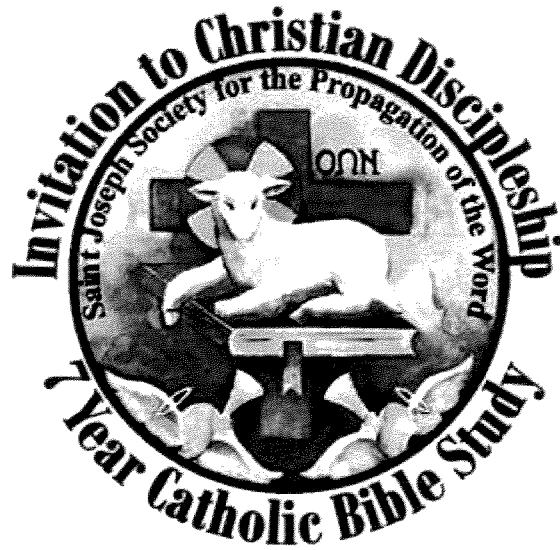


**A CHRISTIAN  
WALKS THROUGH GENESIS**



**GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST**

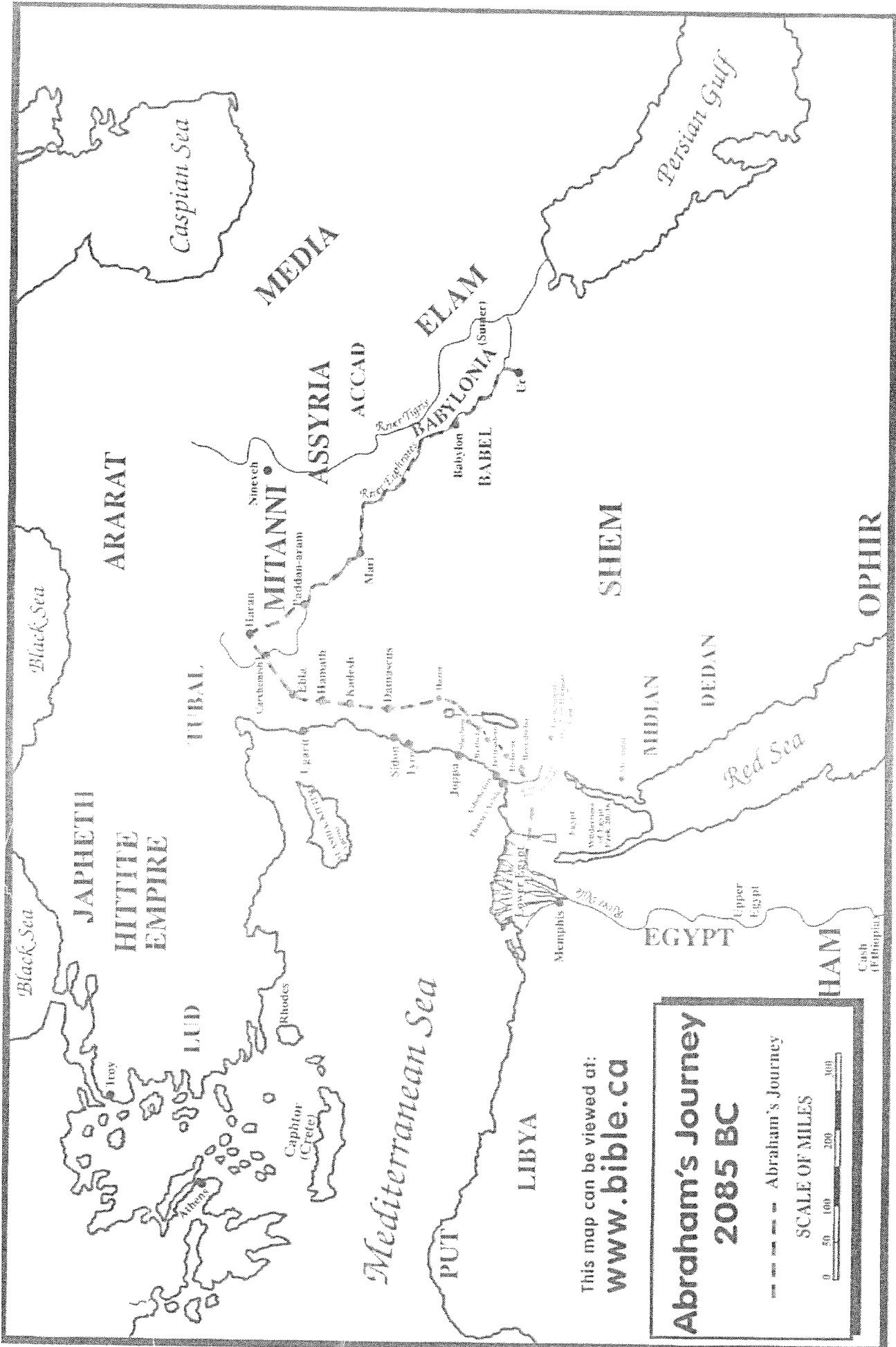
# A CHRISTIAN WALKS THROUGH GENESIS



**James Christian**

Society for Propagation of the Faith  
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# A CHRISTIAN WALKS THROUGH GENESIS

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# A CHRISTIAN WALKS THROUGH GENESIS

## INTRODUCTION

The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are our primary written sources of faith. The Sacred Scriptures must be studied under the same light of the Holy Spirit who inspired them. The secular mind, unaided by grace, skips over the inspired writing as rocks over a frozen pond. St. Paul teaches: *"The natural man does not accept what is taught by the Spirit of God. For him that is absurdity. He cannot come to know such teaching because it must be appraised in a spiritual way" (1Cor 2:14).*

The Christian Church reminds students that these truths are the subject of faith, the product of divine revelation, and are not subjects for scientific investigation. The truths of the Sacred Scriptures lie within the dominion of faith, beyond natural science. As God is the Author of all truth, beliefs of faith do not contradict the truths of science and vice versa. Faith goes beyond science, as do the truths revealed.

The psalmists sings: *"Your word, O Lord, endures forever; it is firm as the heavens: Long have I known that your will is established forever" (Ps. 119:89,152).* *"Through all generations your truth endures. You have established the earth, and it stands firm. According to your ordinances they still stand firm: all things serve you" (Ps 119:90-91).*

Hebrew and Christian Scriptures are written for men and women of faith. As St. John reminds us, *"But these things have been recorded to help you believe--so that through this faith you may have life in his name" (Jn 20:31).*

We are reminded by one author, "We speak of God, and man's relationship with God, using human terms--even though they hardly can bear the burden of what we wish to say. Religious language soars beyond the ordinary. To speak of the things of God, we often need poetry more than prose. And in poetry it is heart that speaks to heart, more than head to head" (Robert Stern, *One*).

The Hebrew Scriptures are awesome and ineffable in their presentation of truth, presenting religious truth underlying ancient myths in historical narrations, and biographies of unique individuals--all in the words of inspired poets. The Hebrew Scriptures fashion a series of picturesque scenes--created stories enshrining deep truths that reveal the Principle of Life and unity of all created beings. Its primary picture represents God/Eloim--the Eternal and Infinite Principal of Creation. God brings all things into existence, nothing exists outside of His creative activity. The primary picture is that of a "powerful spirit" moving above darkness, bringing light into darkness, and with it, myriads of beings both animate and inanimate.

Mother Earth comes forth crowned with a universe of stars. With the birth of the world and its universe one truth remains constant: the care and concern of God for his creation does not cease. Creation is a work of divine self-expression. Creation remains covered with the divine footprints and fingerprints of its Artist. God is clearly recognized by the things he has made. Creation, expressing perfectly the will of God, is the Glory of God. Reviewing all His works, the Divine Artist proclaimed the self-evident truth: IT IS VERY GOOD!

The Hebrews, as a Semitic people, trace their origin back to Shem, first son of Noah. The ancient Hebrews did not compartmentalize their people. They did not view themselves or life around them from an objective, scientific point of view. Such concepts common to modern man as character, personality, will, a conscious, unconscious, or subliminal mind were foreign to them. They understood, measured, and valued things as they personally experienced them, and as they affected and effected their behavior. They experienced human life as a unified being, with their heart as the principle of unification. Their life proceeded from the “the breath of God,” and this “breath” resided in the heart. All thoughts, feelings, and emotions proceeded from the heart. They did not equate the “heart” with a physical organ. Our best understanding of this concept would be to view it as our concept of “mind” or “soul.” Nevertheless, survival after death was not a common belief among the Jews; the resurrection of the body back to life was a belief.

The reality of God, self, other persons, angels, and good and evil came down to experience. Intuitively, they experienced that all knowledge came from concrete images presented to the heart through human senses. Their method of revealing truth was to present it clothed in concrete examples that could be visualized and meditated upon. Through this method people came to universal truths applicable to human existence and salvation.

When we read in the Scriptures that something is “known,” or that you “know” something, or have “knowledge” of a thing, it is important that we understand the concept of “knowing” in keeping with the Hebrew mentality, otherwise we fail to understand what is being revealed.

The Hebrew Scriptures were authentically translated into the Greek language. Much of our English translations come from the Greek translations. The poverty of expression in the English language has been a problem. Often we do not have the proper concepts in English to express the Hebrew and Greek concepts. We are familiar with the fact that there are four different expressions of love in the Greek (*eros*, *storgy*, *philia*, *apage*), all of which convey unique meanings. All are translated into English with the one word, “love.” Needless to say, much is lost in the translation.

In the Greek language there are over fourteen different words expressing “know,” “known,” “knowledge,” and “to know.” All carry different nuances of meaning that are lost when they are translated merely as forms of the word “know.” The Greek words *gnosis* and *ginosko*, translated into English as “know” and “to know,” express the thought of possessing “truth” through “experience.” For a Hebrew person “to know” a truth, “to

have knowledge” of the truth, is to *experience* it. “Knowledge” is truth known from experience. A wise man is a man rich in experience.

This is a vital concept to bear in mind when reading and studying both the Old and New Testaments. “To know God” in the Scriptures cannot be separated from “the experience of God.” We read in the *Benedictus* that John the Baptist will be “*giving them [the people] knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of sins*” (Lk 1:77). The proper interpretation would be that salvation is experienced through the forgiveness of sin; from the forgiveness of sins flows the experience of salvation. When reading these concepts in English, it would greatly help our understanding to translate them as “experiences.” What would the words of Jesus, “*I don't know you!*” mean from this point of view? How would I know if the water in the swimming pool is ice cold or body temperature? How do scientists come to know “the truth” about a drug in the laboratory? *Experience is the Teacher!*

With this understanding of the Hebrew mentality, it should be easier for us to understand that the Image of God in the Hebrew Scripture is not an abstract and speculative image. It conceives God as intimately concerned with the world, but nevertheless remaining God, whose Being dwells in obscurity as a hidden God. To ask an ancient Hebrew person why God did this or that, he might well have responded as a father might answer his son when he asks, “Why did you name me ‘Adolf?’” The father might reply, “I just did!” The answer to all these “whys” to God would be answered with “I just did! You got a problem with that?”

Scripture confirms that God is not to be found in the storms, the earthquakes, the fire. God can only be experienced beyond the natural sphere as symbolically expressed “in the rustling of a gentle breeze.” The rabbis spoke of hearing a *bat tol*, loosely translated “the whisper of the Holy Spirit.” The poet wrote, “God is not dumb that He should speak no more. If you hear not his voice today, ‘tis your soul that’s poor.” The Hebrew would say, “*If you hear the voice of God today, harden not your heart!*” (Ps 95:7-8). They saw the problem of unbelief, not as one of muteness or deafness, but one of hardening of heart.

To know the human person in depth is a complex undertaking. The rich complexity composing the human person is a “mystery.” But from all this complexity arises a unified vision of the human person. The human being emerges as a person intrinsically well ordered.

Any realistic study of the human person demands remaining within Christian anthropology. This requires interpreting the human person under the twofold lights of revelation (*sub luce Evangelii*), and of human reason (*et humane experientiae*), which implies in keeping with the light of human experience (*II V. C. Gaudium et Spes*, No. 46).

As Christians today we do not enter the study of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures as children entering a kindergarten. As Aristotle would say, our minds are a *tabula rasa*--a clean slate upon which nothing is yet written. We inherited the treasures of wisdom that saints and scholars have handed on to us. Even upon writing these words, the teaching of Saint Paul of Tarsus comes to mind: “*Don't let anyone capture you with empty philosophies*



*and high sounding nonsense that comes from human thinking and from spiritual powers of this world, rather than from Christ” (Col 2:8-9). “Stand firm and keep a strong grip on the teaching we passed on to you both in person and by letter” (2Thes 2:15).*

St. Paul's words ring a clear warning in our ears today. Many people, even in high places, only share their ignorance with us. I am reminded of the words my mother spoke to her friend over the gossiping fence, “I can't tell you any more. I've already told you more than I know.”

Reputable scholars and holy men and women, both in the past and present, have much wisdom and understanding to share with us in our journey through the Holy Scriptures. Let us give prudent attention to their teachings. Let us lift up our voices to the Holy Spirit of Truth, to assist us in discerning the wheat from the weeds.

We begin with the teachings of the Christian Church concerning the inspiration and the inerrancy of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. The Second Vatican Council confirms that the Church, “relying upon the belief of the apostles, hold that the books of both the Old and New Testament in their entirety, with all their parts, are sacred and authentic because, having been written under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have God as their author and have been handed on as such to the Church herself” (Constitution on Divine Revelation).

Concerning the inerrancy of the Sacred Scriptures, the same Council confirms, “Since everything assisted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully and without error that truth (*veritatem...sine errore*) which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of salvation.”

The following five points summarize fundamental teachings of the Church concerning the Sacred Scriptures:

1. The entirety of the canonical Scriptures comes from God.
2. The writers of the Scriptures truly wrote in a human fashion.
3. Israel and the Christian Church have their foundations in the Old and New Testaments.
4. The Scriptures are inspired in their origin. Inspiration and inerrancy is limited to the author and his original work. The Scriptures are inspiring in their effects.
5. The truth to which the Scriptures give testimony is the truth necessary for the salvation of human beings.

Nothing is immune to its environment, neither the Rock of Gibraltar nor a titanium rocket ship. The Hebrew People and their religion unfold on the stage of history amidst a scanty background provided by their own testimony: a miraculous deliverance from Egyptian slavery, a dramatic encounter with God at Mount Sinai, followed by trudging through desert sands years upon years, and finally aggressively occupying the land of Canaan,

declaring it their God-given homeland on the face of this earth. We knew nothing of the social and religious environment against which they came into being until early in the Twentieth Century. Doors that had been closed for over four thousand years were pried open by archeologists, releasing a kaleidoscope of ancient customs, laws, and religious beliefs of people known intimately by the Israelites.

The cultural, social, and religious life of ancient Mesopotamia was described in their myths and poems, providing the colorful background against which the Hebrew people and their religion came into existence. There was the myth of Creation, *emuna elest*, in which creation began as a formless chaos inhabited by two divine beings--male and female. The female is a hideous monster of gigantic size with awesome strength. She spawns a host of demons and destroys her male partner. This personification of chaos is slain by her offspring Marduk, who creates the universe of order and design out of her remains.

There is the epic poem "Gilgamesh," which concerns a kingly hero who lost the opportunity for immortality, and learns to live in his human condition. The myth of "Atrahasis" relates how angry gods destroy the earth with a flood, and from one surviving person the human race begins again. There appear "Lotan," the swift, writing serpent, and "Shalzat" of the seven heads--monster and dragon embodiments of the wild forces of chaos.

These grotesque and absurd tales of the Mesopotamian gods reveal that reality is a conflict between two equal and opposing forces: order and chaos--two cycles within nature in continuous conflict with one another. Victory goes to one and then to the other, and neither ever prevails.

The ancient gods and goddesses personified the forces of nature, but they also personified human beings, with their strengths and weaknesses. The people and their gods were well suited--they mirrored each other. The Assyrians worshiped Ashur, the storm god, and the mother Ishtar, a military heroine. The Assyrians were the most warlike people of the ancient world.

People from this ancient world were given no definition of good or evil from their gods and goddesses. They lived in a world in which nature and humanity were essentially unstable. The Hebrew religion was born and grew up in the world of these gods. The Hebrews were racially, ethically, and spiritually akin to the Mesopotamian and Syrian people. Naturally speaking, their gods would have been the gods of their neighbors.

Once we have a clear picture of the religions of Mesopotamians, we know that Yahweh was not one of them; He was totally different. He was not the personification of the ideals of the people or of the forces of nature, but a vitally personal God who intruded Himself into history and into the lives of the Hebrew People.

We must realize that divine revelation did not begin on Mount Sinai. The Voice of God has never been silent. The Scriptures confirm that "*in times past, God spoke in fragmented and varied ways*" (*Heb 1:1*). Scripture pictures the saving love of God hovering over his creation

as a mother eagle over her young. We read in Wisdom: *“From the greatness and the beauty of created things, their original author, by analogy, is seen”* (Wis 13:5).

Paul speaks to the pagan Romans: *“What can be known about God is clear to them. Since the creation of the world God's invisible realities, God's eternal power and divinity have been visible, recognized through the things he has made”* (Rom 1:19). Paul speaks of the voice of God being in the depths of the heart of man: *“When Gentiles who have not the law keep it by instinct...they show that the demands of the law are written in their hearts. Their conscience [the Voice of God] bears witness together with the law, and their thoughts will accuse or defend them on the day when God will pass judgment on the secrets of men through Jesus Christ”* (Rom 2:14-16).

Speaking to the people of Laconia Paul says, *“...the living God, the one who made heaven and earth and sea and all that is in them. In the past he let the Gentiles go their way; yet in bestowing his benefits, he has not hidden himself without a clue. From the heavens he sends down rain and rich harvest; your spirits he filled with food and delights”* (Acts 14:15-17).

Paul proclaims to the pagans in Athens: *“The lord of heaven and earth does not dwell in sanctuaries made by hands, nor does he receive man's service as if he was in need of it. Rather, it is he who gives to all life and breath and everything else besides. From the one stock he made every nation of mankind to dwell on the face of the earth...Yet he is not really far from anyone, for ‘In him we live and move and have our being,’ as some of your poets have put it, ‘For we too are his offspring’”* (Acts 17:24-28).

Paul may be speaking about natural revelations in these texts, but that does not rule out the presence of supernatural revelation before Old and New Testament times. We know that God spoke directly to Noah, and entered through him into a covenant with mankind. There is a most unique presence in Genesis wherein Abram has his encounter with Melchizedek, the king of Salem, identified as *“being a priest of God Most High”* (Gen 14:18). Melchizedek gives the following blessing to Abram: *“Blessed be Abram by God Most High, the creator of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High who delivered your foes into your hands (Gen 14:19-20). Melchizedek is a priest of the same God that appeared to Abram--El Shaddai.*

On one occasion, Jesus spoke of his Father as the seed--the Word of God--sown throughout the field of the earth, where some seed fell on hard ground, some on rocky ground, some among thorns, and some on fertile ground yielding a rich harvest. As the author of the Hebrews told us, *“In times past, God spoke in fragmentary and varied ways to our fathers through the prophets; in this, the final age, he has spoken to us through his son”* (Heb 1:1-2).

There is a real need in our present sinful condition for divine revelation. Although mankind can come to know the existence of God as the Scriptures maintain, it does not do so without much error and uncertainty. *“Without knowledge, without understanding, they walk in darkness; all the foundations of the earth totter (Ps 82:5).*

An ancient Babylonian poet writes. "I wish I knew that these things would be pleasing to one's god! What is good for oneself may be offense to one's god. What in one's own heart seems despicable may be proper to one's god. Who can understand the plan of the underworld gods? Where have humans learned the way of a god?"

And another writes, "You are as stable as the earth, but the plan of a god is remote. The mind of the god, like the center of the earth, is remote. Knowledge of it is very difficult; people cannot know it...Though it is possible to find out what the will of the god is, people do not know how to do it" (*Babylonian Wisdom and Literature*: W. G. Lambert, Oxford: Clarendon, 1960).

God willed to use human instruments, known as prophets, to reveal necessary truths for the salvation of human beings. As much as these are God's revelations, God is their author. His human instruments are not robots or stenographers taking dictation. God submits himself to the limitations of His instrument--to their natural mode of thought, of speech, of style. God does not express thoughts beyond the mental capacity of the human writer. The human author is a living instrument, whose personality, experience, and unique gifts of mind and heart are used by God to express what He desires. If God desired to reveal scientific matters, he would use a scientist. Moses was no scientist, and God did not express scientific matters when Moses wrote Genesis.

The ancient Semitic mind viewed creation and human life grounded in material reality. Looking up into the heavens, they saw only the glory of God, and they sang: "*The heavens proclaim the glory of God and the firmament shows forth the works of his hands...There he has placed a tent for the sun; it comes forth like a bridegroom coming from his tent, and rejoices like a champion runs its course. At the end of the sky is the rising of the sun; to the farthest end of the sky is its course. There is nothing concealed from its burning heat*"(Ps 19:1, 4-6).

They expressed the world that their senses beheld. When they looked at man, it was the same--they saw only what their senses revealed to them. "*You turn man back to dust, saying, 'Return, O children of men.' You make an end to them in their sleep. They are like the changing grass, which at dawn springs up anew but by evening wilts and fades. Seventy is the sum of our years, or eighty, if we are strong, and most of them are fruitless toil, for they pass quickly and we drift away*" (Ps 90:3-6,10).

Our minds, spiritualized by its immersion into Greek philosophical thought, are accustomed to the abstractions of metaphysical nature. We view our sense experience and we look beneath what our eyes see. We want to know the "nuts and bolts" of what we see. We believe that reality, and therefore truth, lies beneath the appearance of things. For the ancient Hebrew person truth is what is experienced. One knows only that which one has experienced. As Christians going through Genesis, we will be subjected, in some degree, to seeing reality from two different viewpoints. We seek to see it as the Hebrew mind saw it, but also as we would see it today. It may be said--we need bi-polar vision.

Pope Benedict XVI in his work, *Jesus of Nazareth*, reminds us especially concerning the sacred scriptures, "It is necessary to keep in mind that any human utterance of a certain weight contains more than the author may have been immediately aware of at the time. When a word transcends the moment in which it is spoken or written, it carries within itself a 'deeper value.' This 'deeper value' pertains most of all to words that have matured in the course of faith-history...The process of continually revealing and drawing out new meanings from words would have not been possible unless the words themselves were open to it from within."

Our Holy Father also gives this teaching on interpreting the Sacred Scriptures:

For someone who feels themselves addressed by the Bible today, the first limit, by its very nature, is it has to leave the biblical word in the past. It must investigate the current context of events in which the text originated. It attempts to identify and to understand the past--as it was in itself--with the greatest possible precision, in order then to find out what the author could have said and intended to say in the context of the mentality and events of the time...It can glimpse points of contact with the present and try to apply the biblical word to the present. *The one thing it cannot do is make it into something present today.*"

The renowned scripture scholar John L. McKenzie, S. J. shares these wise insights to students of the sacred scriptures:

When you open the Hebrew Bible you enter a different world; you must put aside your mental baggage to read these ancient books with intelligence and sympathy. Nature for the Hebrew People was mysterious and overpowering, and in it they experienced the activity of God. Their language is the speech of the simple man who sees reality as it is sensibly experienced and not as intellectually perceived. Thinking for them was a grasp of totality; our method is an analysis of a totality.

The Hebrew Bible is a collection of religious writings; this is its primary interest, and this is the only interest it has ever had for the world at large. The religion of the Old Testament is the relationship between the Hebrew people and their God, as they experienced it and described it.

The Hebrew Bible will say little and it will say it simply; it has a firm grip upon reality which makes it quickly and surely to discern truth from false, good from evil. The reality which the Hebrew saw most concretely and immediately was the supreme reality: GOD. It was a world in which men felt they could reach out and touch God. If you can gain some sense of this divine reality, you have heard the spiritual message the Hebrew Scriptures have for you. If this relationship has no spiritual significance for your faith, then the book means nothing to you. Nevertheless, the Bible is a sacred Book; it comes from God, and it brings God to us.

No ancient literature has a historical work of a religious nature comparable to that produced by Moses. It may be said that the work produced by Moses takes its place as a

remarkable religious achievement. The religious genius of the writers of the Hebrew Scriptures is an accepted fact of history.

