jesus the Christ.

—Herb Smith, professor of Philosophy and Religion,
McPherson College, McPherson, KS

Reflect

1. Joseph, a powerful leader in Egypt, saw his brothers arrive to buy grain. What choices lay before Joseph? Why did Joseph eventually choose the route of reconciliation?
2. When apartheid ended, white South Africans feared payback. Instead Nelson Mandela began to build a rainbow nation in which no one had reason to fear. In the words of Desmond Tutu, another famous South African, "Goodness is stronger than evil." What other examples show goodness overcoming evil?
3. Reconciliation brings both pain and joy. What experiences of reconciliation have shaped your life? Where might the path of reconciliation lead if you were to follow it now?
4. Reread Viktor Frankl's idea in the last section of the commentary. Does the idea that "broken, crooked lines flow smoothly from God's perspective" mean that God has events planned out ahead of time? What are some other possibilities for understanding how God is at work?