Tradition reveals Moses to be the original author of Genesis. He was the primary instrument used by God to convey those truths God willed to reveal to mankind. No doubt God's intent went beyond what would have been the intent of the human authors. The divine intent would be achieved though divine inspiration working within the limitation of his human instrument. Through divine inspiration the author would achieve both the human and divine intents.

Writing was used in the time of Moses--he received a divine command to write down the things received from God. Books were rare and their preservation even rarer. It was a time of hearing; the stories of the patriarchs would have been repeated over and over around the tables during their years of servitude in Egypt, keeping alive their hopes; and around the camp fires during their desert sojourn.

The myths and stories told from one generation after the other were a form of what we may call "oral books," whereby beliefs and customs and rituals were handed down within the communities in which people lived their entire lives. It would not be surprising that these truths assumed different settings as it was narrated over the centuries. When they would later be recorded anew, stories relating the same truth would appear in close proximity.

Psalm 78 reveals something of the importance of oral tradition in the Hebrew communities: *"What we have heard and known, and what our fathers have declared to us, we will not hide from their sons; we will declare to the generation to come the glorious deeds of the Lord and his strength and the wonders that he wrought...what he commanded our fathers they should make known to their sons; so that the next generation to come might know and that they too may rise and declare to their sons"* (Ps 78:3-6). We also know that within ancient religious rituals these revealed truths were kept alive among the people, as we clearly see in the Passover ritual.

What we know of the Prophet Moses comes to us through the holy scriptures and sacred tradition. Moses, born a Jew in the tribe of Levi, was abandoned as a baby by his family in the hope of saving his life. Providentially, the daughter of Pharaoh discovered the child and adopted him as her own, giving him the name Moses, *"for, she said, I drew him out of the water"* (Ex 2:10).

Moses, raised and educated in the royal household, was well acquainted with the gods of Egypt, and would not have been ignorant of the gods of the surrounding nations. Many caravans from these countries came to Egypt to sell their wares. As his natural family was not unknown to him, neither would have been their ancestral God--the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God who revealed himself to Abraham as *El Shaddai!* God the Almighty.

We read this account of Moses in the Acts of the Apostles: *“It was at this time Moses was born. He proved to be an exceedingly handsome child. For the first three months he was reared in his father's house, but afterwards he was abandoned, and Pharaoh's daughter adopted him and brought him up as her own son. Moses was educated in all the lore of Egypt. He was a man powerful in word and deed. When he was forty, he decided to visit his kinsmen, the Israelites”* (Acts 7:20-23).

It was El Shaddai that revealed himself to Moses in the Burning Bush. There, God revealed to Moses and the Hebrew People his name as *Yahweh*. Yahweh would prove to be greater than the gods of Egypt and of the nations. Subsequently, when Moses wrote about Yahweh, he revealed a God totally different from the gods of the nations.

Of the character of Moses we are told: *“Now, Moses himself was by far the meekest man on the face of the earth (Num 12:3). Yahweh says to this meek man, “Come up to me on the mountain...So Moses set out with Joshua, his aide, and went up to the mountain of God...After Moses had gone up, a cloud settled upon Mount Sinai...The cloud covered it for six days, and on the seventh day he called Moses from the midst of the cloud. To the Israelites the glory of the Lord was as a consuming fire on the mountain. But Moses passed into the midst of the cloud as he went up on the mountain; there he stayed forty days and forty nights (Ex 24:12-13, 15-18). When Moses came to the people and related all the words and ordinances of the Lord...(he) then wrote down all the words of the Lord”* (Ex 24:3-4).

Moses, as the author of Genesis, is questioned by certain biblical scholars. However, we hold Moses to be the primary author of the Book of Genesis. We say primary because there is evidence that the final work, as we have it today, indicates the work of more than one hand in its composition. We have the testimony of the New Testament and Jesus Christ's own personal testimony as our authority.

When certain Pharisees questioned Jesus on the question of divorce he said to them, *“What command did Moses give you?”* They replied *‘Moses permitted him to write a bill of divorce and dismiss her.’* To their reply Jesus added: *‘He wrote that command to us because of your stubbornness’*” (Mk 10:3-5). Jesus went on to back up his teaching on marriage by quoting directly from the first chapter in Genesis. When the Sadducees asked Jesus about the resurrection of the dead, Jesus quotes to them from Exodus: *“As to the raising of the dead, have you not read in the Book of Moses, in the passage about the burning bush, how God told him, ‘I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob?’ He is the God of the living not the dead. You are very much mistaken”* (Mk 12:26-27).

On another occasion Jesus said to the Jews, *“If you really believed Moses and all the prophets, you would believe in me, because he wrote about me”* (Jn 5:46). When Jesus encountered the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, we read: *“Beginning, then, with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted for them every passage from Scripture that referred to him”* (Lk 24:27). We read this confirmation from Saint John: *“For while the law was given through Moses, this enduring love came through Jesus Christ”* (Jn 1:17).

What God revealed to Moses in that Divine School of Sinai he shares with us in Genesis, and in the rest of the Torah. With human language, He weaves a tapestry of universal proportions, depicting the relationship between God the Creator with his creation. Moses shares to the best of his ability these ineffable mystical experiences. Within these writings, the Divine Author reveals the origin of the human race and the fundamental relationship existing between Creator and His Creation. We believe that what Moses did record was done under the gift of divine inspiration, and actually revealed the religious truths God willed to reveal for the salvation of mankind.

Moses desired to trace back through history the origin of the Chosen People, to record the historical origins of the People who would one day become the Chosen People of Yahweh. Moses narrates how the family of Jacob came to be the progenitors of the one race that God chose out of all the nations of the earth as his own. God permits Moses to tell his story while at the same time writing His story of His relationship with creation itself. Jesus Christ's reference to Genesis implies its universal application.

It is not yet possible to discriminate sharply between the elements that are strictly historical and others that are symbolic or necessary to complete the story being told. The Hebrew People knew that their election by God as his Chosen People was no mere accident in time, but part of God's plan from the beginning of the world. This is the lesson that lies behind the genealogies narrated in Genesis.

The Church teaches that, although the narratives in Genesis may not contain history in the modern sense of the word, they do contain history in that they relate, in simple and figurative language, the fundamental truths underlying the divine scheme of salvation, as well as a popular description of the origins of the human race and of the Chosen People. We may say that Moses adopted a style of writing recognizable as such by his own people, by which he clothed important religious truths in a concrete graphic narrative. It was the means needed at the time to impress these truths in their minds and hearts and preserve them in their memory.

We enter the Garden of Genesis seeking to understand these primary truths as revealed by Moses, and from the light thrown upon them by subsequent divine revelations. Genesis has fascinated the human mind and fired human imagination over the centuries. Subsequent revelation has added light to these mysteries, as well as the findings of science, and the contemplation of wide-open and holy hearts.

There in Genesis we find our beginnings as human beings. In a picturesque language, it teaches us that it is an essential part of our human nature to communicate and be united to God. Separated from God, mankind can never be completely itself. Genesis reveals that a separation occurred in the essential relationship of God with mankind, which has deliberately and willfully rejected the authority of God over itself.

The "Absence" that resulted from this separation would perpetually haunt the human heart, turning it into a restless "street-walker with a hungry heart," seeking its lost love. Those words from Genesis--"*Adam, where are you?*"--sound in the human heart. Paul once



wrote: *"God's call is irrevocable" (Rom 11:29)*. Reflecting upon the human condition, St. Augustine observes: "Our hearts are made for you, and they will not rest until they rest in you!"

Mankind's search for union with God is a universal experience. No tribe on earth has been discovered that did not possess an awareness of the unseen Divine Reality, and did not desire and will some kind of union with the unseen Power. On the other hand, mankind has simultaneously experienced a sense of sin and alienation from the Divine that produces fear of union with God. When a certain man, during a public debate, spoke of the loss of his original innocence, the English writer G. K. Chesterton dryly remarked, "The only thing you know about original innocence is that you never had it!" Truly that expresses the universal experience.

In the dramatic presentation of Genesis, we can get lost in the narration, and fail to realize that Genesis is the preface and preparation for what follows in the rest of the Pentateuch. Here is the foundation for what occurs on Mount Sinai. That Genesis traces the history of the Chosen People back to our first parents is obvious, but that herein lays the foundation of Jewish theology and, along with it, their "divine right" to the land of Canaan, might remain unnoticed.

The narrative is the vehicle chosen by Moses to convey religious truth. In the narration of Genesis, Moses demonstrates the relationship of God to creation, to the human race in general, and to the people of Israel in particular. Therefore, it should be clear why Genesis is the foundation of Jewish theology. To dismiss these narratives in the light of our secular knowledge would be crass ignorance on our part. We would fail to understand the thought-world of the ancient Near East, and the literary methods of the time. Be mindful, these "stories" have occupied some of the sharpest minds in human history. To lightly dismiss them could leave us open to the application of Jesus' words, *"Do not throw your pearls before swine!"*

There is one singular and common word vitally important to understanding the message of Genesis, a word so common to us that it may be easily overlooked. However, we praise it every time we sing our National Anthem. This simple, common word is "land." A people without land is a no-people, a tribe of nomads blown on the winds of need from one watering hole to the other, less important on the world's stage than a wave washed upon sands of a shore--the history of homeless.

The three essentials of the Creation Story are God, Man, and Land. The theme of Chapter One through verse twenty-five of Chapter Two is a hymn of praise of God's benevolence--the gift of land. God prepares the land for man by separating it from water, and by furnishing it with resources. He gives the land and its resources as a blessing to be safeguarded through obedience. A distant echo of this theme is heard in a hymn of Moses in Exodus, *"And you brought them in and planted them on the mountain of your inheritance--the place where you made your seat, O Lord, the sanctuary, O Lord, which your hands established" (Ex 15:17)*.

Genesis introduces God's Story along with that of the Hebrews. In Genesis, we encounter God the Almighty, creator of heaven and earth, plus all that is within them. Before we begin our pilgrimage through Genesis, let us recall these words of Yahweh, "*My ways are not your ways*" (Is 55:8). As the star in the furthestmost galaxy of the universe distances itself from a grain of sand at the bottom the sea, so also are God's ways from the ways of man. Our thoughts our judgments, our desires, our feelings, our wants are not the thoughts, judgments, desires, feelings of God. Nevertheless, we insist of projecting them onto God, making God in our own image and likeness, ending in the idolatry of self. Mark Twain said it well, "God made us in his image and likeness and we returned the favor."

Out of the millions of galaxies in the universe we ask, what is planet earth? Is it more than a grain of sand? Amidst the myriads of creatures, what is man? If the Creator of the universe had not said of Himself, "*My eye is upon the sparrow,*" we would have known nothing about the universe, the earth, the human person, and our relationship with the created universe, with one another, with our purpose and destiny. We would have eternally remained in darkness and in the shadow of death. However, there is Light, and Light shines in the darkness, revealing itself as Compassionate Love.

Have not those words heard at the Burning Bush in the desert of Sinai had universal application? "*I have witnessed the affliction of my people and have heard their cry...I know well what they suffer...I have come down to lead them out of that land [of darkness--the shadow of death] into a good and spacious land*" (Ex 3:7-8).

#### METHODS OF INTERPRETING SCRIPTURE

None of the original works of scripture survived; the works possessed today are editions or redactors of the earlier works. These editions have given evidence of more than one hand at work. The Book of Genesis, as possessed today, is a spiritual literary work that presents different versions of the same subjects, suggesting different schools of thought as their origins. However, they have been artfully blended into our present editions that present, as commonly believed, a harmonious rendition of the author's original intent.

It is not our intent to study Genesis from the view of biblical criticism with its methods of critical analysis of text, although we are aware of their valuable contribution to our understanding of scriptural texts. Rather, the light that work gives us will be background for our present study.

Both Hebrew and Christian students inherit a rich background in their studies of the scriptures. The early Fathers of the Church maintained that the Scriptures reveal historical events of salvation, and deep theological and cosmological truths. In the third century, Origen of Alexandria maintained there were the literal, the moral, and the spiritual senses of the scriptures. There was the Antioch School that stressed the fundamental importance of the literal and historical sense of the text. There was the Alexandria School that stressed the higher sense of the text to be found through the allegorical method. Both Saints Ambrose and Augustine were greatly influenced by the allegorical method of interpreting the scriptures.

**Saint Cassian added to the literal, moral, and allegorical sense a fourth sense of understanding the scriptures, called the eschatological sense. Cassian teaches that the literal sense has to do with God's redemptive activity, the moral sense with ethical behavior, the allegorical sense with articles of faith, and the eschatological (anagogical) sense with our eternal destiny.**

**Cassian saw, in the allegorical method of interpreting the text of the scriptures, an escape from a study of text that was fixed and frozen in time to an inexhaustible method of studying scripture. The Cassian method of teaching scripture found acceptance by Saint Benedict, the founder of Western monasticism, which led to a wide and long-reaching influence through the middle Ages.**

**As Christians, we have a wide range of methods for the interpretation of scriptural text. Probably we will be more in the Antiochan School of the literal and historical sense, but we will not close the door to the school that housed such men as Ambrose and Augustine.**

## INTRODUCTION TO GENESIS

### STUDY QUESTIONS

(Please read Introduction to Genesis)

1. What do you see as the importance of supernatural faith for a proper study of Sacred Scriptures?
2. How would you explain the difference between the inspiration of the Scriptures and divine revelation in them?
3. What do you understand the concept "to know God" meant to the ancient Hebrew People?
4. What does "experience is the best teacher" mean to you?
5. How did the ancient Hebrew People come to understand the Person of God?
6. In the light of 2Thes 2:15, what does this saying mean to you: "If you drink from every well, sooner or later you will be poisoned?"
7. The Church gives five principles for understanding the scriptures; what do they teach you?
8. What do the ancient pagan myths teach us about Genesis?
9. What does Rm 1:19 teach you about the presence of God in the world?
10. What does Rm 2:14ff. teach you about the presence of God in the human person?
11. What does Acts 14:15-19 teach you about God's relationship with the pagan people?
12. What does Acts 17:23-24 teach you about the presence of God within the human person?
13. What do you understand by the saying both God and Man are the authors of Sacred Scriptures?
14. How do these two sources blend together in the Scriptures?
15. What does Rev. John McKenzie teach about being a good student of the Hebrew Bible?
16. What does Ps 78:3-7 teach you about the importance of witnessing to the Scriptures to others in your life?
17. As Christians why do we accept Moses as the original author of Genesis?
18. What do you see as relationship between Genesis and the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in Exodus?
19. What do you see as the importance of the Sacred Scriptures in our world today?
20. What do you understand by these three different means of interpreting the Scripture: the literal, the moral and the allegorical methods?

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**THE FIRST CHAPTER**  
**INTRODUCTION**

Genesis presents picturesque images woven into a concise story relating fundamental religious truths through the medium of a story. It is a poetical presentation, but written in prose, not poetry. Genesis presents its story in subtle simplicity. What that means will become clear as the story of Genesis unfolds.

In the light of divine revelation, Moses sees (envisions) the world that has been. In the world that has been, Moses caught a vision of a world yet to come. Between what had been and what would come to be stands the Hebrew People and their world; they are destined by God to be intermediaries between the lost world of Eden and the creation of a new heaven and a new earth. Moses beheld the divine plan of salvation and the indispensable role assigned to the Hebrew People by God. In the light of this vision, Moses writes Genesis.

As the divine inspired agent of Yahweh, Moses reveals that the present state of mankind is not of the primeval world planned by God. Within a picturesque presentation of the Garden of Eden and its inhabitants--dwelling under the blessing of God's care and concern--Moses unfolds God's original will for creation. He relates the sad story of sin that brings an end to the Garden of Eden.

Moses, as "through a mirror darkly," saw the creation of a new heaven and earth. God, rising from His rest, would bring about the redemption of his lost world. It would be arduous, because God willed to accomplish the redemption through the willing instrumentality of man and woman. God initiated the divine plan with his call to Abraham, and with the divine promise of blessing for all nations through his seed. The second part of the Divine Plan would unfold at Mount Sinai, with God's Covenant with the descendants of Abraham.

The Book of Genesis opens with the theme of glory--Glory to the Creator of Heaven and Earth! The book records the eternal love of God that materialized in time with the creation of the Universe. *"God's eternal power and divinity have become visible, recognized through the things he made" (Rm 1:20).*

Genesis is composed of five major sections. The primeval story of creation appears in Chapter One through Chapter Two. The second section, beginning with Chapter Three, is composed of a series of short stories, loosely strung together with connecting genealogies dealing with the Fall of Man, Cain and Abel, Noah and the Flood, the first Covenant of God with mankind, the nations descending from Noah, and the Tower of Babel, bringing us down to the birth of Abram. The third section begins with the call of Abram in Chapter 12 and ending with his death in Chapter 25, verse ten. The fourth section begins with the story of Isaac, followed by Jacob and Esau, ending in Chapter 36. The final section tells of Joseph, ending with his death in Chapter 50.

The first eleven chapters establish a connection between God and the entire universe. They depict the formation of a relationship between the creator and all the families of the earth. This relationship will remain as the crucial background to the story of Israel. (R. E. Friedman)

The created universe, both in the minute and the magnificent, reveals the order and design of the Divine Mind--a creation of harmony and beauty, one in peace with itself, knowing all is well, all is very well, all is Shalom. All creation is the external glorification of God, as it reveals something of God's nature. We have an ancient measure for judging the nature of a living thing--"*By their fruits you will know them*" (Mat 7:16). In a word, if we experience God's activity in creation, what does the experience tell us?

In the heavenly realm, where we hear no tick of the earthly clock, a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day. Creation unfolded on heavenly time. However, Moses records earth's march into creation according to his measure, where a basic period of time is a day and a night. In eternal silence, the living Spirit of God moves over the primal created elements, impregnating them with a life-giving force: birthing stars, suns, moons, planets, and earth. Moses writes, "*In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters*" (Gen 1:1).

Concerning the opening lines of Genesis, we receive this sage advice: "Nothing is here by chance, everything must be considered carefully, deliberately, and precisely. Genesis opens with seven words: a clear, concise statement. Simplicity belies the depth and its content. These seven words are fundamental for all that follows in the Bible."

The seven-word sentence opening the Book of Genesis identifies the Creator and explains the origin of the world. "*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*" (Gen 1:1). These seven words identify the Lord God as the sole creator of the universe--God is the supreme authority in the universe! Moses, with a few strokes of his quill sends the pantheon of pagan gods into oblivion. The only God that is, ever was, ever will be is *Adonai Yahweh!*

The pagan deities were known through their function in nature. The sun god, Shamash, *was* the sun. If you wanted to know Shamash, you contemplated the sun. But the God of the Old Testament was different--as Creator of the universe and all that is in it, God stands outside of all creation, and is not identified with any created element of nature.

St. Paul teaches us, "*Since the creation of the world, invisible realities, God's eternal power and divinity, have become visible, recognized through the things he has made*" (Rom 1:20). Paul insists: the existence of God is knowable and men are obliged to glorify God and give thanks to Him. The Hebrew Scriptures maintain that the Lord is a "hidden God." The essence/person of God is not known through created things, but by His divine acts in history, by what God does and says.

The ancient myths of the pagan world are conveyers of beliefs buried deep within the consciousness of mankind regarding the existence of God and the relationship of the Divine with creation. It should not be surprising if Moses adapted the framework of these stories to present divine revelation. Placing these myths next to the revelations found in Genesis, the frame may be the same but the substance of the pictures presented could not be further apart.

Those seven inaugural words of Genesis tie together what came to be in the past and what will come to be in the future with the creative power of God. In the first story of creation, God is identified as *Elohim*. In the second account of creation, in Chapter Two, God is called *Yahweh Elohim* (Lord God). This will identify Elohim as the God who calls Abraham, and later delivers the Hebrews from slavery to the Egyptians. Elohim alone is eternal--all else owes its existence to him. We read in Psalm 96:3-8:

*Tell his glory among the nations;  
among all peoples, his wondrous deeds.  
For great is the Lord and highly to be praised;  
awesome is he, beyond all gods.  
For all the gods of the nations are things of naught,  
but the Lord made the heavens.  
Splendor and glory go before him;  
praise and grandeur are in his sanctuary.  
Give to the Lord, you families of nations,  
give to the Lord glory and praise;  
give to the Lord the glory due his name!*

Herein echoes Jeremiah's message to the Nations: "*Hear then this, these gods who did not make heaven and earth will perish from the earth and from under the sun*" (Jer 10:11).

The Hebrew text begins with the word *Bereshit*. A Jewish-English translations begins, "*When God began to create heaven and earth.*" The heart of the word *bereshit* is *re sit*, which in biblical Hebrew marks a starting point of a specific duration, as "in the beginning of the year" (*re sit hassanab*). The use of *re sit* is often used in

comparison with *ah sit* the end. By opening Genesis with the use of *re sit*, our author leaves the door open to an ending of what now begins, i.e., as it was in the beginning so will it be in the end times. We read these words of the Lord in Isaiah, “Behold, I will create a new heaven and new earth” (Is 65:17). We read in Revelation, “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21:1).

A Jewish/English translations begins, “When God began to create heaven and earth--the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water--God said, ‘Let there be light’ and there was light” (Gen 1:1-3). We are reminded by Hebrew scholars that

a tiny point of grammar makes a difference for theology. In the Hebrew of this verse, the noun comes before the verb. This is now known to be the way of conveying the past perfect in Biblical Hebrew. This point of grammar means that this verse does not mean the earth was shapeless and formless, but rather that the earth *had been* shapeless and formless--that is, it had already existed in this shapeless condition prior to the creation. Creation of matter in the Torah is not *creatio ex nihilo*--out of nothingness. (Richard Elliott Friedman, *Commentary on the Torah*)

It is pointed out to us that “the Torah is not claiming to be telling events from the beginning of time.”

When we consider the concrete thought-pattern of the ancient Hebrew mind, “creation out of nothingness” would be inconceivable for them. In their experience the clay is there, and the Potter brings form, design and beauty out of the mess of clay. In the creation story, God demonstrates his supreme power over the evil powers of chaos.

Our concept of the world--our picture of the universe before the active presence of God brings it into being--is “nothingness.” The Christian Church's teaching on creation is that God brought the universe into being *ex nihilo*. Such an idea is one hardly conceivable to the human mind, but it does not have to be so difficult because we are not dealing with human experience, but with the activity of God. We earthly beings have only our sense experiences to guide our formation of an idea. Aristotle teaches, “nothing is in the mind that is not first in the senses.” As human beings, we experience things as coming into being from some pre-existing substance. However, as Christians, we believe that truths beyond human reason can be revealed to us by God.

For the ancient Hebrew mind, the concept of existence before “the beginning” was not “nothingness,” but something far worse. In that deep darkness beneath the surface churned a universe of chaos, lacking order and design, without anything of goodness and beauty such as dry land, trees, birds, animals and man.



What Moses reveals to his people in Genesis is God, who brings forth light, life and goodness out of evil. He reassures his people that *Elohim* is greater than the existing powers of evil. What Moses categorically states in Genesis is that the God of the Hebrews is not the cause of evil in the world. *Elohim* is the great destroyer of evil. He is the source of all goodness, all order and design, all beauty.

Interestingly, pagan mythology presents a somewhat similar idea. In Babylonian mythology, the god Marduk created the universe out of the slain goddess Tiamat, his mother. We have here creation that is from a god, out of a goddess. The universe itself is godly.

We believe as Christians that God created the world out of nothingness. We maintain that if nothingness is its beginning, then nothingness can be its ending. From nothing it came, and to nothing it can return. Genesis applies the same logic to man, "*from dirt you are and to dirt you will return*" (Gen 3:19c).

We may add here, since the Hebrews had no sense or evidence of life after death, there was very little belief among them of survival after death. However, because of God's personal love for them, they believed in the resurrection of the dead body to eternal life. St. Martha expressed this concept when she said to Jesus, "*I know that my brother will rise again on the last day*" (Jn 11:24).

Our author speaks of the creation of "heaven and earth." The same expression appeared both in Isaiah and Revelation, as quoted above (see Gen 1:1-3). This is a literary form, called a "merism," in which two concepts are united to express the beginning and the end and all that is between--in other words, "a totality," i.e. spirit and flesh, saint and sinner, rich and poor, young and old, good and bad. Saying God created "heaven and earth" expresses the totality of creation--God created all things!

We read in our English translations of Genesis that in the beginning "*the earth was a formless wasteland.*" Our Hebrew translations reads, "*the earth being unformed and void.*". This ancient interpretation clearly expresses the concept that the earth began as an uninhabitable land and, through divine action, the earth became a habitable place for human beings.

The true meaning the author gives to the text lies in two Hebrew words *tohu* and *wabohu*--often translated as "formless" and "empty." According to the Jewish interpretation, this verse describes the land before God prepared it for mankind. The Hebrew words suggest the land was "formless and empty" because darkness and water covered the land. The land was not a suitable place for man to inhabit. Isaiah uses the word *tohu*, signifying empty, when he writes, "*God did not create the land to be empty [tohu] but formed it to be inhabited*" (Is 45:18c). In Deuteronomy, *tohu* is used to describe a desert, "*He found them in the wilderness, a wasteland [tohu] of a howling desert*" (Deut 32:10). The prophet will later proclaim that the land has become again *tohu*, uninhabitable, and the people are sent into exile.

In the opening verses of Genesis the land, being *tohu* and *wabohu*--formless and empty, is seen as an evil place before God's gracious deed made it *tob*, "good."

Our English translation comes from the Greek, in which *tohu* is translated *aoratos*, meaning "unseen," and *wabohu* as *akataskeuasto*, meaning "unformed." Both of these words played an important part in Grecian cosmology at the time of the translation of the Septuagint. The choice of these words may have been an attempt of the translators to harmonize the biblical account with views of their day. Translations of these Greek words often created an image of earth and the universe as a mass of cooling gases, whirling aimlessly through space in the first stages of creation.

Regardless of how much in keeping these ideas may be with our modern physical science books, the proper interpretation of the Semitic words in Genesis give no support to such a concept. We find *tohu* and *wabohu* adequately paraphrased in these words, "desolate, without human beings or beast, void of all cultivation of plants and trees."

As mentioned earlier, our human authors of the Scriptures may have had their own conscious program to project in their sacred writings, while at the same time, God, who is all powerful, uses this same material to express truths in the divine mind that are completely hidden from the human author. With this in mind, let us review what others believe to be Moses' intent in writing Genesis.

Moses desires to make a connection between the original plan of God and the Covenant of Sinai. The blessing lost by man's disobedience, God intends to restore through Abraham and his descendants, who will become the Chosen People. As land is necessary for a people to be an ordered society--to be a nation among other nations--God, who is free to do what he wills with what is his, gives the land of Canaan to the Hebrew People. We see this right confirmed in Jeremiah, "*Thus says the Lord: It was I who made the earth, and man and beast on the face of the earth, by my great power, with my outstretched arm, and I can give them to whomever I think fit*" (Jer 27:4-5).

We noted in the Hebrew-English translation that the wind sweeping over the abyss is the *Ruah* of God--the Spirit of God. This has been subjected to diverse interpretation. Does the phrase belong to the second clause that described the state of uninhabitable land, and is translated as a "mighty wind," or does it belong to verse 3, which describes the work of creation by the Spirit of God--*Ruah Elohim*. The argument for the spirit of God rather than the sweeping wind rests upon the use of the word *merahepet*, which implies "hovering." *Merahepet* is not a word suitable to express the action of wind but more the action of a humming bird hovering over a blossom. In Deuteronomy we read, "*as the eagle incites its nestlings forth by hovering [meraphepet] over its brood*" (Deut 32:11). This interpretation says to Israel: God performed his work by means of the Spirit of God, so Israel was to do its work by means of the Spirit of God.

We agree with the Hebrew-English translation, “*And the spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters and God said: ‘Let there be Light!’*” We see this as a bold proclamation that announces the presence of the Person of God before the creation of the universe. One Hebrew scholar maintains that in “*Let there be Light!*” we have the one example in Genesis of *creatio ex nihilo*--creation from nothingness.

The scripture concept best expressing God is “*Light!*” Light is the power that causes things to be, to live. The nature of light is beyond comprehension. We cannot determine its beginning or its ending, nor can we determine its power. It appears infinite and limitless from our view. We identify the concept of God with light. Not without reason did ancient man worship the sun in the sky as god.

The expression “*God created [bara]*” appears forty-six times in the Hebrew Scriptures. God is always the direct subject of the creative action. There appears to be no intermediary element. Creation flows completely from the power of God. When God creates, order comes into existence. Creation stands in opposition to chaos. That God created all existing things negates the existence of chaos before creation. If chaos subsequently came into existence, it would have to be a disordering of creation itself.

When we read “*God said,*” the creative breath of God becomes the Word of God. It is a “living” word. The Lord says to Isaiah, “*The word that issues from my mouth: it does not come back to me unfulfilled*” (Is 55:11). We read in Psalm 33:6, “*By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, by the breath of His mouth all these hosts.*” The author of Hebrews describes the Word of God thus, “*Indeed God’s Word is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates and divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the reflections and thoughts of the heart*” (Heb 4:12). The Word of God is infinitely effective--It is the Person of God. The Word of God is effective because it is the Word of God. Creation is not an emanation of God. Creation exists distinct from God. It exists because God willed it.

Scholars observed that the creative power of words underlies both Mesopotamian religious beliefs and the Egyptian theology of Memphis. An ingrained belief existed in the Near East that all creation came from God and God preserved it in existence.

John J. Scullian has described it thus:

Creation has been summed up in three words: Word-Formula-Event! “*God [the Word] said [the Formula] ‘Let there be light’ and [the event] light was made.*” God speaks a word and an event immediately occurs precisely in keeping with what is said. An inner connection exists between God’s word and the event. “*And God saw that it was good*” means that the ordered world with its inhabitants, human and animal, was just as it should be as it came from the word of God. (John J. Scullian, *Anchor Bible*).

Moses makes clear that the blessing of salvation to come to the earth through Israel rests upon their obedience to the will of Yahweh. A central point of the Pentateuch is God's rule among his people. We may say that Genesis becomes a distant light shining upon the Covenant of Sinai.

### FIRST DAY OF CREATION

Let us begin with the words from the Cantic of Daniel, in which he gloriously sings of the first nineteen verses of Genesis:

*You heavens bless the Lord.  
All you waters above the heavens bless the Lord.  
Sun and moon bless the Lord.  
Stars of heaven, bless the Lord.  
Every shower and dew, bless the Lord.  
All you winds, bless the Lord.  
Fire and heat, bless the Lord.  
Cold and chill, bless the Lord.  
Dew and rain, bless the Lord.  
Frost and chill, bless the Lord.  
Ice and snow, bless the Lord.  
Nights and days, bless the Lord.  
Light and darkness, bless the Lord.  
Lightning and clouds, bless the Lord. (Dan 3:38-51)*

When Daniel writes “*bless,*” it commands nature to glorify its Creator.

The Psalmist sings, “*O Lord, before the mountains were born or the earth brought forth, you are God, without beginning or end*” (Ps 90:2).

We read in Sirach: “*At God's word were all his works brought into being; They do His will as he has ordained for them. As the rising of the sun is clear to all, so the glory of the Lord fills all his works*” (Sir 42:15-16).

The Jewish medieval theologian, Saadia ben Joseph (882-942), tells us “God's creation was an act of pure grace, there could be no question of God's shortchanging mortals. God gave being where none was needed, then enabled all creatures to pursue their own good within an environment that was so constituted to make that possible. God is just!”

At this point, let us present a Christian Revelation that powerfully and brilliantly illuminates the Lord of Creation. In Christian Revelation we have a “beginning,” carrying our minds to a place before there was a tick of time on earth. We read in the Prologue to the Gospel of John, “*In the beginning was the Word; and the Word was in God's presence, and the Word was God. He was present to God in the beginning. Through him all things came into being, and apart from him nothing came to be. Whatever came to be in*

*him, found life” (Jn 1:1-3).* This revelation reveals that the Word of God, called in the Greek, *Logos*, is the divine means through whom the universe came into existence.

There existed among the Greek scholars a belief that God was so completely removed from the universe, that for the material world to come into being, the existence of an agent of God was necessary, a spiritual being far superior to any material creature, who acted as the intermediary between God and Creation. They identified this being as the *Logos* who created the Universe and holds it in existence.

Let us say at this point that when we read “*God said, ‘Let there be Light,’*” God announces the presence of the *Logos*, the Light through whom the universe is created. The *Logos* is the life-giving Light of creation.

Let us begin by hearing the creation story from the stand-point of a Hebrew child. That is, if we are not too old to play “make believe” again, as we did as children. Jesus reminds us, “*Unless you become as little children, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven.*” It will be good practice for us to do so. So let us go to the synagogue school as Hebrew children to hear the story of Genesis for the first time.

The Glory of God unfolds as Rabbi Jacob unrolls the Creation Scroll: “*When God began to create heaven and earth--the earth being unformed and void, with darkness over the surface of the deep and a wind from God sweeping over the water--God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light ‘Day,’ and the darkness He called ‘Night.’ And there was evening and there was morning, the first day*” (Gen. 1:5).

Rabbi Jacob points out that in certain ancient scrolls there is no mention of seven days of creation. “Perhaps,” he said, “later scribes added the seven days for memory purposes--to maintain an orderly presentation of events.” He observes that if that was the way in the original text, it eliminates the old scientific problem of creation being created in “seven days.”

In our Hebrew text, our teacher explains that we are not dealing here with the beginning of space and time on earth, but the time God created the heavens and earth out of that preexisting vast, dark mass of watery substance--a formless wasteland of darkness. The Spirit of God hovers over the disorder and begins to create out of the disorder, because the Spirit of God is greater than all the forces that create disorder in the universe.

Our rabbi points out that this is not a denial of creation out of nothingness; Genesis does not deal with that moment in creation, but rather in a period when created matter already existed.

“What is God's first act in creation?” he asks us. “Note,” he says, “the first act of creation is to call forth ‘Light.’” “*God said, ‘Let there be light,’ and there was light*” (Gen 1:3). Light is the first thing called “good/godly.” Light comes forth from God. The

presence of light itself may well symbolize the active presence of God within creation.

The presence of this light makes a difference. God, through the power of light, will make a difference--*Creation is the making of distinctions*. Light enters into the preexisting darkness and causes a separation from darkness. They become distinct, one from another. God sees that both day and night have their place, “*And God called the light ‘day’ and called the darkness ‘night’*” (Gen 1:3). This light, called day, by coming into existence removed the darkness.

Our teacher is careful to point out that “light” is not to be understood to derive from the sun. The light that surrounds us in the daytime is an independent creation of God. The light of day does not speak to us of the sun, but of God's presence in the world.

We find these beautiful prophetic words of Zechariah in the Benedictus Song: “*In the tender compassion of our God the dawn from on high [Anatole] shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death and guide our feet into the way of peace*” (Lk 1:78-79). The Greek word for the “dawning light” is *anatole*. Anatole is another name for the Word--the Light of the World.

Days and nights are the Creator's division of time for activity and time for rest, the time to create and the time to recreate--recharge our batteries--for the work of the coming day.

On the first day of creation, the first tick of time sounds. Before days and nights, there was only timelessness. The first day concludes its account with the cardinal number "One". It is the Number One Day! It is the extraordinary Day of Creation, with the appearance of "the Light", the Source from which everything that will come into being. All other days will be spoken of as "the second day," the third day etc.

It is now the second day and “*God said, ‘Let there be a dome in the midst of the water, to separate one body of water from the other.’ And so it happened. God made the dome and it separated the water above the dome from the water below it God called the dome ‘the Sky.’ And there was evening and there was morning, a second day*” (Gen. 1:6-8).

Our teacher points out that we will have a better understanding of this concept of “dome” or “firmament” if we understand that the Hebrew word itself expresses the activity of the goldsmith hammering gold leaf to tissue thin. The firmament is a dome made of some type of transparent material holding the heavenly waters in storage for those rainy days to come. Both the firmament and space are called the “sky”.

As the story of Genesis unfolds, it has been noticed that of the second day of creation there is no divine confirmation that it is “good”. This has, indeed, been a bit of concern to students and scholars--Does this harbor some evil omen for the future? Does it have

something to do with the nature of water itself? Our teacher says that the simplest solution is that the scribe of our Masoretic Text made an omission when his eye jumped from the first two letters of this line to the beginning of the next line: they both begin with the same first two letters.

As the second day ends, we see water everywhere--a veritable water world, not one dry spot upon which to stand. Now it is the third day and the Lord deals with that problem. What we couldn't see, we couldn't know--there was land under the water. God creates an empty basin of vast length and deepest depth, a place for water. When the water pours into its new home, the dry land appears. Our teacher reads us this description: *"God said, 'Let the water below the sky be gathered into one area, that the dry land may appear.' And it was so. God called the dry land Earth, and the gathering of waters He called Seas. God is pleased and calls the land 'earth' and the great basin of water he called the 'seas'" (Gen1:9-10).*

At this point our attention is called to a little fact we might have overlooked--the author of Genesis avoids using the word "sea" and says instead, "seas." Why? Because, Rabbi Jacob says, the Hebrew word of sea is *tinnet* and "Tinnet" is the name of the pagan goddess of the sea. Moses uses the plural to avoid any reference to the pagan goddess.

We are invited now to take a field trip. It is a clear day, so the teacher takes us down to the sea shore. "Look up into the sky," he tells us. "What do you see? You see blue; you see the blue waters above the sky. Now look out to the horizon as far as you can see. What do you see? Blue--you see it again." The teacher has demonstrated to us that here on earth we are completely surrounded by water.

On the third day our earthly home comes into existence. Now we have dry land on which to stand, but as it stands now, survival for man would be impossible. Looking upon the vast barren earth, God creates tiny entities of atomic potency and calls them "seed." The Divine Gardner scatters these fertile seeds across the earth; seed and earth become one. Their Gardner commands them, *"Be Fruitful!"* And it happens--the earth springs forth with every kind of seed-bearing plant and every kind of fruit tree, bearing seed within its fruit. It was a pleasing sight to behold. How good it was. And our teacher reminds us how good our Creator is. "The fact that plants not only produce but also propagate offspring like themselves is fundamental to our life, which needed an explicit creative utterance by God."

And so he reads from the scroll: *"And God said, 'Let the earth sprout vegetation: seed-bearing plants, fruit trees of every kind on earth that bear fruit with seeds in it.' And it was so. The earth brought forth vegetation; seed-bearing plants of every kind, and trees of every kind bearing seed in it. And God saw that this was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a third day" (Gen 1:11-13).*

Our teacher reminds us that with the command, *"Let the earth bring forth,"* the Lord calls his creatures to participate actively in the process of creation. It is an invitation

to enrich the earth as its “co-creator.” The third day ends with “*God saw how good it was*” (Gen 1:12).

As the earth below flourished with verdant life, the vast grey dome above remained empty. Did God reserve this vast empty canvas for some masterful strokes of divine genius? Yes indeed he did! A mighty glorification of God will unfold and all of it will be light. God made a great light to govern the day--a creation of such dazzling beauty that the blind of faith called it a “god.” Then God made an evening light--a lamp cool and serene--the night's own light. Across the darken canvas of the skies, the Lord, with extravagant generosity, scatters millions of astral fireflies as his finishing touch for lighting the night. All is good, and good is beautiful.

Our teacher points out to us that the light of night and day does not depend upon the sun, but upon the special creation of God. The sun, moon, and stars are to be understood as sources of light, like a lamp or torch--but stronger. They are also markers for time: days, seasons, years. The pagans worshipped all these celestial planets as gods. Our author deliberately negates their importance by reducing them to substances created by the Lord.

Let us listen to Moses' words as he recounts this glorious fourth day of Creation:

*God said, “Let there be light in the expanse of the sky to separate day from night; they shall serve as signs for the set time--the days and the years; and they serve as lights in the expanse in the sky to shine upon the earth.” And it was so. God made the two great lights, the greater light to dominate the day and the lesser light to dominate the night and the stars. And God set them in the expanse of the sky to shine upon the earth, to dominate the day and the night, and to separate light from darkness. And God saw that this was good. And there was evening and there was morning, a fourth day (Gen 1:14-19).*

Our teacher asked, “Did you note that the Lord speaks of the greater and lesser lights? It is obvious they are the sun and moon, but our author will not mention them by name, as the two are names of a pagan god and goddess.”

What yet needed to be? Our teacher points to the void between the sky and the land and the emptiness of the sea, and how God deals with the problem on one of the busiest days of creation:

*“God said, ‘Let the waters bring forth swarms of living creatures, and birds that fly above the earth across the expanse of the sky’--and then God adds, perhaps with a sense of merriment—‘great sea monsters, and all the living creatures of every kind that creep, which the waters brought forth in swarms in the sea.’” And in that lonely sky winged creatures found their place. “God said: ‘Let birds fly beneath the dome of the sky’ and they flew through the sky, every kind of winged creature. So pleased and satisfied was God with the sea and sky, God said to the creatures of the sea ‘Be*



*fertile, multiply and fill the waters of the sea!’ To the birds he said: ‘Let the birds multiply on the earth.’ And there was evening and there was morning, a fifth day” (Gen 1:20-23).*

We cannot let that business of “sea serpents” pass us by. This subject is somewhat of a mystery, Rabbi Jacob tells us. He sees this mention of the monsters of the deep as a subtle refutation of pagan beliefs. Under those black waters, pagan myths found the chaotic existence of great sea monsters from which all creation subsequently came into being. Belief in the existence of these monsters existed, not only in pagan myths, but received honorary mention in the sacred scriptures.

The “monsters” are generally understood to refer to some giant serpent-like creature, formed at creation and later doomed to be destroyed. Isaiah writes of Rahab and Leviathan, “*O arm of the Lord was it not you who crushed Rahab, you who pierced the dragon?*” (Is 59:9b). Again Isaiah tells us, “*On that day, the Lord will punish with his sword that is cruel, great, and strong, Leviathan, the fleeing serpent, Leviathan the coiled serpent; he will slay the dragon that is in the sea*” (Is 27:1). We read in Psalm 74:1, “*You stirred up the sea by your might--you crushed the heads of Leviathan and made him food for the dolphins.*” “*You have crushed Rahab with a mortal blow*” (Ps 89:10).

We read in the Book of Revelation: “*But woe to you earth and sea, for the devil/dragon has come down upon you. His fury knows no limit, he knows his time is short*” (Rev 12:12).

We have now come to the sixth day of creation; we have fish in our sea, birds in the air, plants and trees covering the earth. Creation is, indeed, a glorious symphony in praise of its Creator, yet--in the eyes of the Composer—it is a work still in process. The Creator gives a command to the earth. “*Let the earth bring forth every kind of living creature: cattle, creeping things, and wild beasts of every kind.*’ And it was so. And God saw that this was good. God made wild beasts of every kind, and all kinds of creeping things on earth. And God saw that this was good” (Gen 1:24-25). Let us note that the earth did as it was told.

(We were encouraged earlier in our study to let nothing go unnoticed in Genesis. A note has sounded that may carry a deeper meaning than we may have observed. Let us keep in mind the phrase “*let the earth bring forth*” for future reference.)

Mother earth comes forth encased within a universe of stars. With the birth of the world and its universe one truth remains constant: the care and concern of God for His creation does not cease. Creation is a work of divine self expression. Creation remains covered with the divine fingerprints of its Artist. It has truly been said: “*Since the creation of the world, invisible realities--God's eternal power and divinity--have become visible, recognized by the things he has made*” (Rom1:20). Creation, expressing perfectly the will of God, is the External Glory of God.

God created a Garden of Eden, and now He reveals for whom it exists; God brings forth the Stars of Creation--the very glory of God.

*Then God said, "Let us make man in our own image, after our own likeness. Let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground." God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them, after his own likeness (Gen 1:26-27).*

Rabbi Jacob observed that God uses the third person imperative when defining man's role—"let them have dominion [radah],"--and strengthens their authority in the following verse with "subdue the earth [kabach]." In relation to the world, man is given kingly status to rule over creation as God's viceroy. As the dominion flows from God, and man shares in God's rule, it is to be exercised in a godly manner--treating creation with tenderness and appreciation.

The Hebrew sentence construction is of such a nature that it implies mankind is made in the Image and Likeness of God, that man may have dominion. The future possibilities of mankind are brilliant. As God's chosen partners in creation we have great opportunities, as bearers of the Divine Image, to be positive and responsible stewards in the world until the Lord returns to make all things new.

God imparts his own authority over creation into the hands of man--to use in a godly manner that demonstrates care and concern for creation. It is a mandate to preserve the beauty that flows from order and design, and implies bringing the potential within creation into actuality.

The Scriptures clearly militate against misuse of our natural resources. We are told that "dominion" does not imply ownership but stewardship. We are stewards of creation, it has been placed in our care, and we are called to bring to perfection the potential goodness and beauty innate in creation.

We may say God left work undone for us to do. In a word, we are invited to become co-creators. And when all is said and done, we are strictly accountable to its true Owner. One day an accounting of our stewardship will be demanded. The Lord makes this clear in Leviticus, "*The land belongs to me. You are foreigners and tenant farmers working for me*" (Lev 25:23). Isaiah reminds us, "*The land is to be lived in and not wasted.*"

What will be the food of human beings and the animals? God tells man and woman, "*See, I give you every seed-bearing plant and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit on it to be your food; and to all the animals of the land, all the birds of the air, and all the living creatures that crawl on the ground, I give all the green plants for food*" (Gen 1:29-30). Our teacher could not resist pointing out to us, "See, we were all originally created to be vegetarians."

At the end of the sixth day, God completed the creation of the Garden of Eden. We read in our Hebrew/English version:

*And God saw everything that he had made, and found it very good. And there was evening and there was morning, the sixth day. And the skies and the earth and all their array were finished. On the seventh day God finished all the work that He had done and He ceased on the seventh day from all His work that He had done. And God blessed the seventh day and declared it holy, because on it God ceased from all work that He had done (Gen 1:31: 2:1-2).*

In the ancient Babylonian story, creation ends with the erection of the temple to their god, to maintain the god's presence among them. It served as the sacred place for the worship of their God. This practice was customary among the pagan people. Our scriptures inform us, *"The God who made the world and all that is in it, the Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in sanctuaries made by human hands" (Acts 17:24).*

In our six day journey through creation, the glory of the cosmos and the glory of the Lord God unfold before our eyes, stirring within our hearts deep emotions. We are given a panoramic view of the heavens that slowly narrows down to the sparrow's day, which from dawn to evening never lays beyond the eye of its creator.

It all began on Day One with **LET THERE BE LIGHT!** All creation materializes as sparks of light; each bit emanates the fire within, which knows the touch of love. Psalm 19:1-4 sings out, *"All the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament proclaims his handiwork. Day pours out the word to day, and night to night imparts knowledge. Not a word, nor a discourse whose voice is not heard. Through all the universe their voices resound and to the end of the world their message"-- TO THE LORD GOD BELONGS HONOR AND GLORY!*

God Himself constructs the temple to his glory--a temple not made by human hands--a temple beyond human imagination. The entire universe is a temple to the glory of its Creator. *"Through him all things came into being. And apart from him nothing came to be. Whatever came to be in him found life, life for the light of men" (Jn 1:3-4).*

We may now ask, does not the human person become the tabernacle in which God abides on earth? Is it here that God comes to abide and to rest? Can we not therefore say that the Universe is the Temple Of God, and God tabernacles Himself in the human spirit? We read *"You are the temple of the living God, just as God has said" (2Cor 6:16b),* and *"I will dwell with them and walk among them, I will be their God and they shall be my people" (Ez 37:26-27).*

Our teacher calls our attention to the magical number *seven*. He explains that the number seven does not represent any known astronomical event. Nevertheless, the number seven did signify completions. It was a widely accepted belief in the Ancient Near East that things come to their best conclusion on the seventh day.

The Book of Genesis opened with seven words. The expression that God saw creation was good, very good, appears seven times in the creation story. However, our teacher points out that in certain earlier editions of Genesis there is no enumeration of seven in the creation story. At the same time he calls our attention to Moses' speaking of the "seventh day," which we all know would be the Sabbath. He reminds us that Moses did not refer to the Sabbath because the Hebrew for "Sabbath" is *Saturn*, a planet worshipped as a god by the pagans. Moses is continuing his work of demythologizing the universe.

Rabbi Jacob informs us that our concept of God's going to "rest" is but a poetical interpretation of the Hebrew word, which simply means God "stopped" working. In other words, the Lord is saying to us "My work is finished!" We are left with the impression that work remains, and it is in our hands...

In words of utter simplicity Moses announces a profound revelation, "*And God blessed the seventh day and made it holy*" (Gen.2:3). With the culmination and climax of the story of creation, comes the revelation of a cosmic event--Time is Holy!

Holiness in the Scriptures implies much more than an object that is set apart for sacred usage in the worship of God. Holiness implies a powerful, mysterious quality. It implies that certain objects, places, and persons have a mysterious quality that separates them from other things, rendering them serviceable to the presence of God.

A.J. Heschel wrote that the special significance of the concept of the Sabbath is that it means the sanctification of time. Most other religious symbols are spatial, and are "applied to objects, places, music, prayer, acts, food, gestures and practices."

The revelation in Genesis proclaims that God is present in the unfolding of the minutes and the hours of the seventh day of the week. Making a commandment, "*Keep holy the Sabbath day!*" is a divine revelation of God's presence here and now, and with the command that we be present to Him.

God is love. Divine love is not static--it is divine activity. If God is present in the world, love is present in the world. If love is present, God is active. If God is present in the Sabbath, He is present in the other six days of the week. The commandment given at Sinai, to keep holy the Sabbath, reinforces in the minds and hearts of men that God is present in this world and in our lives. Love and justice demand that we "glorify Him as God and give Him thanks!" (see Rom 1:21).

The Scriptures remind us we cannot escape the presence of God. "*If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!*"(Ps 139:8). "*In Him we move and have our being!*" (Acts 17:28).

Time is sacred, and God determines the flow of it and the end of it. We all live on borrowed time. We need scheduled days and times as reminders our time is God's

time. We will render an account of our use of our bit of time on earth. Scriptures remind us that the heavenly Father takes note of the fall of a sparrow from the sky.

Our author ends the first story of creation with these words, *“These are the records of the heavens and the earth when they were created. In the day that YHWH God made earth and heavens” (Gen. 2:4).*

With jubilant praise let us make the song of the Prophet Daniel our own:

*Let the earth bless the Lord. Praise and exalt him above forever. Mountain and hills bless the Lord. Everything growing from the earth, bless the Lord. Your springs, bless the Lord. Seas and rivers, bless the Lord. You dolphins and all water creatures, bless the Lord. All you birds of the air, bless the Lord. All you beasts, wild and tame, bless the Lord. You sons of men, bless the Lord (Daniel 3:52-60).*

When our scribe unrolls the scroll again, we'll hear the rest of the story!

Up to this point, we have presented a general view of the first story of creation. Let us now return to our text and study in depth certain important concepts in the first chapter.

In the creation episode of man, the first major concern of ancient interpreters has been what is meant by *“Let us make man.”* What is signified by the use of “us?” There have been several suggested explanations, and perhaps the best of these follows the sage advice to interpret scripture by using scripture.

Following this advice, we would say the best explanation of the “us” is a scriptural reference to the celestial court. We find several very interesting accounts of God's relationship with his celestial court. We read in First Kings,

*The prophet Micah says, “listen to the words of the Lord!! I saw the Lord sitting on his throne with all the armies of heaven around him...And the Lord said, ‘Who can entice Ahab to go into battle’...There were many suggestions and finally a spirit approached and said, ‘I can do it’ (1Kgs 22:19-21).*

The Prophet Isaiah tells us *“It was the year King Uzziah died: I saw the Lord. He was sitting on a lofty throne...Attending him were mighty seraphim...Then I heard the Lord asking, ‘Whom shall I send as a messenger to this people? Who will go for us?’” (Is 6:1,8).*

In the Book of Job we read *“One day the members of the heavenly court (the sons of God) came to present themselves before the Lord, and the Accuser, Satan, came with them [seemingly he was not one of them]. ‘Where have you come from?’ the Lord asked Satan” (Job 1:6-7).*

We find this interesting interpretation of the text in Jewish midrash--we read that when God informed the angels of His plan to make man in his image and likeness, the angels held a lengthy discussion over this matter among themselves. So God took the matter in his own hands, "Why are you debating?" He asked them. "Man has already been created."

I wonder, do we have in this episode our first clue why one day all hell broke loose in the heavens. We know how it went: "*Then there was a war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon and his angels. And the dragon lost the battle, and he and his angels were forced out of heaven*" (Rev 12:7-8). That interesting little episode will be dealt with a bit later.

Let us return to Genesis 1:26, "*Then God said: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'*" We first need to understand the concept of *man* in these scriptures. The word translated as "man" in the English text is *Adam* in the Hebrew. It is a general and inclusive term, meaning humanity or mankind, and in this sense Adam occurs some five hundred times in the Hebrew Scriptures. When it appears with the article "the" in front of it, as *ah adam*, it is commonly translated as the name of an individual person, a person known as "Adam," our first male parent.

In the first and second chapters of Genesis, Adam, the individual person, is intended except in three of the verses. In Gen 1:26, "*Let us make man in our own image and likeness,*" *man* means mankind/humanity. We read in Genesis 1:27, "*So God created man in his own image.*" Here again *man* means mankind, and it is man and woman who are created in the divine image. In Genesis 2:7, where we read "*the Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life and so man became a living being,*" it teaches mankind's kinship and solidarity with the earth.

The effect of this unique creation of the human person indicates that the human being is a special creation, neither animal nor divine. With the subsequent naming of the creatures of the earth by man, scriptures reveal the human person as ennobled with intellect and freedom of will. In the human person God did not create a robot.

The Greek translator translated "adam" as *anthropos*, which was later translated into English as "man." Since *anthropos* in Greek is an inclusive term for both male and female, humanity/mankind would have been a better translation. We find no distinction between male and female until the second chapter of Genesis.

After the statement that "*God created the heavens and the earth,*" there is no more profound truth than when God said, "*Let us make man in our own image and likeness.*" These verses are the foundational stones that explain the who, what, and why of mankind. Paramount in understanding the nature of the human person is to know precisely the meaning of the phrases "*in our image and likeness,*" and "*in the divine image he created them.*"

Genesis 1:26 reveals that God made mankind in his *selem* and *demut*. We translate *selem* as “image.” The word appears seventeen times in the Old Testament. *Demut* is translated as “likeness,” and appears twenty-one times in the Old Testament. *Selem* is often used in the scriptures for “idol.” A common belief concerning idols was that the images contained the spirit of the god represented. *Selem* could also express a mere semblance of a person. We read in Ps 73:20, “*As though they were the dreams of one who had awakened, O Lord, so will you, when you arise, set at naught these phantoms [selem].*” Even in these usages the word carries a hint of something spiritual, a somewhat mystical concept.

*Demut*, as a noun, is derived from the verb meaning “to resemble” or “to be like.” It is more abstract than *selem*, and can refer to something more than physical appearance. Ezekiel uses the word to avoid saying that he sees God. He speaks of “*the appearance of the likeness (demut) of the glory of the Lord (Ez 1:28).*” Daniel uses the word to describe the archangel Gabriel: “*One in human likeness (demut) touched my lips*” (Dan 10:16). *Demut* can imply a reflection or projection of reality. We read in Genesis 5:3, “*Adam begot a son in his likeness (demut), after his image (selem).*”

Here Adam is revealed as the prototype--the original model of the human being in which all the rest are modeled or patterned. Both *selem* and *demut* in this example imply a personal relationship of father and son, and one in which personal communication is possible.

When translated into the Greek, *selem* becomes *ikon* and *demut* becomes *homoïoma*. *Selem* is translated into the English as “image” and *demut* as “likeness.” The English translation leaves much to be desired. Our common understanding of these words doesn't make the necessary distinction needed to understand these concepts. The Greek translation does a better job.

In the Greek, *ikon* carried the concept of the representation of something when applied to a statue, mural, or impression of a coin. However, when applying *eikon* to a person, as an image of a god, it signifies much more than a visual representation of the original. The *eikon* is seen as substantially participating in the original object--as being an emanation and revelation of the object. The *eikon* is not seen as a feeble copy of the original, but an illumination of the inner core and essence of the original. When the Grecian people of Egypt spoke of their rulers as the *eikon*/image of god, it implied that the ruler possesses the same power and same capacities of feelings and actions as their god.

In the English language the words “image” and “likeness” can convey similar meanings, but not in Greek. A fundamental distinction exists between *eikon* and *homoïoma* in Greek. *Eikon* is a pattern of the original, *homoïoma* emphasizes the elements or characteristics possessed in common with the original, expressing a similarity between two things that are different. Some have seen the placing of *homoïoma*/likeness after *eikon*/image as an attempt by the author of Genesis to lessen the power of *eikon*.

The concept of mankind as the image and likeness of God, with the one exception in Genesis 7:3, stands alone and isolated in the Pentateuch Scriptures. Judaism stands as a religion firmly embedded in monotheism. The Hebrew Scriptures generally view man as dust and ashes, unable to stand before the holiness of God. The teaching in Genesis of man being made in the Image of God stands out on the margin of its religious thought.

Scholars in general do not question the Mosaic origin of the text, and see its existence as the author's intention to stress that the relationship of man with God is unique, different from his relationships with other creatures. With the expression of "*image and likeness*," the author carefully approaches the mystery of man being an earthly image of God, created in the likeness of Elohim. He designated man as a being belonging by nature to the heavenly regions, together with the other "sons of God."

We see some confirmation of this truth in Psalm 8:4-6, "*What is man that you should be mindful of him, or the son of man that you should care for him. You made him a little less than the angels, and crowned him with glory and honor. You gave him rule over the works of your hands, putting all things under his feet.*"

Here is expressed both man's outward appearance and, by use of *doxa* (glory), an inner force within the human person. In the Hebrew Scriptures, *doxa* refers exclusively to God. Its application to mankind in this psalm implies that the human person transcends physical life. When reciting Psalm 8, recall that what is translated as "man" is *adam*, meaning mankind.

With this understanding of the divine nature of man, Scriptures draw a veil over that divine nature--a silence that was ended centuries later in the Book of Sirach, a much later Hebrew work written around 200 B.C. in Jerusalem. There we read:

*When God, in the beginning, created man, he made him subject to his own free choice. If you choose you can keep the commandments; it is loyalty to do his will. (Sir15:14-15)*

*The Lord from the earth created man and in his own image he made him...He endows man with a strength of his own and with power [and rule] over all things else on earth...He imparts to him an understanding heart...with wisdom and knowledge he fills them. (Sir 17:1,3,7,6).*

We read in the Book of Wisdom, written in Egypt about a hundred years before the birth of Christ, "*For God formed man to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made him*" (Wis 2:23).

St. Gregory of Nyssa, along with other early Fathers of the Church, distinguished between a twofold imprint of man. Gregory argues for a real distinction between *eikon* and *homoïama*. He maintains the *eikon* is of the very creation of man--common to all men. He insists the Image of God is not lost with the Fall of Adam. The



*homoioima* is something a person is not created with, but is given the power to obtain it. It is something the human person must strive after to attain. (According to Gregory and other early Fathers of the Church, fallen man lost the Likeness to God but not the Image of God.)

St. Irenaeus teaches that the Image and Likeness of God intends to distinguish the natural from the supernatural qualities in the human being. Other early Christian writers see the Image of God in our spiritual endowments as memory, self-awareness, rationality, intelligence, spirituality and immortal soul. Augustine sees the Image of God manifested in the ability to make moral decisions, which presupposes free will, knowledge of good and evil, and the ability to love. The Image of God is expressed in the unique characteristic of transcending self, and the recognition of beauty resulting from order and design. It is displayed when a human being, as God's deputy, oversees rule over the earth.

Although we find similarities between the Hebrew narratives and those found in pagan myths, there exist fundamental differences between the Hebrews' understanding of religion and human nature and that of their pagan neighbors. These differences would not only be expressed in the Hebrews' monotheistic rejection of the pantheon of paganism, but also in their understanding of basic rational principles.

Before the Greek philosophers and the Roman legalists, the world of Near East spawned Assyrian, Persian, and Egyptian empires. It could be said that the social and political lives within these pagan nations rested upon the principle that the whole is greater than any of its parts, and greater than the summary of its parts.

The application of this principle to society would glorify the State, while negating the rights of its people. This principle, filtering down to the grass roots of society, meant that any individual rights dissipate before the social good. It was a common belief that all rights and dignity were embodied in the king who, on his coronation, underwent some form of deification with the particular god of that society. The king, as a representation of their god, possessed supreme authority over and land and people.

The State itself is actually deified. Under its banner, and before the image of their god, the king led his people to war. If the king was victorious, the conquered people were slaughtered or enslaved. The image of their god became a trophy in the temple of the victorious.

Among the people of the God whose eye is even upon the sparrow, and who revealed that He made mankind in his image and likeness, even foreigners and slaves possessed innate dignity and human rights. In Israel, rational principles would find different interpretations and applications from those found among their pagan neighbors.

**CHAPTER ONE**  
**IN THE BEGINNING**  
**STUDY QUESTIONS**

(Please read Introduction and Chapter One)

1. What do you understand by the expression, “creation is a work of divine self-expression”?
2. What does this chapter reveal about the Creator?
3. What major truths are revealed in the first seven Hebrew words of Genesis?
4. What does Romans 1:20 reveal about God and Creation?
5. What do you understand by “Creation is the glory of God”?
6. According to Psalm 96:3-8, what does it mean to glorify God?
7. In what way does your own life glorify God or fail to do so?
8. How does the story of creation in Genesis differ from the teaching of the Church--*ex creation nihilo*?
9. What do the Scriptures teach us about the “Word of God”?
10. How do you understand the concept “light” in Genesis and how does it differ from the concept “day”?
11. How does Moses demythologize all creation?
12. In what way does the creation of man and woman differ from the rest of creation?
13. What is the relationship of man and woman to the rest of earthly creation?
14. What do you understand by being created in the Image and Likeness of God and how are they distinct one from the other.
15. How did God sanctify “time” itself, and what does it teach you about your time on earth?

## CHAPTER TWO

### NATURE OF MAN AND WOMAN

Many centuries space the days of Moses from our world. Nevertheless, Moses is closer spiritually to our times than to those of primeval days. Moses used materials from ancient myths as background for conveying divine revelation. Shadows of these ancient images may fall across the stories of Genesis but their substance does not infiltrate into truths revealed in Genesis.

Biblical scholars remind us that different accounts of the same historical events may appear attributable to different sources. We will deal with such material in the classical Hebrew tradition of harmonizing the discrepancies--intertwining stories so that the details of one fill in the details of the other.

As students of Genesis, let us now rejoin our scribe, Rabbi Jacob, as he unrolls the scroll and reads: "*At that time when the Lord God [Yahweh Elohim] made earth and the heavens,*" he pauses and notes a striking element in the phrase--the use of *Yahweh Elohim* as the source of all creation. He notes that this ties the revelation on Mount Sinai with Genesis--there is only one Lord God of all. Pronouncing the proper name of the God of Israel would be categorically forbidden by rabbinical law in the future. The Jewish high priest alone pronounced it once a year on the Feast of Atonement. The Hebrew language replaced the sacred name of *Yahweh* with *Adonai* or *Ha Sham*--rendered "Lord" in English.

Our teacher directs our attention to the fact that there is a reversal of "*the heavens and earth.*" By the earth not preceding the heavens emphasizes the importance of the earth and what now occurs upon it.

*While as yet there was no field shrubs on the earth and no grass of the fields has sprouted, for the Lord God has sent no rain upon the earth and there was no man to till the soil, but a stream was welling up out of the earth and was watering all the surface of the ground (Gen 2:5-6).*

The Hebrew word translated as "stream" is *ed*, and its proper translation would be that "a river has come up from the earth" (i.e., the river is not a goddess but a creation of God). Where there is a river there is mud, and God will put some of it to good use, i.e. we read here, the insertion of "field shrubs, grass of the fields." There are no thrones or thistles as yet. The earth awaits a human presence.

What follows puts a glaring light back upon Genesis 1:26, “*Let us make man in our image and likeness.*” We read, “*The Lord formed man [adam] out of the clay of the ground [adama] and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being*” (Gen 2:7).

Any delusion of mankind being of divine nature or sharing substantially in the divinity is utterly shattered. Man's origin is earthly. Man is rightly called *adam* because his mother's name is *Adama*--Red Clay.

What do we have here? A drastic and dramatic reversal of our being in the Image of God? The human person substantially shares a nature with other living creatures. However, there exists a close and more intimate relationship with his Creator, who blew the breath of divine life into this “earth-bound” creature that now lives through the presence of God's Spirit.

May we ask, did our author intend by this episode to deny any immortality to the human nature? Our teacher urges caution here, explaining to us that in ancient times for a man to survive death rendered him a god to be placed within the pantheon of the gods. In ancient days, myths and legends abounded of men seeking the “tree of Life,” which bore the fruit of immortality.

The theology of the Hebrew People led them to a different anthropology from their pagan neighbors, with whom they lived in close proximity. We may say that Christian theology would lead us also to differ, in some degree, especially from the general Hebrew concept of the human person.

Within the ancient Hebrew concept, the human person is not a spiritual being that is incarnated in human flesh. They did not see the human person as a spiritual being living in a bodily tent. Later Hebrews would come to see man as a “psychophysical unity;” a concept much closer to our Christian view.

The Hebrew concept closest to our idea of the human soul is *nepes*. When the Hebrew Scriptures were translated into Greek, *nepes* was translated as “psyche” or “soul.” However psyche or soul does not truly convey the meaning of *nepes*.

In the Greek, *psyche* is viewed as a spiritual principle, the seat of human life. The “breath of God” is the seat of life for the Hebrews. In Hebrew, the *nepes* is distinct from the human body, but not as a spiritual entity in itself. It is likewise distinct from the breath of God. The *nepes* comes to life through the breath of God. The *nepes* lives, but is not itself the principle of human life. God alone remains the source and principle of life. The human *nepes* ceases at death. We may say that Hebrew theology left no door open for the human person to see oneself as a god.

The best way to understand the Hebrew vision of a concrete human being is to see a human person simply as “a living being.” *Nepes* is self as a conscious subject of personal actions and feelings. *Nepes* is the seat of appetites and emotions.

In the Old Testament, the process of knowing, thinking, and willing are usually attributed to the heart, but occasionally to the *nepes*. *Nepes* expresses natural personal life, with no reference to spirituality or to immortality. To attack one's *nepes* is to attack one's life. All living beings possess the *nepes*, because it is the faculty to receive life, but they are not all the same. The *nepes* of a human person is not the same as the "wild animals of the fields."

Let us at this point say something about the concept of "spirit" in the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew word for spirit is *ruah*. Literally, *ruah* means "wind." In the Old Testament, the *ruah* is something that pertains to Yahweh; *ruah* is the Spirit of God. The *Ruah* of God is the principle of life. The *ruah* is God's own life, and the *ruah* of God is within the human person. *Ruah* is not personally possessed by the human person. At death the *ruah* returns to God, and the human person ceases to exist. Only the *nepes* of the human being possesses the *ruah* of God.

We read these words of God in Genesis 6:3: "*My spirit [ruah] shall not remain in man forever, since he is but flesh. His days shall be one hundred and twenty years.*" A human being will die because of the withdrawal of the *ruah* of God.

To complete our picture of the human person, we need to review our Christian concept of the human soul. Plato taught that the soul, or the psyche, is a pure spiritual principle--the subject of thought--distinct from the body, and immortal. For Plato the soul is truly the human person. Aristotle, his fellow philosopher, unties the soul and body, making them both the essential components of a human being.

The spirituality and the immortality of the soul are less evident in the philosophy of Aristotle. The teachings of the Christian philosophers blended the teaching of Plato and Aristotle: the human being is a composite of the two essential elements of body and soul, of which the soul is the spiritual substance and the principle of human life. Our Christian concept of the human person derives from both faith and reason; we are indebted to divine revelation, the teachings of Greek philosophers, and the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Let us leave these ivory towers and return to ground level. When all is said and done, our author firmly places mankind deep into human mortality. What follows demonstrates God's preferential care for human life.

Ancient myths of the Near East reveal that kings and their subjects built temples to their gods--holy places of worship, shrines wherein people and gods spoke to one another. Genesis reveals that God Himself designs the Temple of Eden, wherein God comes to dwell with man and woman. More than all else, Eden is the earthly sanctuary wherein God and man dwell in harmony--within a milieu of blessings with nothing on earth to impede them.

How could Moses, in human frailty, describe the land of Eden wherein a garden called "delight" and "paradise" is found? As with all human instruments in the hands of the divine, he does the best he can--the rest is in the Hands of God.

*Then the Lord God planted a garden in Eden, in the east, and he placed there the man whom he had formed. Out of the ground the Lord God made various trees grow that were delightful to look at and good for food, with the tree of life in the middle of the garden and the tree of the knowledge of good and bad. (Gen 2:8-9)*

Among the colorful images in the Garden of Eden, I find none more mysterious than the “two trees” in the middle of the garden. That they were situated center stage implies their importance. Our synagogue teacher observes that many commentaries only share their fantasies with us: they tell us more than they know.

Interpreting the meaning of the Tree of Life is not as difficult as the Tree of Knowledge of good and bad. It is generally agreed that the concept of “after life” does not appear in Genesis, but the possibility of immortality does--the Tree of Life symbolizes it--eating from it enables one to live forever. The man and woman were not forbidden to eat of this tree.

Genesis clearly reveals that the Lord God is the Source of the existence of all beings and the life of all living beings. The Tree of Life could symbolize God as the Source of Eternal Life. However, I see the Tree of Life representing the point of “union” of man and woman with God; a permanent such union would effect everlasting life. God created man and woman with the potential for such a union, and invites them to unite their lives with Him. God extends the invitation but man and woman are free to accept or reject it. It is an invitation to be taken deadly seriously; any rejection of it closes the door to eternal life.

The gift of free will would not be a gift if it did not leave open the possibility of rejecting the will of God, in other words--misuse the gift. The gift of free will flows from being made in the Image of God.

The will of God is the very breath of the heart of God. When a person enters the will of God through obedience, she or he brings the human spirit into union with the Divine Heart. Hearts blend in loving union. Union with the divine life sanctifies and deifies the human soul. This activity is spoken of as “the glorification of God” in a human person. It brings about, here and now, the presence of God. This heavenly activity transforms the human life into a likeness unto God that goes beyond the creation as the Image of God.

Human nature, as a “created substance in God,” shares naturally in the divine life; its very existence flows from union with God. Here the love of God only begins. God opens His heart and invites us, through our obedient response to His will, to enter deeply into the divine life. *Entering* into, and *abiding* within the will of God initiates a process of the person's transformation into God. This begins the unfolding of the hidden plan of God for the individual person.

God's plan for our life remains unknown. It unfolds with each obedient step into darkness. The unfolding of God's plan reveals the hidden mystery of God's love for the individual person. As St. Paul proclaims, “*Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love him*” (1Cor 2:9). His plan is for those who, through their confidence in His will, permit God to love them.

Let us now return to our seat in the synagogue. Our teacher informs us that our common interpretation of the Tree of Knowledge of good and bad is very questionable. We see the trees as representing the moral problem of a choice between good or evil. Our teacher doesn't deny that it may represent this, but he goes on to point out that the Hebrew word *ra*, which we translate as "evil," possesses a vaster spectrum. *Ra* could be speaking of the qualities of good or bad in any particular topic, such as a moral act, a work of art, a house, a plate of food, a bottle of wine. *Ra* could mean that the thing in itself is good or bad--when we eat of it, we'll know if it is good or bad. It could imply that if we eat the fruit of the tree it would impart to us the ability to discern if the thing is good or bad. As he says, "as things stand now we don't know how the ancients understood this text."

I found my own solution for the problem--first by abandoning any previous ideas I may have had on the subject of the Tree of Knowledge of good and evil; and second to see the phrase "good and evil" as we saw the previous phrase "heaven and earth"--as a literary merism--two opposite concepts joined together that express the beginning and the end and all between. Therefore, I see the Tree of Knowledge of good and bad as representing "omniscience." Whoever would eat of such a tree desires to be omniscient-- having infinite awareness, understanding, and insight, in other words-- possess universal and complete knowledge.

Let us now return to the earth that God Himself fashions. Here again God is working, and leaving a pointed example for the new occupants.

*A river rises in Eden to water the garden, beyond there it divides and becomes four branches. The name of the first is the Pishon; it is the one that winds through the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold. The gold of that land is excellent; bdellium and lapis lazuli are also there. The name of the second river is the Gihon; it is the one that winds all through the land of Cush. The name of the third river is the Tigris; it is the one that flows east of Assyria. The fourth river is the Euphrates (Gen 2:10-14).*

The geographical elements mentioned are not without their symbolic meaning. The simple statement of locating the garden in the "east" of Eden may itself be an ominous omen--a red flag--of the division and judgment to follow. "East" carries this significance in other sections of Genesis. Looking at the above text as a whole, it may present an image both of the known world and the Promised Land.

In ancient literature, the number four is a symbol of the world: it speaks of "the four corners of the world." The water that God causes to flow forth from Eden divides into the four rivers of the then known world.

Certain Ugaritic texts teach "the high god (*El*) dwells at the source of all life-giving waters of the earth." Eden is the locale of God, according to our text. Does this imply that God also dwells in the whole world? The world at its creation was the Temple of God. By making Yahweh the source of the water, Moses dethrones all the river gods of the pagans.

When Moses speaks of the land's possessing gold and precious gems, it may indicate that the Promised Land possesses the things men esteem and desire. Such elements express the glory of God's presence through the beauty of the physical surroundings.

The Prophet Haggai saw the presence of God in the New Temple, symbolized by the gold and by the precious metals in the temple. *"I will fill this house with gold: the silver is mine and the gold is mine, declares the Lord Almighty"* (Hag 2:7-8).

The location of Eden remains a haunting mystery. Certain scholars place the region of Eden in Southern Mesopotamia (the word *Mesopotamia* means between the two rivers), near the head of the Persian Gulf where the Tigris and Euphrates join and flow as a single river into the Persian Gulf.

We read in Genesis 2:8 *"he placed there [in the garden] the man whom he had formed."* In verse 15 we read, *"The Lord God then took the man and settled him in the Garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it."* In both these verses, the author uses a term reserved to express "rest" or "safety." Has God placed man in a place where he can "rest" and be "safe?" Man, coming forth from the darkness of the earth, needs the light of life. There, in the light of God, man dwelt in communion with God. Apparently, God ardently desired such communion with mankind

There is evidence to indicate that the phrase *"to work it and take care of it,"* should have been interpreted to read, "put in the garden to worship God and to obey him." In this interpretation, worship and obedience characterized the work of man. First man is priest and, then, man is the gentleman farmer. Following upon this, God gave his first commandment to man, *"You are free to eat from any of the trees of the garden except the tree of knowledge of good and bad. From that tree you shall not eat; the moment you eat from it you are surely doomed to die"* (Gen 2:16-17).

The expression "doomed to die" implies that death results from the act itself. If a man places a loaded pistol to his head and pulls the trigger, he surely is "doomed to die." The Torah later stresses that keeping the good land would depend upon obedience to the commandment of God (*miswot*).

In the Garden, God presents to man the divine Will for the first time. This command of God was a necessary directive for the well-being of man. It was an important reminder to man, in the light of his glorious creation, that he is not a god, capable of discerning good and evil. There is the existence of evil, of which he possesses neither knowledge nor defense against. His only defense and security lies in the loving will of God.

Upon our first reading, God places the Tree of Knowledge of good and bad so centrally located that we can almost hear those words spoken centuries later: *"I call heaven and earth today to witness against you: I have sat before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the Lord your God, heeding his voice and holding fast to him. For that will mean life for you, a long life for you to live on the land..."* (Deut 30:19-20).



When we truly come to understand the nature of “good” (*tob*), we know then that only God knows goodness. We learn what is good (*tob*) and what is not good (*ra*) for us from his teachings.

A prohibition from God is not a privation, rather it is light needed to discern our proper good. To travel safely home and come to our “rest” demands our trust and obedience in the Word of God. The disobedient decide for themselves what is good and what is evil. When Pride and ignorance become our traveling companions, sooner or later we fall into the pit. We will then need to sound that desperate cry of Peter, “*Lord save me! I am perishing!*”

God sets before us a specific example of the knowledge of what is “not good.” “*The Lord God said; ‘It is not good for man to be alone.’*” And then God gives a specific example of what is “good”--He creates the woman! “*I will make a suitable partner for him*” (*Gen 2:18*).

It seems that God had put this creation on temporary hold, perhaps to bring awareness to man of the “not good” in his life, and what the “good” is that is lacking in his life. “*So the Lord God formed out of the ground various wild animals and various birds of the air, and he brought them to the man to see what he would call them; whatever the man called each of them would be their name. The man gave names to all the cattle, all the birds of the air, and all the wild animals...*” (*Gen 2:19-20*).

These creatures were all formed out of the earth as was Adam himself. God recognized the superiority of Adam over them by telling him to name all the creatures. Adam possessed the power to understand the difference between these creatures. He personally dealt with “each of them.” Having finished his work, Adam realized, first of all, that none of these creatures are like himself--none are on his own level with him. Seemingly this disappointed him. Was he looking for something he did not find? Yes! “*None proved to be the suitable partner for the man.*”

*So the Lord God cast a deep sleep on the man, and while he was asleep, he took out one of his ribs and closed up its place in flesh. The Lord God then built up into a woman the rib that he had taken from the man. When he brought her to the man, the man said: “This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh”* (*Gen 2:21-23a*).

Adam, no doubt, said to the Lord, “This is very good!” Adam had the habit now of naming everything he saw; he immediately named this new creation, and acknowledged her solidarity with himself. “*This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called ‘woman’ for out of ‘her man’ this one has been taken*” (*Gen 2:23b*). “*Bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh*” indicates woman to be of the same substance as man--equal to him.

The creation of woman reveals that human existence is a partnership between man and woman, and that being in the Image of God lies precisely in this partnership--“*Let us make mankind in our own image and likeness. Male and female he made them.*” The Lord

concludes the day with his will on the matter, *“That is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife, and the two of them become one body”* (Gen. 2:24).

Woman, as the suitable partner to man, completed the concept of the human person created in the Image of God. Man and woman clearly are distinct from the rest of creation, possessing a mystical relationship to God. Adam and Eve are essential to the Plan of God on earth, *“Everyone whom I formed and made, I created for my glory”* (Is 43:7). *“All the earth is filled with his glory”* (Is 6:3b). Whatever be the Plan of God, it is a Glorious One!

The power of relationship seemingly is intrinsic to being made in the Image of God. God blessed the human person with the capacity to relate to God, to other human beings, and to the world itself. Our communion with God has led to our commission by God to do godly works. One of the primary things the Scriptures teach human beings is that *“the fear of God is the beginning of knowledge”* (Prov 1:7a). By the word “knowledge” is meant “communion.” Fear of God is the proper foundation for our relationship with God. Fear of God emphasizes the abiding gulf between Creator and creature; it is a deeply sane recognition that we are not gods and goddesses.

It is God's relationship with us, and God's relationship with his creation, that is the standard of all our relationships. We are wisely warned by Saint Edith Stein, that for us to make ourselves the standard for our relationships is to lock ourselves into the prison of our own individuality.

One author, Loren Eislen, speaking upon relationships says, “[Relationship] is the most enormous extension of vision of which life is capable: the projection of itself into other lives. This is lovely, magnificent of humanity. It is far more than any spatial adventure, the supreme epitome of reaching out.”

Seemingly, the human need for proper relationships is so essential that human life depends on them, not for mere human survival, but for the normal human growth and development that flows from such relationships. Destruction of proper human relationships results in chaos.

It is of the nature of human beings, made in the Image of God, that relationships be freely reciprocal, with the freedom to say “Yes” or to say “No” to any relationship. Certain Christian saints, such as Julian of Norwich and Teresa of Avila, observed that we are not bits and pieces of God, nor do we substantially participate in the Divine Nature. We are friends and partners of God, and we are given the awesome responsibility of primacy here on earth.

The question is asked, how can we be in the Image of God and God still be “Totally Other?” When it comes to our understanding God's relationship with us, we often must accept that which we lack the ability to understand. St. Julian describes it in this manner--the human soul is a creation in God; it is not God but it is in God. On this point St. Teresa exclaims that the human soul could exist no longer outside of God than a tree uprooted from the earth. Teresa understood--and this comes from her own mystical

experiences—that God is present within the human soul without being substantially a part of the human soul, which makes possible the greatest and most intimate relationship between God and the human spirit.

Our friends, the Quakers, believe that in every human being is an “Inner Light.” Apparently they identify the “Inner Light” as a modicum of God's Spirit--recognized as the “Seed of Light” or “Seed of Christ.” According to their theology, salvation depends upon the individual person's discovery of this “Inner Light.”

The Scriptures testify, and human experience along with it, that the Image of God is evidenced differently in individuals and communities of people, according to the maturation, experience, and the character-building that has taken place. God is not static. Why should those made in his Image be so?

As someone once observed, we are not making ourselves up as we go along. We continue to draw upon our nature, and express ourselves through it in varying degrees of fullness. We cannot put limits on what God desires and intends for those who love him—those who open themselves to the power of his love. Certain men, called the Sadducees Party, did try to put boundaries on God's intentions. Jesus told them they were entirely wrong. *“You know neither the power of God nor the Scriptures” (Mk 12:24).*

Edith Stein writes concerning our relationship with the Sacred Scriptures, “Holy Scripture counts as God's word for us. It draws near to us. He makes himself known to us, He makes demands upon us. If the person reading them fails to recognize their sacramental power, they fail to accept them as God's Word. In that case it becomes a ‘dead letter.’ It no longer points beyond itself in a living way to the realm where it issues.”

The Book of Job encourages us to give up our prideful endeavors of instructing God on matters that are his own--on what is right and what is wrong. He wisely observed that if we are going to reflect upon the nature of God, we ought to extend it to the example he is giving us--tolerating the wildness, the chaos, the erratic choices of freedom, and the suffering resulting from our inordinate use of free will. We need to keep ourselves engaged in the partly-determined and partly-undetermined character of the world. After all, it is a world in progress.

St. Paul observed that we live in a world that is suffering itself. How can we expect to escape suffering, living in such a world? He reminds us that the world, too, is waiting on the revelation of the sons of God on earth.

How should the Image of God in man be reflected in nature itself? It has been said that for the animal world, we are their god. Our task is to reflect God's image to them. The Bible gives us tender and wonderful glimpses of God's own care of his creatures--His eye is upon the sparrow; He feeds the birds of the air; He knows when one falls from the sky.

The Book of Proverbs calls us to admire the creatures of the earth. As an example, the author says, look at the ant so small and weak yet wise--in the summer it stores up its food

for the winter. One scientist calls our attention to “the eye of a frog peering up from a pond (that is) is more marvelous and complex in its evolution than all mechanical inventions of mankind” (L. Eisely).

We are free to administer to creatures for their own good, but not to violate the order put in place by the Creator. Right relationship with nature implies the space and freedom for both the crocodile and the gorilla, for their wellbeing. Right relationship requires a respect between us and the forest and the minerals of the earth.

The message of the sage is this, “If you are going to reign on God's behalf in the world, as God's chief ministers, then for pity's sake, do it the way God would do it. Display, the image of God in you: do it with wonder, tenderness, and pleasure.” If sister bird and brother fox cease to exist, we are impoverished. It may be only a matter of time, and we are next!

The Garden of Eden is the Kingdom of God on earth; as the Will of God is in heaven so it is on earth. The Garden of Eden, frail as a reflection upon the waters, rested in the hands of man.

The Scriptures proclaim “*All the earth shall be filled with his glory*” (Num 14:20). Visible realities reveal the invisible. “*God's eternal power and divinity is recognized through the things he made*” (Rom1:20). He fashioned all things that they might have being, and the creatures of the world are wholesome. There is not a destructive drug among them, nor any domain of the nether world on earth. “*God did not make death...He fashioned all things that they might have being*” (Wis 1:13-14).

*In the beginning, when God created man, he made him subject to his own free choice. If you choose you can keep the commandments; it is loyalty to do his will...Before man and life and death, whichever he chooses shall be given him...No man does God command to sin, to none does he give strength for lies (Sir 15:14-20).*

The Tree of Life represents the life, the love, and the presence of God on earth. The human spirit united in the will of God creates the heavenly man, a man of spirit (*pneuma*), immersed in the life and love of God, and who drinks from the fountain of eternal life. In such a condition, man possesses a life-giving spirit and is immortal.

Let us say the Tree of Life is the Will of God. The Tree of good and bad is the free will of man and woman. They cannot choose the bad without rejecting the good, for the will of God stands in-between such a choice. As God is the source of life, rejecting the will of God rejects life. Surely you will die if you do so.

The stars of Genesis are the Lord God, Man, and Woman, and their relationship with one another. A secondary element, but a major one, is the Earth, and man's and woman's relationship with the earth.

## RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MAN AND WOMAN

At this point in our study, let us look more deeply into the nature and relationship of man and woman.

With the creation of man, the human person stands unique and solitary among other creatures. There is no other earthly creation with which to relate. Out of all created things, the human person sees nothing on earth as marvelous and beautiful as himself. It would be only a short step from seeing oneself “like” God to beholding oneself “as” God.

Viewing the whole scene, God says for the first time that all is not well in Eden. “*It is not good for man to be alone. I will make a suitable partner for him*” (Gen 2:18). The account of the creation of woman follows. The story demands careful attention as it reveals the relationship between man and woman as God created it to be, as God wills it to be. We need to understand and remember this relationship before we view what sin did it. The situation between man and woman produced by sin is not the reality willed by God. It is not “the good” that God intended.

An important Hebrew expression in Genesis in interpreting the relationship between man and woman is *ezer kenegdo*. Our text translated it as “suitable partner.” However, it has been translated in the past as “fitting helper,” “helpmate,” an “aide” for him. The last four translations lend themselves to the idea that woman was created to be, in some fashion, a servant to man. Whatever man’s relationship may be with God, it is the same as the relationship between woman and God.

The word *ezer* is seemingly a combination of two root words, one of which means “to rescue” (save), and the other means “to be strong.” The two roots emerge to form *ezer*. The noun appears twenty-one times in the Hebrew Bible. Eight times it means “savior,” in the other texts it means “strength.” In later, non-biblical works, *ezer* appears as “to help.”

The word *kenegdo* appears only once in the Bible. We cannot, therefore, imply its meaning by reference to other scripture texts. However, it does appear in later rabbinical writing with the meaning “to equal.” We find it in the Hebrew saying, “The study of the Torah is equal to all the other commandments.” Apparently there is no valid ground for translating *kenegdo* as “fit” or “helper.” The phrase, “*male and female he created them*,” does not lead us to conclude the superiority of either man or woman. Seeing the woman of Genesis as man’s “suitable partner” is certainly proper translation, in keeping with the intent of the author.

In the creation scene of woman, God forms the second person, “woman,” out of the first person, “man.” God formed the body of the second person, “woman,” from the body of the first person, “man.” God does not breathe a living spirit into the second person, as had been done with the first person. The life received by Eve is the life shared by Adam (please bear in mind, we are dealing here with the Semitic concept of life as “the Breath of God”). The Spirit received by the first person is shared with the second person. You cannot cut the spirit into parts. Each possesses the same spirit; it unites them as one.

What a divinely masterful stroke! God creates within man and woman the need to love one another--to be drawn outside of self-love in order to find fulfillment of self. Two persons, male and female, united together, will be One. We read, "*When God brought the woman to man, the man said: 'This one at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh; This one shall be called "Woman" [issa] for out of "her man" [is] this one has been taken.'* This is why a man leaves his father and mother and clings to his wife and the two of them become one body [person]" (Gen 2:22b-24).

Creating the one human person, male and female, teaches that no human person will ever find their fulfillment by turning in upon self. By being called to complete the other's self, he or she finds wholeness. In the union of love the human person finds personal fulfillment. The scriptures teach, "*Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself*" (Eph 5:28).

Jesus of Nazareth teaches that marriage between man and woman is a divinely ordained union that cannot be dissolved, for it has made them one person. Presumably, marriage is the exercise of the power of love between two persons, making them one and preserving their union. Jesus maintains that this is the divine reality, and it still stands in the face of human sinfulness. Jesus admits that Moses made concessions outside of the divine will because of the "hardness" of human hearts--the refusal to love.

Man and woman of Genesis are presented as equal, but not the same. God made the male and female, and whatever maleness (masculinity) or femaleness (femininity) may be, one thing is certain, they are intended to be different. A complementary difference!

It is important to note that as masculinity and femininity are essential attributes of the human person, these attributes reveal something of the very nature of God. Therefore masculinity and femininity stand above their bodily expression and function within human beings.

Let us turn at this moment to a Christian Teacher, Saint Teresa Benedicta, formerly known as Doctor Edith Stein, who is now known as Doctor of the Catholic Church, for the light she shares upon the subject of being male and female.

Teresa Benedicta teaches that the difference between man and woman lies chiefly within their souls which, as the inner form of the person, is the source of intellect, will, and emotions. God created the human bodies to conform to their souls. Their bodies are different, as are the tasks of the bodies. The dissimilarity between man and woman is intrinsic to their souls.

Man and woman share the one human nature, and are of the one species, because both hold all its attributes. But, at the same time, they are not to be confounded, because each is a different subspecies, and stands at a pole that cannot be exchanged for its opposite. Under the species of Homo sapiens man and woman are two distinct subspecies.

The soul of man receives the imprint of the attribute of the divine nature most often identified with the Father, that of originator and initiator. It is an attribute innate to the male soul, and is incarnated into his physical form by being orientated outwardly toward objects. This enables the man to serve the woman and their offspring intelligently and completely by both providing and protecting. The soul of man differs from that of the woman, though they share the same human nature in every aspect.

Teresa Benedicta teaches that the atmosphere of the woman's soul, unlike that of man, is emotion (this does not mean a man does not have emotions--he would be inhuman without them). As a result of this "the woman's soul is present and lives more intensely in all parts of the body, and it is inwardly affected by that which happens to the body: whereas with men, the body has more pronouncedly the character of an instrument which serves them in their work and which is accompanied by a certain detachment."

Because of the vocation of the woman's body, the unique physical attributes of a woman are directed toward that which is living, personal, and whole. There is a natural yearning in the woman "to cherish, guard, protect, nourish and increase growth."

Rising out of the woman's soul is the innate desire to achieve personal union. (In an unspiritual person dominated by her physical desires, this feminine attribute finds its expression in sexuality, and can lead to compulsiveness. In the spiritually maturing person, this desire is increasingly recognized as spiritual.) Herein lays the fundamental desire of human nature for union with God. Because of this dominant desire within the soul of woman, Teresa Benedicta sees the woman as the entry point of all the spiritual striving of the human soul.

This universal desire of woman to achieve loving union by surrender, places her within a unique subspecies. Although this feminine uniqueness is stamped into the very soul, woman is capable of innumerable variations. Woman is formed by many influences, especially those of an emotional nature, to which she is primarily susceptible and her unique being characterizes. There is no generalized female. For a woman to find fulfillment, Teresa Benedicta teaches, each must seek the maturing of that basic and common inner force, and permit it to develop according to its truth.

As God created man and woman in the Image of God, Teresa sees the union of man and woman to be a communion of love imaging the triune love of God, and reflecting the creativity and joy of the Holy Trinity.

The primacy of the person over his or her sexuality must be positively affirmed and not forgotten, where there is a discussion of human sexuality. A person must never be deprived of his or her personal, basic, ontological dignity of being a creature of God wherever there is a subjective study of sexual morality, i.e. discussions concerning types of sexuality and its concrete forms of realization among certain individuals.

The Christian Church reminds us that "the human person made in the image and likeness of God, can hardly be adequately described by a reduction reference to his or her sexual

orientations. Every human being living on the face of the earth has personal problems and difficulties but, at the same time, challenges to growth and the strengthening of talents and gifts as well. The Church rejects identifying human beings with sexual labels and insists upon the fundamental identity of every person as a ‘creature of God and by His grace, His child and heir to eternal life’” (Doctrine of Faith--Oct. 1, 1986).

The Scriptures confirm the relativity of our sexuality, and affirm the primacy of the Christian person over sexuality when it teaches, “*All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with him. There does not exist among you Jew or Greek, slave or freeman, male or female. ALL ARE ONE IN CHRIST JESUS!*” (Gal 3:27-28).



## CHAPTER 2

### NATURE OF MAN AND WOMAN

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

(Please read Chapter Two)

1. Genesis speaks of God as *Yahweh Eloim*. How does this tie Genesis in with Exodus?
2. What does the second creation story teach about the nature of the human person?
3. In the light of Genesis 1:26 and Genesis 2:7, how would you describe the human person?
4. What does “it is not good for man to be alone” teach us about human nature?
5. What do you learn about the work of man and woman on earth in Genesis 2:15?
6. What do you see as the symbolic meaning of the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Bad?
7. What is the meaning of the Hebrew concept *nepes* and how does it differ from our concept of “soul”?
8. What do you understand as the relationship between the *ruah* of God and the human soul?
9. What does Deut 30:19-21 confirm about the nature of the human person?
10. What does Sirach 15:14-20 teach us about free will?
11. What do you understand by the concept “the human soul is a created substance in God”?
12. As presented in Chapter Two what is the ideal relationship between man and woman?
13. How would be a proper translation of the Hebrew concept *ezer kenegdo*?
14. What does Dr. Edith Stein (St. Therese Benedicta) teach us about the natures of man and woman?
15. How would you explain the teaching that men and women are equal but they are not the same?

## CHAPTER THREE

### LIGHT AND DARKNESS

The more we understand the initial chapters of Genesis, the more we discover a tightly woven tapestry, with every thread significant and none extraneous to the revelation; it remains a deep well of mystery.

Within the first chapters of Genesis, we enter more deeply into the mysteries of life, goodness, love, and the Person and Nature of God. God is spotlighted as the Source and the Lord of all Creation. It confirms the revelation in John, *“Through him all things came into being, and apart from him nothing came to be. Whatever came to be in him found life” (Jn 1:3). “He sustains all things by his powerful word” (Heb 1:3).*

As we read in Chapter One, *“At God's word were all his works brought into being” (Sir 42:15). “Indeed God's Word is living and effective!”(Heb 4:12).* What God creates reveals knowledge of God. Creation is a revelation of the mind and heart of God.

The author of the Book of Wisdom teaches, *“For all men were by nature foolish who were in ignorance of God, and who from the good things seen did not succeed in knowing him who is, and from studying the works did not discern the artisan...For from the greatness and the beauty of created things their original author, by analogy, is seen” (Wis 13:1,5).* To those words of the author we can only add, “Amen!”

We learn the meaning of “the good,” and we come to understand why Jesus later teaches, *“No one is good but God!”* We are taught in Genesis that whatever God has “let be,” is good, “very good.” God refers to created things as “good” that are not of themselves “God.” These created things are not God, but external expression of God. We understand God is “Good” and, therefore, whatever flows from divine activity is “good.” These created things are the external expression of God, and as such they glorify God. They reveal His nature.

This leads us deeper into the nature of God--into the heart of God. The “good” itself is the effect of divine activity. What does it reveal about the Person of God? John the Evangelist gives the reply, *“GOD IS LOVE!” (1Jn 4:8).* The nature of God is Love, and “good” is the external effect of God's action. We ask the question, “What is good?” And we answer, “The external effect of love!”

How then can any human deed be called “good?” It can only be properly done if it is an action of God's love that is expressed through the human ‘will. The scriptures confirm: *“The love of God has been poured out into our hearts” (Rom 5:5). The way we know we remain in him and he in us is that he has given us of his spirit” (1Jn 4:13).*

*“Beloved, let us love one another because God is of love; everyone who love’s is begotten of God and has knowledge [experience] of God, for God is love (1Jn 4:7-8).*

This ought to help us understand life itself. Life cannot be separated from God, for it is an effect of God's action--a labor of love. *“God formed man out of the clay of the ground and blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and so man became a living being” (Gen 2:7).*

In summary, we say good results from divine action. Divine action is an external expression of the inner life of God. The human being is an external expression of God's love. Through God's external activities, we know that “God is love.” Therefore, an expressed commandment of God to humankind is an external expression of God's love for humanity. It is an invitation to enter more deeply into the heart of God, and experience more deeply the life of God. The actualization of God's will in our life produces “good.” Outside of the will of God there is no good.

Chapter Three opens with ominous clouds gathering over the land of Eden, heralding a coming storm with lightning striking a mortal blow at the very heart of the Garden of Eden.

We return at this point to class at the synagogue to study Chapter Three of Genesis. As Rabbi Jacob unrolls the scroll, he recalls the last words of Chapter Two, *“The two of them were naked, the man and his wife, yet they felt no shame” (Gen 2:25).* Rabbi Jacob says to us, “Why should they?” They had no *self*-conscious awareness at this point; conscious awareness “Yes.” As human beings they realized they were a separate reality from God, but their experience of “self” was one in complete union with one another and God. They possessed no conscious awareness of any separation; their conscious awareness was one of oneness. Their foundation of union with God rested upon their creation in the Image of God. They were created substances in God, and could not conceive of themselves separated from their source of life.

Rabbi Jacob says, “Shame is a painful emotion caused by self-consciousness. The shame arises from sin. Adam and Eve were without sin and self-consciousness.” He reads to us from the scroll:

*Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God really say that you are not to eat from any tree of the garden.” The woman replied to the serpent, “We may eat of the other trees of the garden. It is only about the fruit of the tree in the middle of the garden that God said: ‘You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die.’” And the serpent said to the women, “You are not going to die, but God knows that as soon as you eat of it your eyes will be opened and you will be like divine beings who know good and bad” (Gen 3:1-5).*

We are informed of the presence of an intelligent serpent in the Garden. The entrance of the Serpent into the Garden tolls the bell, sounding its death knell. This “speaking

serpent” appears in the Garden with no introduction other than it is the shrewdest of wild beasts, which identifies it as a creature of God.

The Temptation and Fall of Adam and Eve is one of subtle simplicity. Let us seek to sound the subtlety within the Garden story, and understand in some depth the simple story told.

Eve and the Serpent are the protagonists in which the Serpent is the antagonist to the naïveté of Eve. Adam's presence is silent and consensual. The center of the story concerns the wisdom of knowing good and evil. The first subtle hint of this comes with the identification of the serpent as *arum*, which of itself is not a negative term in the Bible; *arum* implies adroitness, shrewdness, resourcefulness, and craftiness. We read, “*Now the serpent was the shrewdest of all the wild beasts that the Lord has made*” (*Gen 3:1*). It identifies the serpent as a creation, negating any concept of its being a god.

Genesis makes no direct relationship between the Serpent and Satan--no direct identification. However, the Hebrew text demonstrates that the serpent was no ordinary animal; he was a creature craftier than any other animal of the fields. In fact, while he was crafty, the other animals were not. “The serpent is not totally within the circle of those animals already mentioned in Genesis.” The narrative has subtly left the door open for the possibility of the serpent as something “other.”

A further description of the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent warring with one another deepens the mystery of the serpent's identity. Although he is a very wise creature (*arum*), we later see his wisdom and craftiness lead to his being cursed (*arur*) forever by his Creator.

The silence of Genesis concerning the identity of the serpent as Satan has been a concern, but understanding the background of Genesis is helpful. The ancient world believed in the dual existence of divine power--both good and evil; two equal powers that were in constant war between themselves. Neither one ever achieved permanent victory over the other, with the result that life on earth was constantly subjected to chaos.

The identification of the serpent in Genesis as Satan could have led the readers of Genesis to believe the serpent was the evil god, equal in power to *El Shadai* (God Almighty). To safeguard his readers from this error, the author makes it clear to them that this serpent is a *creation* of God, albeit an extraordinary one.

Our author is drawing a subtle relationship between the fall of man and man's quest for wisdom. Some see the disobedience of Adam and Eve as an act of folly, not as “an act of great wickedness, a great transgression.” Their folly was that, although they possessed all the wisdom they needed, they wanted more; they wanted to be like God. The irony of the tragedy is that they were already “like” God, but possessed the foolish desire to be “as” God.

Apparently, certain scholars have entered into Eve's mind-set, and seek to determine what is good and evil themselves. Only God can determine the depth of wickedness and the greatest of the transgressions committed by Adam and Eve. The evident result of their action, and God's reaction to it, suggests much more than "folly" on their behalf. Saint Julian of Norwich writes, "The Lord showed me that Adam's sin was the greatest harm ever done or ever to be done until the end of the world."

Evidently, the relationship between Adam and Eve with God concerns the Serpent. He cautiously engages the woman in conversation concerning God's one negative command to them. "*Of every tree of the garden you are free to eat, but as for the tree of the knowledge of good and bad, you must not eat of it, for as soon as you eat of it, you shall die*" (Gen 2:16-17).

This prohibition of God stands before Adam and Eve. It does not impose a privation upon them; all the fruit of all the other trees are at their disposal. It is not a matter of the fruit, but the acceptance of the human situation of being subjected to the will of their Creator. Only the human being possesses a freedom in this regard. This freedom required them to have trust and faith in God's love for them. It calls forth their love for God--to put the will of God before their own will. The Prohibition implies that the will of God goes beyond the will of the created being. We cannot even will for ourselves what God wills for us. Who can put boundaries on the goodness God desires for those who love Him?

The very existence of the prohibition confirms free will. Man is free to follow his own will. Here we see the first expression of God's humility. God leaves His will open to acceptance or rejection by human will. When the human person rejects the will of God, the rejection itself produces negative results beyond the control of the person. Moses understood this clearly, and warned his people that rejecting God's will automatically produces evil beyond their control. The Hebrews came to understand that God did not have one will for human beings, and another for the rest of creation; the good or evil that man does affects the world they live in. We are intimately united for better or for worse.

Out of love, God warned man and woman that any rejection of his commandment would create a major separation between them and their Source of eternal life, automatically resulting in their death.

Eve and Adam both possessed the Image and Likeness of God. Because Eve's substantial nature as a human person consisted in the Image of God, it could not be touched by an act of her will. Only an act of annihilation by her Creator could effect such a result. Eve possessed the freedom and the power to follow the light of her own mind and the desires of her own will. A rejection of the will of God, however, would result in a loss of any preternatural gifts enjoyed through her union with God.

The Tempter par excellence approached her in the guise of a creature lower than herself, engaging her in conversation, placing her in the higher position of enlightening him. The serpent shrewdly opened up dialogue with a question that did not permit a yes-or-no answer. As we would say, the serpent has a secret agenda, and he doesn't play according to the rules. "*He said to the woman, 'Did God really say: You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'*" (Gen 3:1). He disarms her by placing her in the superior position of authority.

The situation impressed Eve. Perhaps no one had ever asked her opinion on anything before (Adam always had all the answers). Eve, exalting in her glorious nature, seemed to claim for herself what by nature belongs to God, given to her only by the operation of the Spirit of God within her. She condescendingly responded, *“We may eat of the fruit of the other trees of the garden. It is only the tree in the middle of the Garden God said: ‘You shall not eat of it or touch it, lest you die’”* (Gen 3:3).

Our teacher points out to us how Moses reveals Eve's mindset, even before the Fall; *“The woman saw that the tree was good for eating, and a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom...”* (Gen 3:6). We have seen in the two preceding chapters only God *“saw that it was good,”* but now Eve needs neither God nor Adam to tell her what is good.

Saying to man that the choice of evil would certainly lead to death was no threat from God, but a declaration of objective reality. All choices of good are within the will of God. God commands man and woman not to experience evil. To deliberately choose evil is an abuse of human freedom.

If disobedience is turning my back on God, in what direction am I pointed? Deliberate rejection of God's will causes separation from the Tree of Life. A person deprived of God's Spirit has only natural talents and abilities to direct him. One must cope with life alone as he travels many dangerous and insidious roads. We read in the Scriptures, *“But my people did not heed my voice and would not obey, so I left them in their stubbornness of heart to follow their own designs”* (Ps 81:11-12). What can be more lethal than a stubborn heart directed by an ignorant mind? Even the good that is possessed will be lost.

Eve's words to the serpent imply that even to touch the fruit of the tree would bring death. Why she added the prohibition of touching the fruit is unclear. Rabbi Jacob tells us that Eve's actions confirm an old teaching among the rabbis, *“He who adds to God's words, subtract from them.”* Others, he tells us, see here the rabbinic principle that one should *“make a protective hedge for the Torah.”* As Eve had not heard the command herself, she related to the serpent what may have been Adam's version to her. Unfortunately, this addition gave the serpent the opening needed to begin his seduction of Eve.

One Jewish tradition relates that when the serpent heard Eve's reply, he began to touch the tree with his hands and feet. He shook the tree until the fruit fell to the ground. When no thunder or lightning bolts followed, the serpent picked up the fruit and offered it to Eve.

The serpent's action began to undermine the credibility of God's entire commandment in the woman's mind—*“you will surely die.”* He goes on to solidify her doubts, and assures her, *“You will certainly not die.”* The serpent goes on to imply that this prohibition is the attempt of a jealous God to protect his omniscience. *“No, God knows well that the moment you eat of it you will be like gods who know what is good and*

*what is bad*" (Gen 3:5). The Deceiver makes God the deceiver. The Liar makes Truth the lie.

The serpent sows seeds of doubt in Eve as to the goodness of her Creator and Father. He places in her mind an image of a jealous God, lying to her in order to protect his own divine status. The serpent succeeds in contaminating her trust in the Word of God. She is encouraged to be self-reliant and make her own decision about what is good and evil for herself.

Eve, by nature, is inclined to goodness. The serpent deceptively proposes to her the possibility of obtaining a great good; to be as wise as God appeals to Eve. He subtly encourages an act that will separate her from the source of all goodness. The serpent waits while Eve ponders. We read in Psalm 36, "*Sin speaks to the sinner in the depths of the heart. There is no fear of God before her eyes...(S)he has set her foot on evil ways, (s)he clings to what is evil*" (Ps 36:1,3).

The evil leaven of the lie is sowed in her mind, clouding her judgment. What follows is the classic case of rationalization. She finds three good reasons to disobey God—"when she saw that...the tree was good for eating and a delight to the eye, and that the tree was desirable as a source of wisdom, she took of its fruit and ate" (Gen 3:6). The tree was an object appealing to her physical senses, to her aesthetic nature, and to her mind. The wisdom she seeks will not come, but the wisdom she possesses will be lost. The gift of wisdom is the divine vision of reality that the Holy Spirit imparts to the obedient soul.

What the deceiver failed to inform Eve is that the only way to obtain knowledge of evil is to experience evil by doing evil, being evil. Such an experience comes by the loss, as good as that is, of the nature of evil. Knowledge comes with experience; knowledge is not an intellectual awareness of the difference between good and evil. Eve would become, not more like God who knows no evil, but more like the serpent who knows it all. We read in Genesis 3:6, "*She took of its fruit and ate.*" After Eve ate of the fruit we are told "*She also gave some to her husband and he ate*" (Gen 3:6).

Eve's act brought about the fall of Eve, but not of humankind. God gave Adam the commandment. The Scripture makes it clear that Adam is present at the time of the temptation.

Why, we may ask, did the serpent approach Eve rather than Adam? Presumably, the serpent, being such a cunning creature, was well aware of the difference in the natures between Adam and Eve. The serpent, knowing Eve was more emotional by nature, counted on her emotional reaction to his lie about God to cloud her judgment. The Serpent plans to attack Adam indirectly; it would come by way of his heart, not his reason. Eve becomes the serpent's instrument to bring about the fall of Adam.

Sin separated Eve from God, and she invites Adam to join her. She reaches out her hand to him. To take her hand, Adam must let go of the hand of God. To join with her in opposing the will of God, Adam must turn his face away from God and join in her

rebellion. In so doing, Adam is saying to her, “Your god will be my god; wherever you go, I will go.” Adam leaves his Father's House and cleaves to his wife, and the two become as one--for the moment!

Genesis simply states that after Eve ate of the fruit, “*she also gave some to her husband and he ate*” (Gen 3:6c). The two great towers of humankind are brought down to zero level; Man returns himself to the ground from which he came. His Creator confirms his choice, “*You are dirt and to dirt you shall return*” (Gen 3:19c). The kingdom of God on earth ends precisely at that moment.

Both man and woman aimed to be masters of their own lives, to determine good and evil, be autonomous, and direct the course of their lives without any reference to God.

Self-love brought about the fall of humankind. The Scriptures teach, “*For this is the love of God, that we fulfill his commands, for God's love requires us to keep his commands and his commands are not a burden*” (1Jn 5:3).

Eve puts the love of self before the love of God. Adam, in turn, loves himself in Eve more than he loves himself in God. Their hearts had already reversed the proper order of love, breaking the first and greatest commandment--to love God with your whole heart. They enthroned Self in their hearts, not God. The Lord revealed to Saint Catherine of Siena, “You know that every evil is grounded in selfish love of oneself.” Inordinate self-love creates disorder in nature, a disorder that is acceptable neither to God nor to Nature.

After Adam accepted the lethal offering of Eve we read, “*Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked; and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths*” (Gen 3:7)

This act altered all previous relationships--with God, with themselves, and with nature itself. They now have a sense of shame in the presence of each other and in the eyes of God.

For the second time we are told the couple were naked. Once again we see something of the subtlety of our author that is lost in our English translation. In the previous sentence, the Hebrew word for naked is *arom*, but here it has been changed to *eron*. Both of these terms occur infrequently in the Torah. The best understanding of *eron* in Genesis is found in Deuteronomy, in which Israel is being punished for their failure to trust and obey God's word. We read there, “*Because you did not serve the Lord your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity, therefore in hunger, thirst, in nakedness [eron] and dire poverty you will serve the enemies the Lord sends against you*” (Deut 28:47-48).

The effect of their disobedience is not their awareness of being naked (*arum*) before one another, but rather their sense of standing naked (*eron*) before the judgment of God. The human will in opposition to the will of God produces guilt and shame. In another place in scriptures, the text speaks of people in the same situation, longing



for the mountains to cover them and hide them from the judgment of God. In Eden, there are only trees in which to hide from the coming judgment, *“They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the man and his wife hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden” (Gen 3:8).*

Adam and Eve have altered not only their relationship with God, but with all their offspring. Oceans of sin, suffering, and death will flow through all the coming centuries, and all will have its origin at Adam's feet.

Perhaps we can better understand those words of the Lord to Julian, *“The Lord showed me that Adam's sin was the greatest harm ever done or ever to be done until the end of the world.”*

The scene following the Fall opens with the word *qol*, “sound”, the sound of the Lord God (*qol yhwh elohim*). The “sound” that vibrates through the entire scriptures is preceded by the word “hear,” (*sama*). In the Sound of God we hear the Word of God. The Word heard in the soul becomes the seed of eternal life--a divine seed sown in the soul. Nourished in the grace of obedience, the fruit of the Word is eternal life--the enduring love of the Word Heard. A haunting refrain permeates the soul, *“If you hear the voice of God, harden not your hearts!”*

The teacher now reads these sad words to us: *“Then the eyes of both of them were opened and they perceived that they were naked, and they sewed together fig leaves and made themselves loincloths. They heard the sound of the Lord God moving about in the garden at the breezy time of day; and the man and his wife hid from the Lord God among the trees” (Gen 3:7-8).*

The scene of the First Judgment opens with the subtle reminder that the one thing needed in order to experience the loving presence of God is *“to listen to the voice of God [lismo et qol yhwh elohenu].”* It is the call to obedience. The scene recorded in Genesis no doubt recalls to the student of the Torah the Sinai Scene, in which the people of Israel heard the sound of the Lord at Sinai and *“feared, keeping their distance...saying to Moses, ‘You speak to us and we'll listen; but let not God speak to us, or we shall die’” (Ex 20:18-19).* *“If we hear the voice of the Lord our God, any more, we shall die” (Deut 5:25).*

Rabbi Jacob points out that although our text paints a pleasant scene at twilight time, there is no mention in the ancient texts of the time of day. He goes on to explain to us that the “sound” of God can be read in two ways: it could be interpreted as the sound of God walking in the garden, or as the sound of God's voice echoing throughout the garden.

The scriptures say nothing about the quality of the voice heard. It may have been a thunder-like sound announcing a theophany--an appearance of God-- with the “breezy time” being no more than a picturesque translation of *ruah*, the same great and powerful wind that blew on the “mountain of the Lord.” Or it could have been as in Job, when God spoke “out of the storm.” After all, the rabbi says, stormy weather in such a situation

would not have been expected. Whatever sound they heard that day, it caused Adam and Eve to hide in the trees out of fear.

In his writings, Dr. John Sailhamer gives a very pertinent meditation on trees in the garden of Eden.

Trees, play a central role in depicting man's changing relationship with God: in Chapter 1 and 2 the fruit trees are a sign of God's bountiful provision; at the beginning of Chapter 3 it is at "the tree" Adam and Eve rebel against God; after the fall they hid in the trees; when they are being expelled from the garden, their way is barred from the tree of life. Later the tree becomes a symbol of death as indicated in Deuteronomy: "*If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and his corpse hung on a tree, it shall not remain on the tree overnight--since God's curse rests on him who hangs on a tree, you will defile the land*" (Deut 21:22-23). [He also recalls Galatians 3:13] *Christ has delivered us from the power of the law's curse by himself becoming a curse for us, as it is written "accursed is anyone who hangs on a tree."*

Before the arrival of the Judge and the fall of the curtain over the Garden of Eden, we have a brief portrait of the heavenly Father that visualizes the Lord's relationship with man and woman, and theirs with Him. We read that when Adam and Eve heard the approaching presence of God, they hid themselves. They sought to hide from His wrath but, in truth, they hid from his forgiveness. He was coming to bring them hope, to banish their excessive fear, to let the children of men know that it is in their sinfulness that His infinite goodness will show itself. It is the joy of his heart to love and be known by His children.

We project into God the narrowness of our hearts. It is unthinkable to us that God would desire the companionship of sinners, or desire to be their friends; after all, we certainly do not desire friendship with sinners. We insist on perfection in others. How rightly did Mark Twain put it, "God created us in his own image and we returned the compliment!"

It is unthinkable for sinful men to think that God would desire our companionship, and desires to be our friend. Regardless of how outrageous the idea may be, it is a divinely revealed truth. That divine call from the bereaved heart of God, "where are you?" will sound and echo down through the ages.

The time to stand before the Judge has arrived. The Lord enters into his earthly court and the defendants are nowhere to be seen.

*The Lord God called out to the man and said to him, "Where are you?" He replied, "I heard the sound of You in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked, so I hid." Then He asked, "Who told you that you were naked? Did you eat of the tree from which I had forbidden you to eat?" The man said, "The woman You put at my side--she gave me of the tree and I ate." (Gen 3:9-12)*

Interestingly, the Judge asked Adam only three questions, and there were no words of condemnation from the Judge. Adam, with his answers to the three questions, stands self-accused, along with God Himself and Adam's wife. So much for oneness and togetherness! The Judge has addressed only one question to Eve: *“WHAT IS THIS YOU HAVE DONE?” (Gen 3:13).*

Our author will use the next nine chapters of Genesis to give some adequate answers to that question. Eve responds, *“The serpent duped me, and I ate” (Gen 3:13).* The two defendants pleaded “Not Guilty!” The serpent is not questioned. There are no further questions.

At this point Rabbi Jacob asks his students to observe--there is only one repentant person at this trial: The Lord Himself.

The Just Judge of the World finds all three GUILTY! All excuses are inexcusable. The deed that has been done is judged. We are all responsible for the deeds we do. Whatever we *will* to do--we become. We are what we have willed. We will be judged for what we are! We alone are responsible for what we become in our bodies. Paul reminds us: *“We must all stand before the tribunal of the Lord and give an account for our life in the body” (2Cor 5:10).*

The Judgment of the Judge comes swiftly upon the condemned. It falls first upon the serpent, the initial cause of the evil, with a curse.

*Then the Lord God said to the serpent:*

*Because you did this, more cursed shall you be  
than all the cattle and all the wild beasts;  
On your belly shall you crawl, and dirt shall you eat  
all the days of your life.  
I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
and between your offspring and hers;  
He will strike at your head,  
and you shall strike at his heel. (Gen 3:14-15)*

The Serpent in Genesis appears as a mysterious Agent of Evil. Evidently its presence is essential to the story being told. His presence in Genesis apparently is not a one time appearance. Our author makes clear in the judgment scene that the serpent has an abiding presence in the age to come. On some distant battlefield, it will suffer complete defeat.

With a few strokes of the pen, our author implies the serpent is a symbol of an intelligent person who became the “spoiler” in the Garden of Eden.

In the judgment scene the serpent alone is personally cursed. Initially identified as the (*arum*) “crafty” one, he is now the (*arur*) “cursed” one. The Serpent's extraordinary talents bring upon him the Wrath of God.

The first part of the Serpent's judgment concerns his future status with the rest of God's creatures. It will be one of alienation: *"Because you have done this, more cursed you shall be than all the cattle and all the wild beasts"* (Gen 3:14a). The second part of the judgment implies he will exist in a lowly and humiliating form among other creatures: *"On your belly shall you crawl, and dirt shall you eat all the days of your life"* (3:14b). To eat dust in the scriptures evokes a picture of the victor with his foot on the head of the defeated, his face pushed into the dirt. A very graphic picture of defeat!

Rabbi Jacob reminds us that this is not a matter to be taken lightly, for it implies that an enduring spirit of animosity now exists between the Creator and this cursed creature, which became instrumental in the destruction of that which the Garden of Eden symbolized. A war was initiated in which the final battle would be won on some distant field. The enduring Wrath of God rests upon this cursed creature.

The Serpent, in the destruction of Eve--God's unique creation, has invoked the anger of God. The Serpent achieved victory over God through the free will of a woman--the Serpent separated Eve from God. However, the last word in this matter has yet to be said. God Himself will enter actively into this matter: *"I will put enmity between you and the woman, between your offspring and hers"* (3:15a).

This spirit of enmity does not exist between Eve and the Serpent, for she is already in his camp and under his dominion. The enmity exists between "the woman" and "her offspring." The text could imply a New Eve, a new creation, and the Seed of the New Eve through which God will achieve victory over the Serpent. The Serpent achieved victory over God through the free will of Eve; the Lord God will bring about victory through the free will of "the Woman and her Seed."

Our text reveals what will occur on that distant battlefield in which the serpent itself (not his seed) will face the Seed of the Woman: *"He will strike at your head, and you shall strike at his heel"* (3:15b). The picture presented is the head of the serpent under the heel of the Seed of the woman--a scene of total victory over the Evil One by the Lord God.

Now we come to the judgment of Eve, and then Adam. If we look closely we will discover a relationship between what went before and the judgment, and what will now occur. Before getting into the details of the judgment, I want to express some thoughts on the principle of cause and effect now in operation.

A fundament truth revealed in Genesis is that the Lord God is the Source of the created universe. Order--design of creation--proceeds from the divine mind; the goodness and beauty of the created universe expresses the very nature of God. As the author of Wisdom tells us: *"From the greatness and the beauty of created things their original author, by analogy, is seen"* (Wis 13:5). All creation beats to the drum of God's will.

The will of God is not static--it is alive and active. If the will of God be impeded on earth, it would affect, in some degree, all creation. And it *was* impeded, and it *did* affect life on earth. When the Lord made man and woman he placed life on earth under their dominion. God willed it this way, and it is irrevocable.

Such an action would be impossible unless God made it possible. And He did! He made the human person in His Image and Likeness, and He placed life on earth under their dominion. This included their own lives, with their gift of free will. **THE WILL OF GOD IS IRREVOCABLE!**

Eve heard the beat of an alien drum when the hiss of the serpent sounded in her ear. The sound she heard appealed to her and she made it the beat of her own drum. Adam heard the beat and joined the band. Its discordant sound disturbed the harmony of the universe.

We hear its first ill effects when Adam tells God: "*The woman you put here with me--she gave me fruit from the tree, and so I ate it*" (Gen 3:12). So much for Adam's "*This one, at last, is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.*" What once appeared as a great gift from God has now become problematic, and it is God's problem. Storm clouds are gathering!

Speaking to Eve, the Lord God says: "*I will intensify the pangs of your childbearing; in pain shall you bring forth children. Yet your urge shall be for your husband, and he shall be your master*" (Gen. 3:16). What once was a blessing for the woman—the harmonious and equal partnership of marriage blessed with children, has become tainted by their separation from the will of God. "In those moments of life's greatest blessings--marriage and children--the woman would sense most clearly the painful consequences of her rebellion from God."

However, it would be through the blessing of childbirth that the serpent would be defeated, and the lost union with God be restored. "In the painful birth of every child, there was to be a reminder of the hope that lay in God's presence." We read in the scriptures, "*We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present moment...as we wait eagerly the redemption of our own bodies*" (Rom 8:22-23).

The fall from grace equally affected the equality of the relationship between man and woman, as we now read of the husband's domination of his wife. Eve who would not submit her will to the loving will of God, will now be subjected to the will of Adam, whose love for her, as we have already noted, may not be all that loving. No doubt, this condition expressed the status quo at the time of the writing of Genesis.

Let us note that the Will of God is expressed in the first two chapters of Genesis. What we have in the third chapter is the effect of sin: the ill will of man and woman. Ill will results from the exercise of the freedom of human will, or often from the misuse of it. God will not impede the effects of human will; that would imply destroying human freedom.

In the present situation, God offers his loving grace to enable us to have good will toward others. His will for us in the past (and continues to be in the present) is *“this is my command to you, love one another as I have loved you!”* (Jn 15:12).

Concerning the part of the judgment that reads *“yet your urge shall be for your husband,”* is the common interpretation of the Hebrew text. However, Rabbi Jacob points out that interpretation is seriously questioned.

The Hebrew word translated as “desire” is *te suqah*. It occurs in only two other places in the Old Testament: in Gen 4:7, and in the Song of Songs 7:11. Rabbi Jacob points out that the standard method of understanding a particular word in Hebrew is to see how it appears in other texts. In the case at point, the second time this word appears, in Gen. 4:7, is only one chapter removed from its first time in Gen. 3:16. We find the last use of the word in the Song of Songs written after 538 BC--a poetical work that expresses the love of God for his people in terms of human love. Here *te suqah* is used to express the desire of the lover for his beloved: *“I belong to my lover and for me he yearns”* (Sg 7:11).

In the fourth chapter of Genesis, in a statement that deals with Cain, we read *“sin is a demon lurking at the door: his urge is toward you, yet you can be his master”* (Gen 4:7). The statement could certainly be translated in the sense that the wife struggles against the domination of her husband, desiring to gain the upper hand over him. But, within the context of the creation account in Chapter Two, this statement as commonly translated stands in sharp contrast to the picture of man and woman as *“one flesh,”* and the woman as a *“suitable partner for him.”* That text expresses the perfect will of God for the relationship between man and wife. Sin affected negatively this relationship. We now have what is commonly called the “battle of the sexes.”

Genesis certainly implies that proper union between man and woman demands equal respect for the human dignity of both man and woman. The growth and development of both depend upon it. Certainly the will of God demands that both man and woman strive for this respect.

When the author of Genesis relates the punishment upon Adam and Eve, he describes the conditions of his own time. He desires his readers to know that those conditions on earth referred to in a modern ballad as “this bitter earth,” are not what they ought to be. God did not make a “bitter earth.”

*To Adam He said, “Because you did as your wife said and ate of the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You shall not eat of it,’ cursed be the ground because of you; by toil shall you eat of it all the days of your life: thorns and thistles shall it sprout for you. But your food will be the grasses of the field; by the sweat of your brow shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground, for from it you were taken. For dust you are, and to dust you shall return.”* (Gen 3:17-19)

The Lord makes clear to Adam that man himself has brought a curse upon the earth. As man rebelled against the God of Nature, nature rebelled against man. “No more free lunches!” Only by plowing the earth behind a yoke of oxen would the earth reluctantly yield a meager return. If you rest a bit, thorns and thistles will choke it to death.

What was once free for the taking comes now only with toil and sweat. The garden is now off limits. You survive by eating the plants of the fields where the thorns and thistles grow. Your life on earth is filled with thorns and thistles. You have cut the string of the kite that bore you aloft. You fell to earth never to rise. *“You are dirt! To dirt you shall return!”*

*“Then the Lord God said ‘See!’”* Our teacher calls our attention to the use of this “See!” When the Hebrew text seeks to call special attention to an occurrence, it is prefaced by “See!” “Look!” You can expect that an important revelation will follow: *“The man has become like one of us, knowing what is good and what is bad! Therefore he must not be allowed to put out his hand to take fruit from the tree of life also, and thus eat of it and live forever” (Gen 3:22).*

Man and woman not only came to know evil; it became a part of them. Evil must not become immortal. It would destroy the universe! *“The Lord God therefore banished him [Adam] from the garden of Eden [excommunicates him] to till the ground from which he had been taken [Adam is now earthbound]. The Lord stationed the cherubim and the fiery revolving sword, to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen 3:23-24).*

To the outcasts, the Lord God makes a final act of mercy, letting them know there is still an open door: *“For the man and his wife the Lord God made leather garments, with which he clothed them” (Gen 3:21).* Adam and Eve settled down in east of the Garden of Eden. *“The man called his wife Eve, because she became the mother of all the living” (Gen 3:20).* Reflecting upon this name, the author of Sirach writes, *“A great anxiety has God allotted, and a heavy yoke to sons of men; from the day one leaves his mother's womb to the day he returns to the mother of all the living” (Sir 40:1).*

## THE ANCIENT SERPENT

Placing the man Adam and the woman Eve in the Garden of Eden with the commission to cultivate the land, the Reign of God begins on earth. Genesis presents a divine milieu in which the lives of Adam and Eve unfold harmoniously in union with the heavenly Father. With the end of their daily tasks, the Lord joined them “at the breezy time of the day” for a stroll among the trees and along the river bank. Lives, human and divine, become one in the holy communion of friendship. Adam and Eve, holding the hands of one another and the Father, creates the circle of triune love: God and Creation are One.

None of occurrences in Eden escapes the eye of that extra-terrestrial creature Lucifer, who stands silently in the wings, beholding this love-in between God and humankind with a heart aflame with envy.

In Chapter three, verse one, Genesis introduces onto the stage of human history the one identified by Pope Paul VI as “the enemy number one--the tempter par excellence.” He appears benignly in the Garden simply as “the serpent.” However arriving with an introduction worthy of note, “the most cunning of all creatures that the Lord has made,” we cannot but wonder why a celestial creature of such magnitude would be concerned with life on our little planet, and be envious of creatures lower than himself?

Ironically, only in the last book of the Christian Bible is the mask of the guest in the Garden ripped away, revealing, as Paul VI put it, the “terrible reality.” Then we gain some insight into why this creature is earth-bound, and also a bit of a hint of the cause of Lucifer's mysterious envy for us humans.

However, before going to the Apocalypse, we need to note that we do have some information on this subject from later Hebrew Scriptures--*The Book of Wisdom*, which appeared in the Septuagint Bible but was omitted after 90A.D. from later Hebrew Scriptures. We read in Wisdom, “*For God formed man to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made him. But by the envy of the devil, death entered into the world, and they who are in his possession experience it*” (Wis 2:23-24).

Apocalypse chapter 12 reveals:

*Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge dragon, flaming red...His tail swept a third of the stars from the sky and hurled them down to earth. The dragon stood before the woman about to give birth to a son...Her child was caught up to God and to his throne...Then war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels battled against the dragon...The huge dragon, the ancient serpent known as the devil or Satan, the seducer of the whole world, was driven out; he was hurled down to earth and his minions with him...But woe to you, earth and sea, for the devil has come down upon you! His fury knows no limits, for he knows his time is short. (Apoc 12:3-5,7,9,12)*

Satan appears in the beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures, and in the ending of the Christian Scriptures--a prophetic revelation of his presence at the beginning of human life on earth and at its ending. It is left to us to find where he has been in all the time in-between and, more to the point, where he may be presently.

Jesus Christ was no stranger to Satan's presence. He warns his Apostles of Satan's desire to sift them as wheat. Jesus says of Satan, “*He brought death to man from the beginning, and has never based himself on truth: the truth is not in him. Lying speech is his native tongue; he is a liar and the father of lies*” (Jn 8:44-46).



In the spirit of Jesus' teaching, I summarize the work of Satan in two words: Deceive and Destroy--Deception and Destruction. Scripture warns us: he has a preference for appearing as an Angel of Light.

We need to observe Satan's tactic in the Garden because he never changes. His tactics have been too successful to do so. He enters Eden with a plan and purpose. He was exiled to the earth under the dominion of creatures lower than himself--man and woman, who possess the potential to become even greater than the angels. His plan is first to separate them from the will of God by their deliberate rejection of the Will of God. Such an act places them outside of God and within his own camp, to become subjects within his domain, vulnerable in their present state of humanity. This condition makes possible the second part of Satan's plan: to gain dominion of the earth, which is presently under the dominion of Adam and Eve.

There is a teaching in the Scriptures that describe well what occurred in Eden, and its continued effect upon the world. *"When a strong man guards his courtyard, his possessions remain undisturbed, but when a stronger comes and overcomes him, he takes all his possessions as spoils of victory"* (Lk 11:22). With the sin of Adam, Satan assumed dominion of the earth. Scripture speaks of him as "Prince of this world." When Satan tempted Jesus with the offer of the political powers of this world he said to him, *"I will give you all this power and the glory of these kingdoms; the power has been given to me and I give it to whomever I wish"* (Lk 4:6). Jesus did not dispute Satan's boast. Scripture gives this description of the earth's situation: *"Creation was made subject by him [Adam] who once subjected it, yet not without hope, because the world itself will be freed from its slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. Yes, we know that all creation groans and is in agony even until now. Indeed the whole created world eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God"* (Rm 8:20-23).

The fall of Adam and Eve from grace is not a stumbling in the dark over an unexpected object. It is the mega-act of destruction that brings the Twin Towers of Divine Creation down to ground zero.

In order to gain some insight into the enormity of the moral evil of their act, we need to go deeper into the concept of the human being that was made in the Image and Likeness of God. It reveals the God, Creator and Father, with the Heart of Eternal Love. Being made in the Image of God reveals the very nature of Divine Being as a loving Creator, sharing His life with His creatures, becoming not only their Creator but their Father.

Divine life permanently resides in the human nature. It expresses divine love, touching the very nature of the human spirit, and is the very essence of the divine nature. Divine Love for the human person remains an unchangeable and irrevocable gift. It is love lying beyond the will or the deeds of men. It is solely a gift of divine predilection! From this flows that all human beings are recipients of God's paternal care, regardless of the status or condition of a person, whether they be the worst sinner or the holiest saint; whether they are believers, non believers, or totally

indifferent. Simply put, the Love of God is universal, embracing “all rational creatures who make up humanity.”

With the early Christian Fathers, we distinguished between the Image of God and the Likeness of God. Image pertains to the created human nature as a “created substance in God.” Likeness refers to the personal attributes that are developed by the individual person through the deliberate choices of their wills. The Image of God in Adam and Eve could not be touched by an act of their wills, for it consisted in their substantial nature as a human person. This could only cease by an act of annihilation by their Creator.

When we say Adam and Eve were in the “likeness of God,” it implies they possessed preternatural divine gifts in their lives through the presence of the Spirit of God. Through the docility of Adam and Eve to the will of God, their lives truly glorified God the Father on earth. We may rightly say the Kingdom of God was present on earth--in Adam and Eve--as it is in Heaven.

These preternatural gifts were not infinite in nature, but were open to growth and development through their exercise within the lives of their recipients. Adam and Eve were not all-powerful and all-knowing. However, regardless of their limitation, they were glorious beings in whom God took a fatherly delight.

Their limited status did leave the door open to trust and confidence in God's will for them. As we see from the temptation scene, it also left the door open to illusions and fantasies of greatness beyond that permitted by their present status. Who better than the cunning serpent understood this temptation and the consequences of their taking a step upward, which would result in a mega-fall downward?

Pope Paul VI teaches us: “Evil is not merely a lack of something, but an effective agent, a living, spiritual being, perverted and perverting... To refuse to recognize the existence of such a reality is contrary to the teachings of the Bible and the Church. For a correct Christian understanding of the world, life and salvation, it is important to recognize the Real Evil; that it is not a question of one Devil, but of many, is indicated by various passages in the Gospel, but the principle one is Satan. All are creatures of God, but fallen, because of their rebellion and damnation; a whole mysterious world, upset by an unhappy drama. From the fall of Adam, the Devil acquired a certain dominion over them, from which only Christ's redemption can save us. It is a story that is still going on. The question of the Devil and the influence he can exert is a very important chapter of Catholic doctrine which is given little attention today--though it should be studied again.”

St Julian of Norwich reached this vision of the heavenly Father after the fall of Adam and Eve: “The place which the Lord sat on was unadorned, on the ground, barren and waste, alone in the wilderness. It signifies this: He made man's soul to be his own city and his dwelling place, which is most pleasing to him of all his works. And when man had fallen into sorrow and pain, he was not wholly proper to serve that noble office,

and therefore our kind Father did not wish to prepare any other place, but sat upon the ground, awaiting human nature, which is mixed with earth, until the time when his grace in his beloved Son had brought back his city into its noble place of beauty by his hard labor.

What was written of the human heart may well apply to the Divine Heart: "The heart is a lonely Hunter."

The Lord revealed to a Chosen Soul, "I have always wished to remain in this world among men. Since man's creation, I have never for one moment stop living beside him. As Creator and Father, I felt the need to love him. It is not that I need him, but my love, as Father and Creator, makes me feel this need to love man. Thus I live close to man everywhere, I help him in all things, I supply everything. I can see his needs, his toils, all his desires, and my greatest happiness lies in helping him and saving him.

Satan succeeded with his two-fold plan of separating man and woman from God and assuming dominion on earth, thereby inaugurating his reign of darkness. However, his victory remained a bitter-sweet one--God cursed him and the curse carried those prophetic words, "*I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will strike at your head, while you strike at his heel*" (Gen 3:15). It foretold his total defeat.

The Christian Church saw in Jesus Christ the New Adam. Paul would not speak of the Old Adam as a source of life. Adam called his wife "*the mother of all the living,*" but their burdensome gift of sin and suffering, which ended in eternal death, is no gift of life. Eve begets death to her children. Paul proclaims, "*The last Adam has become a life-giving-spirit.*" In Jesus Christ, the human race has begun anew. Jesus will be the source of the life-giving spirit that produces eternal life, destroying the veil of death that hangs over the entire earth. The old order of chaos is being reversed.

It was natural to inquire, if there is a New Adam, is there not a New Eve? The prophecy spoke of "*the Woman and her offspring,*" a woman at total enmity with Satan, one never under his dominion. If Jesus Christ is the New Adam, is not the Virgin Mary the New Eve?

The Archangel Gabriel proclaimed Mary blessed of God: "*Rejoice, O highly favored daughter [keritomene]. The Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women. The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you*" (Lk 1:28,35).

Mary of Nazareth stands fearlessly face-to-face with an archangel who declares her "*full of grace.*" With full consciousness of her human dignity and her personal obligations as a representative of the Chosen People, Mary enters into dialogue when informed she was chosen to be the Mother of the Jewish Messiah. She held heaven at bay until she understood clearly what was requested of her, and how her becoming a

mother was to be accomplished, as she was a virgin.

The heavenly Father had prepared the world for this moment through his choice of the Hebrew People. The preparation culminated in the spirit of this Jewish maiden, standing at the brink of her womanhood. Well-versed in her people's expectations of the Messiah, experiencing her personal total nothingness in the face of this divine request, knowing nothing of what lay ahead of her or what would be demanded of her, and with clear understanding of her situation, purity of heart and firmness of will, she made the greatest leap of faith ever required of a human person. Bowing before the will of God, Mary proclaimed, "*BEHOLD!*" The complete attention of heaven was upon "the Woman." "*I am the servant of God. Let it be done to me as you say.*" Up to this moment no more powerful human words had ever been uttered. "*THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US!*"

Moments before his death, "*Seeing his mother there with the disciple he loved, Jesus said to his mother, 'Woman, there is your son.' Then he said to his disciple, 'THERE IS YOUR MOTHER.'*" There Mary became the New Eve: **MOTHER OF ALL THE LIVING!**

## THE KINGDOM OF GOD

### ISAIAH 11

There is no harm or ruin on the holy mountain:  
as water covers the sea,  
knowledge of God fills the earth.

The baby calf and the little lion together play;  
the lion and ox, side-by-side, eat their grass,  
and the child is a friend of the cobra. (6-8)

All is very good on God's holy mountain!

### EZEKIEL 28

And Adam

In Eden, the Garden of God, you are  
And every precious stone is your covering:  
Carnelian, topaz, beryl, chrysolite, onyx,  
Jasper, sapphire, garnet and emerald.

On the day of your creation, your pendants  
Of gold and jewels were made.

You are stamped with the seal of perfection  
Of complete wisdom and perfect beauty,

On the holy mountain  
God placed you with the Cherub  
To walk among the fiery stones.

From the day of your creation  
You are blameless in your conduct.  
A golden throne you occupy yet  
you are a man and not a god.

Because of your beauty  
you became haughty of heart:  
thinking how like a god you are  
to have the mind of God.

You debased your wisdom  
for the sake of splendor  
and evil was found in you.

Eating from the Tree  
of Good and evil  
you sinned.  
God banned you from the holy mountain:  
The Cherub drove you  
from among the fiery stones.  
So great your guilt God cast you down  
from the holy mountain  
into the dust of the earth.

The angels stand aghast at you:  
a horror you are to them,  
you will be no more.

My Spirit, says the Lord God,  
no longer remains in man,  
he has become flesh.

His days will be years:  
A hundred and twenty  
And no more.  
Cursed is the earth  
Because of you  
ADAM.

## CHAPTER THREE

### LIGHT AND DARKNESS

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

(Please read Chapter Three)

1. What do you understand when it said that “good is the effect of divine love”?
2. What does this teach us about the nature of “the good”?
3. Why is the rejection of God's commandment the rejection of God's love?
4. By what means did the serpent bring about the fall of Eve?
5. What three good reasons did Eve have for disobeying God?
6. What do you see as the true nature and primary evil effect of the sin of Adam and Eve?
7. Why does God not directly impede the effects of our sins?
8. How do you understand Jesus' teaching to St. Julian that Adam's sin was the greatest sin ever committed?
9. What does the First Judgment teach us about the Judge and His way of judging and our own future judgment?
10. What is meant by saying the punishment fits the sin/crime?
11. What does this imply about sin for which we remain unrepentant?
12. How does the Christian Church interpret Genesis 3:14-15?
13. What effects did the sin of Adam and Eve have upon their own personal relationship?
14. What does Jesus' teaching to Saint Catherine that “every sin is rooted in self-love” personally teach you?
15. If every sin is rooted in self-love what would you say is the root of all holiness!

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PRELUDE TO THE DELUGE

*THIS LOVE OF YOURS IS LIKE MORNING MIST; LIKE MORNING DEW THAT QUICKLY DISAPPEARS (Hos 6:4).*

Life in the Garden of Eden symbolized human life in intimacy with God. In the exodus from Eden, human existence itself passes into a state of alienation and becomes earth-bound.

Genesis does not concern itself with the heredities of sin or death as a consequence of sin, but with our separation from God. Evil enters into human existence as a result of man's and woman's deliberate rejection of the Light of the will of God. "*AND IF YOUR LIGHT IS DARKNESS, HOW DEEP WILL THE DARKNESS BE!*" (Mt 6:23).

All goodness lies within the Will of God. Evil lies within the human will that is separated from the will of God. Acts contrary to the will of God produce evil. *Knowingly* and *deliberately* opposing the will of God, not stumbling blindly in the dark, makes a person an instrument of evil. We become what we knowingly will to do. Hebrew scholars acknowledge a spirit of rebellion within the human heart, recognizing it as an evil inclination. It is a bitter root that bears bad fruit. It will affect divine, human, and earthy relations. Genesis throws light upon the rupture that sin causes between the Creator and the creature, and the love between man and woman; it is a harbinger of the coming corruption of the earth itself. God controlled the growth of evil in man, and the perpetuation of evil indefinitely, through our first parents' expulsion from Eden, which made the tree of life inaccessible to them.

Many commentators on Genesis see "the man" and "the woman" of Eden as representatives of the human race. Certain Jewish scholars see this identification carried on through the Jewish People. In Genesis, we are dealing with the primary relationship of God with humanity. Genesis acknowledges the supreme position of humans on earth, and their custodial position to the rest of creation. This position flows from the creation of man and woman in the Image of God. As representatives of God on earth, they are the channels of the divine will for the continual growth and development of life on earth.

The powers to accomplish this, intellect and free will, are intrinsic to human nature. As the human will is a blind power and limited, the human being must be open to divine guidance in order to properly fulfill its obligations. Both reason and divine revelation remind us of the supremacy of the Divine Mind: "*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts*" (Is 55:8-9).

In the first chapters of Genesis, we are presented with the mind and will of human beings in conformity with the mind and will of God. This harmonious relationship is symbolically represented in Eden in the Tree of Life, source of Eternal Life. The Lord invites man and woman to enter totally into His divine will, and by so doing, continually to grow in the likeness of God. The union of the mind and heart of man and woman with God, symbolized in the Tree of Life, invites them on a journey into the infinity of the eternal life. As it is a journey into the life of God Himself, God alone can be the Guide.

The omniscience of the Divine Mind is symbolized in that mysterious Tree of Good and Evil. It teaches us that in this world, in our present situation, only God can truly discern what is good and evil in our lives. We are but children in the universe, and our world is not the only world. There exist other intelligent beings in the universe that are unknown to us, and among them exist forces hostile to our existence. We cannot deal properly with an enemy we do not know, one that we do not know is our enemy, or even why it is our enemy. God requests we trust in his love for us, and to let His Word be our guiding light along the unknown path to our eternal home. Our heavenly Father reaches out to take our hand and lead his little children safely to their destination. He whispers in the ear, *“If you hear the voice of God today, harden not your heart.”*

Chapter Three of Genesis presents the rebellion of man and woman against God. It reveals their deep down desire to be like gods who know what is good and bad. They desire to be their own gods--to be omniscient, to determine for themselves what is good and evil. They would create their own Garden of Eden and determine their own path to self fulfillment. They refused to acknowledge the authority of God over their lives and to honor and to glorify Him. They recognized no need for any union with God. They are like spoiled children who leave the house of their father who said “yes” to nine of their requests but “no” to the tenth, to find the fulfillment of their tenth request. In the end they lose the other nine and fail to find fulfillment of the tenth. They lose everything but the love of their Father for them. That love does not depend upon them.

With unrepentant mind and heart, man and woman leave the Garden of Eden on their self-determined quest. We read of their Exodus out of the Kingdom of God: *“For the man and his wife the Lord God made leather garments, with which he clothed them...The Lord God therefore banished them from the Garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he had been taken. When he expelled the man, he settled him east of the garden of Eden; and stationed the cherubim and the fiery revolving sword, to guard the way to the tree of life”* (Gen. 3:21,23-24).

We read that God settles them *“east of the garden of Eden.”* Our author has given the word “east” a symbolic meaning; it implies moving away from the land of God, moving toward Sodom and Gomorrah, going toward the city of Babylon. With the sad heart of a father, the Lord sends his unrepentant children on their way; they want it so and they have it so! Man and woman *“exchanged the truth of God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator”* (Rom 1:25). The Lord does not send them out naked into an alien world. God designs leathery garments, and clothes them Himself with garments designed by Yahweh. They rejected God's love over their lives, but God does not reject them.



Before the Gates of Eden shut behind their backs, they had shut the door of their hearts to God. They closed their hearts to Him, but their lives would always have need of him. God does not enter a closed door, He stands and knocks. He will touch them where He can in their physical needs--clothing them in their nakedness. He will remain closer to them than the clothes on their backs. God will always be in their lives and do for them what He is permitted to do.

Man and woman, with sinful hearts and a spirit alien to God, have set upon the course of their lives. What they are now will affect all their relationships--with their individual selves, with each other, with future children, and with the very environment in which they exist. A good tree bears good fruit. A bad tree bears bad fruit.

Man fulfilled his goal to be like God. After the Fall he was like God but no longer "with God." Our author teaches us that man's happiness does not consist in being like God so much as it does in being "with God."

I have no picture of man and woman departing Eden with bowed heads, walking hand-in-hand. That business of "*flesh of my flesh, bone of my bone*" ended when Adam, so to speak, throws his wife to the wolves, and when he put the blame for his sin upon God and Eve. "*The woman you put beside me, she gave me of the tree and I ate*" (Gen 3:12). If Eve had been my mother, I know what she would have said, "Don't put that monkey on my back!" Already Eve began to understand those words "*your husband will dominate you!*" (Gen 3:16).

A very unhappy man and woman leave Eden with hearts filled with fear and anxiety of what lay ahead for both of them. Adam leads the procession with Eve following behind. With every docile step she takes, every beat of her heart says, "he's going to pay for this!" The war begins. They remain together; they need one another, there is no one else. Their union will not be without thorns and thistles. In the Garden, man worshipped God. Out of the garden he tilled a hard and barren earth. Now their lives are earth bound. Once soaring eagles, they now live like barnyard chickens. (In case no one notes it, the Serpent slithers closely behind them, a great victory won. But the war has just begun!)

Genesis revealed these thoughts in the mind of God: "*See! The man has become like one of us, knowing what is good and what is bad! Therefore, he must not be allowed to put his hand to take fruit from the tree of life also, and thus eat of it and live forever*" (Gen 3:22). The prophecy given in Chapter 2: 17 has come to be. "*From that tree you shall not eat; the moment you eat from it you are surely doomed to die.*" Now we know--the good can live forever but the evil must perish!

The irony of it is they have come to be what they wanted--to be like God. But they lost God, the source of life. Being like God was a blessing they desired, and it was a blessing God willed for them. It would come to fruition within the unfolding of the divine plan, but they couldn't wait. They would have it their way. "Their way" would serve as a reminder to us to reject our way, and to follow "His Way." It is "The Way!"

The Gift of Life is God's gift to share with man and woman. It is not a gift intrinsic to human nature; we were not created immortal beings. As the rest of living creatures, we have our allotted time on earth. Curtailing human life on earth does not violate our human freedom, for it lies beyond the power of human will. However, we can terminate life on earth. When we do so, we tread at our own peril into the divine domain.

At the closing of Chapter Three, Genesis introduces us to exquisite, celestial creations--the Cherubim, a being very high in the angelic order. The origin of the word may be found in the Assyrian word *karubu* meaning "powerful." We find this angelic being associated with the Divine Presence. The Scriptures speak of the Lord of Hosts "*enthroned on the Cherubim! You alone are God of all kingdoms of the earth*" (Is 37:15). The Scriptures speak of them as a four winged creature.

In the creation of the Ark of the Covenant, God gives Moses these instructions concerning the image of the Cherubim. They were to be of hammered gold of one piece. Two golden Cherubim were to be placed above the Ark, one on one side and one on the other, with their faces facing the Ark and their two front wings covering the Ark of the Covenant. They guard the contents of the Ark, source of wisdom and righteousness. The Hebrews discovered that in obedience to its contents rests the "key," opening the way of our return to union with God (see Ex 25:18-20). The Lord tells Moses: "*From there...I will impart to you all that I will command you concerning the Israelite peoples*" (Ex. 25:22).

In Mesopotamia, two powerful figures of winged bulls stood guarding the entrance to the temple. We have noted that when God drove man and woman out he "*stationed east of the Garden of Eden the cherubim with the fiery ever-turning sword to guard the way to the tree of life*" (Gen 3:24). It leaves a depressing impression--there is no turning back, it is only eastward now.

Is there no antidote to this lethal infection of human nature? Is there hope for the redemption of the human race? Both Jewish and Christian commentators find sparks of hope in the Genesis narrative. As we have earlier observed, the Christian commentators see it in the prophecy made to the serpent: "*I will put enmity between thee and the woman and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head while you strike at his heel*" (Gen 3:15). They interpret this as a prophecy referring to the Mother of the Messiah and her son, who will destroy the power of sin and Satan and the power of death over mankind.

The Jewish commentators do not see any necessity for a personal messiah to destroy the power of evil of mankind. The root for their belief is found in the words of Proverbs 3.

*The fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom: She is a tree of life to those who grasp her. And whoever holds her is happy...My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your mind return to my commandments; for they will bestow on you length of days, years of life and well being. You will find favor and approbation in the eyes of God and man. He will make your path smooth. It will be a cure for your body, a tonic for your bones and your barns will be filled with grain, your vats with new wine. (Prv 3:18,1-8)*

In the mind of the Hebrew People the practice and study of the Torah renews intimacy with the Lord God and leads to eternal life. The Rabbis teach that for the evil inclination in man, the “Holy One created the Torah as its antidote” (b B. Bat. 16a).

Man and woman rejected the Word of God, and it became the “fiery ever-turning sword” impeding a return to the source of eternal life. We read, “Indeed, God's word is living and effective, sharper than any two-edged sword. It penetrates and divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the reflections and thoughts of the heart” (Hb 4:12). The return to Eden is through the “fiery ever-turning sword” entering deep into the Word of God, risking one's death in order to find the life lost.

At this point in history we are far away from the Torah and the Redeemer. Let us now join Rabbi Jacob as he enrolls the scroll and reads: “Now the man knew his wife Eve.” He tells us that these words could just as well be translated that Adam “had known” his wife. It could imply the child had been conceived in the Garden of Eden, present in his mother's womb at the time of God's judgment upon Eve. Being in the womb of his mother is being one with her; did Eve's judgment by God in any way affect her child? Hebrew Scriptures do speak of the sins of the parents affecting their offspring.

Rabbi Jacob mentioned that many commentators in the past have attributed the sin of Adam and Eve to have been a sexual sin. “If nothing else,” he tells us, “it demonstrates people's preoccupation with sexual matters and their sharing their fantasies with us. God's first command to man and woman is ‘increase and multiply.’” He adds to this, “He who wills an end, wills the means to the end. As sexual intercourse is the means to fulfill such a command, God did not forbid sexual intercourse in the Garden of Eden but commanded it.”

Chapter Four of Genesis gives us a brief glimpse of life outside the Garden of Eden, as it continues the story of human history with the recorded birth of Cain, the first born son of Adam and Eve. Speaking of Cain as “a tiller of the soil” reflects us back to the Lord's words to Adam, wherein God foretells the back-breaking work that lay ahead of man.

Genesis attributes human birth both to divine and human activity, confirming that the power to produce human life is a God-given power. A child born of woman is in the image and likeness of God. Only God's power produces this effect in the human person.

Our author places the name of God for the first time upon the lips of a human being; it rests upon the lips of Eve as she proclaims: “I have gained a male child with the help of God!” (Gen 4:1). Eve's words have a very positive ring to them. However, the words can be translated in less positive manner—“I have created a man equal to the Lord.” In these words Eve boasts that as God has created a man, so has Eve. In other words, “how like to God I am!” Seemingly, this arrogant interpretation is more in keeping with the spirit of this fallen woman.

Following the birth of Cain, Abel is born. He will become a shepherd. It is his birth that points us towards the future and the fulfillment of the promised seed. The role of shepherd plays an important part in the history to follow.

With no further reference to the two brothers other than *“Now Abel kept flocks and Cain worked the soil” (Gen 4:2)*, our author immediately records, *“In the course of time Cain brought an offering to the Lord from the fruit of the soil, while Abel, for his part, brought one of the best firstlings of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not” (Gen 4:3-5)*.

From our own knowledge of the Lord, we know that the problem is not with the gift but with the giver. The heart of Abel is at peace with the Lord, but apparently the heart of Cain is not.

The problem between Cain and Abel, and God and Cain, seemingly comes from the deep down recesses of Cain’s own heart. What was the sign of approval given to Abel’s offering and not to Cain’s? It is not known, but it was sufficient to produce a dark mood in the heart of Cain. *“And the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you so resentful and crestfallen?’” (Gen 4:6)*. The Lord directed Cain to look into his own life for the cause of his problems. If his action is bearing bad fruit, its source is a bitter root within him. We have these words on the subject from another sources: *“his own works were wicked, and his brother’s just” (1Jn 3:12)*; *“by faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain” (Heb 11:4)*; and *“If you bring your gift to the altar and there recall your brother has anything against you, leave the gift at the altar, go first to be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Mt 5:23-24)*.

Cain becomes very resentful and depressed. His resentfulness is directed toward God and Abel. So the Lord asked Cain why he was so *“resentful and crestfallen”*. Seemingly with the Lord, a question always precedes judgment; the source of the judgment lies within the answer to the question.

Something is not right in the heart of Cain, and it needs to be corrected. If it is not, it can lead to something much worse. The Lord, who reads the heart, knows the answer whether verbalized or not. The Lord tells Cain, *“If you do well, you can hold up your head; but if not, sin is a demon lurking at the door; his urge is toward you, yet you can be his master” (Gen 4:7)*.

We read in another translation *“sin is crouching at your door.”* Our Lord presents a very picturesque portrait of sin as an anxious animal at Cain’s door, waiting entrance. The Hebrew word translated “crouching” is *robes*, a word very similar to an Akkadian word, *rabisu*, which designates a certain kind of evil spirit. The text seemingly implies this evil spirit is with Cain and seeks to dominate him. [Ed. note: the Akkadians were an ancient Semitic people who lived in Mesopotamia. Their language shares some characteristics with ancient Hebrew.]

Our Lord reminds Cain that he possesses the power to reject the evil spirit. However there is a hardness of heart on Cain's part, and he rejects the word of God. So, "*now Cain said to his brother Abel, 'Let us go out to the field.' And while they were in the field Cain attacked his brother Abel and killed him*" (Gen 4:8).

The Lord said to Cain, "*Where is your brother Abel?*" And he said, "*I do not know, am I my brother's keeper?*" (Gen. 4:9). Our Lord's words to Cain imply that he has a responsibility to "watch out" for his brother. The Hebrew word *smr*, translated as "keeper," is often translated to mean "watch," i.e. "Am I my brother's watchman?" Later the Lord says of Abraham: "*Abraham listened to my voice and kept my watch!*"

Life outside of the Garden has only just begun and Cain soaks the earth with the blood of his brother. Murder begins with fratricide, not with killing an enemy but one's own blood. It is a harbinger of ill for the human race. Fratricide becomes only too common in biblical times. Solomon will kill his brother Adonijeh; Absalom kills his brother Ammon; Abimelek kills seventy of his brothers; a bitter root springs up between Jacob and Esau, and Joseph and his brothers; Benjamin wars with his fellow tribes of Israel; and the struggle develops between Israel and Judah. The word "fields" repeatedly occurs in these stories—"they fought in the fields"--fields cursed with a brother's blood-cry out to the Lord. Can this earth become more than a "killing field"?

Reflecting upon this sin one commentator observes:

Everyone with children learns that it is not the specific content of the fights that matters so much as the fact of the fight. The issue is the existence of the sibling. As the first humans to have a sibling, Cain and Abel are the archetype for sibling rivalry and a warning to parents not to take it lightly for as the Lord warns: "Sin crouches at the threshold!"

Cain and Able became archetypes in human history: Cain--the godless man, man of the earth, the first citizen in the City of Man; Abel--the spiritual man, belonging to the City of God.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "*What have you done? Hark, your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground! Therefore, you shall be more cursed than the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. If you till the soil, it shall no longer yield its strength to you. You shall become a ceaseless wanderer on earth*" (Gen 4:10-12). The earth was cursed because of Adam; the earth curses Cain.

The words the Lord directed to the guilty Cain are the same as those that God directed to Cain's mother, "*WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?*" Is there a relationship between their sins?

If we trace Cain's sin back to Eve, then we must trace Eve's sin back to its originator. Jesus gives us this teaching, speaking of the devil, "*He brought death to man from the beginning*" (Jn 8:44b). We ask, what motivated the devil to bring death to man? We have an answer in Wisdom: ENVY! "*Through the envy of the devil, death entered the world*" (Wis 2:24).

What can we say of the evil spirit of Envy? Envy is Satan's second sin, the one after pride. Envy is the begrudging another the possession of something. "Envious" stresses a covetousness of something, such as riches or attainment. Envy is an inordinate desire for what belongs to someone else--their success, their good fortune.

Envy can be expressed in an urgent, even malicious desire to see another disposed of their blessings or see them destroyed. It receives perverse pleasure in the misfortune of another. The other's talents or gifts become the cause of one's own pain and suffering. The other becomes an object of hate and the recipient of one's destructive energies. The Scriptures see envy as speaking from the depth of the human heart. Envy experiences no guilt as it plots evil, seeking the destruction of goodness. All wisdom has fled; envy clings to what is evil.

Envy negates one's own power and glory as it concentrates upon the power and glory of another. In focusing on the other's gifts, it fails to recognize its own gifts and talents, which lay fallow. It leads to self pity and an unconscious rejection of self, while despising others as the cause of one's own impotence.

The book of Wisdom describes the evil the envious can inflict upon an object of their envy, *"Let us beset the just one, because he is obnoxious to us. He sets himself against our doings. To us he is the censure of our thoughts; merely to see him is a hardship for us"* (Wis 2:12,14).

Scriptures teach that we are an object of Satan's envy. Why would a creature of the angelic order be envious of human beings? Perhaps we find an adequate answer to this question in the Book of Hebrews. There we read:

*What is man that you should be mindful of him or the son of man that you should care for him? You made him for a little while lower than the angels. You crowned him with glory and honor and put all things under his feet. (Heb 2:6-8)*

*To which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my son; today I have begotten you? ...Let all the angels of God worship him." ...To which of the angels has God ever said, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. Are they not all ministering spirits, sent to serve those who are to inherit salvation?" (Heb 1:5,6b,13-14)*

The Serpent appears in Genesis already filled with envy for man and woman, who were made in the image and likeness of God. If the Divine Plan willed a member of the human race to be united with God, and in That Person human nature would be exalted above the angelic, becoming an object of angelic worship, it would propose a serious test for angelic humility. If God also decreed That Person, and all human beings, would come to share in this exalted status through faith and love, we find reason enough for the war that broke out in the heavens, and for Lucifer to cry *"Non Serviam!"* resounding through the heavens. It certainly would be sufficient reason to explain his envy for man and woman. Angels also are created with free will.

The Book of Revelation does confirm that *“war broke out in heaven...The huge dragon, the ancient Serpent known as the devil or Satan, the seducer of the whole world, was driven out; he was hurled down to earth and his minions with him” (Rev 12:7,9)*. We find in Revelation, almost as a footnote, *“But woe to you, earth and sea [a merism], for the devil has come down upon you” (Rev 12:12)*.

Some years ago there was a movie made in which a man of considerable pity and musical talent grew to hate God because of the musical genius of another man. The envious man sought his revenge upon God by seeking to destroy the man God loved and blessed so abundantly. He saw the talents of the other as God’s rejection of him, and a grave injustice. In the case above, Satan did bring suffering, and to “That Person.”

Seemingly Eve was both envious and jealous of God. She was envious of God’s knowing good and evil, and her jealousy led her to seek what is God’s as her own--to be like God! When God said to Eve, *“What have you done,”* she denied any responsibility for it, and expressed no repentance.

*“Apples don't fall too far from the tree!”* Evidently rivalry existed between Cain and Abel. The whole world was Cain’s until Abel appeared on the scene. Did the parents show special affection for the younger, as Jacob did for his young son Joseph? It became apparent at the time of sacrifice that God favored Abel over Cain. If rivalry existed earlier, it was now envy, and deadly. As long as Abel lived, his presence would always be a source of depression for Cain. Scripture passes this judgment on Cain *“Cain killed his brother because his own works were wicked and his brother's just” (1Jn 3:12)*. The Lord responds to Cain’s *“Am I my brother's keeper?”* with judgment: *“Hark, your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground!” Gen 4:10*).

Once again, the theme arises that the environment becomes hostile to humans as a result of human corruption. That is a truth whose time has come; our conscious awareness increases concerning the vital relationship between man and his environment.

It was a belief that God hid his face from those with whom He was angry. Cain’s response expresses his belief that he was now banished from the presence of God. The consequence of his sin comes upon him: he has forfeited the sanctuary of his own family. He now has no one to protect his own life. *“Cain said to the Lord, ‘My punishment is too great to bear! Since you have banished me this day from the soil, and I must avoid your presence and become a restless wanderer on earth, anyone who meets me may kill me at sight!’” (Gen 4:13-14)*.

The man who could not tolerate God’s goodness to his brother, now looks to God for mercy, and he finds compassion. God will do for him what He can. *“The Lord said to him, ‘I promise, if anyone kills Cain, sevenfold vengeance shall be taken on him.’ And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest anyone who met him should kill him. Cain left the presence of the Lord and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden” (Gen 4:15-16)*.

The story of Cain and Abel demonstrate a theme very common in the Old Testament: the difference between what God wills, and human customs and expectations. *“My ways are not*

*your ways!*” Do not expect your 2 x 2 to equal 4 in the heavenly realm. The mark God set upon Cain gave evidence that Cain was under divine protection and could not be touched. The sign read *Noli me tangere!* It was a custom in that ancient civilization for slaves attached to a temple to be marked with the emblem of their deity, which placed them in a special category in relation to other people.

We are told of Cain's exile: “*Cain then left the Lord's presence and settled in the land of Nod east of Eden.*” The land of Nod expresses a “no-place”; it means the land of nomads--of wanderers. Our author appears to see Cain as an example of repentance and forgiveness. The Compassionate Lord does for him whatever Cain's circumstance in life permits God to do.

Some commentators see no moral goodness coming forth from Cain and his descendants, only evil--murder, polygamy, contempt for human life, spirit of vengeance, and irreverent speech about God. Others see Cain as the founder of the first city--the City of Man--from which will flow many material blessings: the craft of herdsmanship for those leading a nomadic life, the invention of musical instruments, and the discovery of working in metals.

Genesis presents a brief sketch of Cain and his ancestors. “*Cain had relations with his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. Cain also became the founder of a city, which he named after his son Enoch*” (Gen 4:17). When we are told he founded “a city,” it implies some dwelling places with a fortification around it. Cain establishes a society and a place in which he will be safe.

Some see this as the first example of a “City of Refuge,” later to be established among the Hebrews as a safe place for those accused of capital crimes. We read in Numbers 35,

*The Lord said to Moses: “Say to the sons of Israel, When you go across the Jordan into the land of Canaan, select for yourselves cities to serve as asylum, where a manslayer who has killed someone unintentionally may take refuge. These cities shall serve you as a place of asylum from the avenger of blood, so that the manslayer shall not be put to death unless he is first tried before the community. They shall serve not only the Israelite but all the resident or transient aliens among them.” (Num 35:9-12,15)*

In recounting Cain's family, Genesis lists its first genealogy:

*To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad became the father of Mehujael; Mehujael the father of Methushael, and Methushael became the father of Lamech. Lamech took two wives, the name of the first Adah, and the second Zillah. Adah bore Jabal; he was the father of those who dwell in tents and have cattle. His brother's name was Jubal; he was the father of all those who play the lyre and pipe. Zillah bore Tubalcain; he was the ancestor of all who forge instruments of bronze and iron. The sister of Tubalcain was Naamah. (Gen 4:17-22)*



Our text now presents the poem of Lamech, which one commentator states “continues the dark theme of violence associated with his ancestor Cain, and attests to the increasing evil of the human race.”

*And Lamech said to his wives:  
“Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;  
wives of Lamech, give ear to my speech;  
I have slain a man for wounding me,  
a lad for bruising me.  
If Cain is avenged sevenfold,  
then Lamech seventy-sevenfold.” (Gen 4:23-24)*

With that little speech, the curtain falls on Cain and his ancestors. With an audible sigh of relief, Rabbi Jacob observes, “Cain’s line will not survive the flood, and the people-Israel will emerge from the lineage of the younger son’s replacement.”

Nevertheless in all fairness to our author it is apparently his intention to present Lamech and the City of Cain in a favorable light as supporting the legal justice system of the time. His presentation brings to mind what is called the *lex talionis*, which seeks to make the punishment fit the crime, and holds back massive and unjust retaliation for a crime. We read in Exodus 21:23-24, “*Life for life, eye for eye.*” A similar passage in Leviticus 24:19-20 warns “*If anyone maims his fellow, as he has done so shall it be done to him...The same injury he inflicted on another shall be inflicted on him.*” Deuteronomy 19:21 states “*Nor must you show pity: life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot.*”

Lamech appealed to the fact that he only injured the one who had injured him. He was not a shedder of innocent blood. He did not hate his neighbor, lie in wait for him, rise up against him, or kill him as Cain had Abel. “*If Cain, who killed in malice, could be avenged seven times then Lamech could be avenged seventy-seven times*” (Gen 4:24).

In his example of Lamech, our author desired to demonstrate that the City of Cain represented an ordered society, in which life and civic affairs could unfold in order under the law.

Genesis now turns away from Cain and his accomplishments to center upon the birth of a new son born in place of Abel. It is in such narratives that the author clearly emphasizes his interest in the seed of the woman that will crush the head of the serpent. The one to whom the promised seed will come is not the heir apparent, the eldest son, but the one God chooses. Abel, the younger son, receives God's favor; Seth, another younger son replaced Abel. Cain will not become part of that royal line, nor Japheth, Ham, Nahor, Ishmael, Lot or Esau. “*God's ways are not man's ways.*”

Genesis returns to Adam and his genealogy. *“And Adam knew his wife again and she gave birth to a son, and she called his name Seth, meaning, ‘God has provided me with another offspring in place of Abel, for Cain killed him.’ And to Seth, in turn, a son was born, and he named him Enosh. It was then that men began to invoke the Lord by name” (Gen 4:25-26).*

Verse 26 in Chapter 4 brings us to a high point in the Genesis narrative. It tells us that this is the time when men began to call upon the name of Yahweh. This true worship comes from the line of Seth and not Cain. Here Genesis makes clear that the worship of the Lord, established at the time of Moses, was, in truth, a return to the worship of the only true God.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### PRELUDE TO THE DELUGE

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

(Please read Chapter Four)

1. What is the Christian Church's teaching concerning the person of Satan, his power in the world, and over the souls of people?
2. What do the words of Jesus in John 8:43-45 teach us about the person and the activities of Satan?
3. What do you see as the major moral concern of Genesis?
4. What does "all goodness lies within the Will of God" teach you?
5. Why would you say the human person is in need of divine guidance concerning moral good and evil in our lives?
6. What is being symbolized when we are told man and woman live outside of the Garden-East of Eden?
7. What does the presence of the Cherubim with a flaming, swinging sword barring entrance to Eden symbolize for us?
8. In light of Proverbs 3:18, what do the Jewish teachers hold as the way to return to Eden?
9. Why do we hold that sexual intercourse was not forbidden in the Garden of Eden, but rather it was commanded by God?
10. How do you see life unfolding for human beings outside of the Garden of Eden?
11. What do the lives of Cain and Abel symbolizes for you?
12. What do you learn from Genesis 4: 6-7?
13. How would you describe the nature and power of Envy?
14. How would you discern the presence of envy in your own soul?
15. How would you describe human life as being lived east of Eden in Chapter Four of Genesis?

## CHAPTER FIVE

### GENEALOGIES IN GENESIS

*“HE WALKED WITH GOD!” Gen 5:24*

It is the opinion of some commentators, the purpose of Genesis is to demonstrate how it came to be that Jacob is the founding father of the one race chosen by God, out of all the nations of the earth, to be his own. It is a delicate and complex subject.

The author of Genesis apparently adapted a style of writing, recognizable to his contemporaries, by which he clothed the important religious truths in forms of concrete graphic narration. He certainly would have known from other historical sources in Egypt and Mesopotamia that the beginning of life on earth came to be in a time far beyond any historical record. From that world, in which a day of earthly time is as a thousand years and a thousand years of time is as day, our author creates a period of time in which to conveniently unfold the story to be told.

Moses designed Genesis in order to present the origin of the human race in Adam, and to trace that origin with Adam down through history to Jacob and his family. The narrative unfolds in such a way that there is a direct relationship between Adam and Thare (or Terah), the father of Abraham.

Adam died in the “year of creation” 930 years old, when Mathusala (or Mathuselah) was already 56. When Mathusala came to die in the year 1650, Noah was 600 years old. Noah survived the birth of Abraham by 60 years, and died only 15 years before Abraham's departure from Harran for Canaan. Three lives, therefore, covered the whole period (E. Power, S.J.).

It is not possible for us to discriminate between elements that are strictly historical and others that are symbolic, but they are all necessary for the completion of the picture presented. The Hebrew People knew that they had been elected by God to be the Chosen People. God's choice was no mere accident of time, rather, it was part of God's providential plan from the beginning of time. This is the lesson that lies behind the genealogies narrated in Genesis. We have an analogy to such historical records in the Babylonian Tablets that relate to time before the flood, but with no evident religious significance.

The long lives of Adam and his descendants find a parallel in the Sumerian King List, a very ancient Mesopotamian text, in which pre-flood kings lived an astronomical number of years longer than those coming after the flood. King EnMenLuAna of

Babtibira, in Sumeria, ruled 43,000 years; King Dumuzi, also of Babtibira, ruled 36,000 years. The seven kings mentioned in the Sumerian King List reigned a combined total of around 240,000 years, which implies that things existed on a much grander scale in those times of gods and giants.

We also know that the science of numerology was very significant, and that numbers had symbolic meanings among the inhabitants of the Ancient Near East. We know for an example that “40” meant an unknown amount of time--40 days, 40 months, 40 years.

Within this time frame of Genesis, the genealogies of ten important names appear: Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, and Noah. Out of these ten men, we are told of eight of them, “he died,” but of two there is no mention of death: Enoch and Noah.

Chapter Five begins with a major break within the Genesis narrative, signifying a new aspect of the history of mankind. The narrative up to this point may be said to have been of God's world, but now begins the unfolding of man's world (man and woman), in which God, the Creator, stands on the periphery of His own creation. Nevertheless, the role of God in the destiny of the human race remains a major role.

God's creation of man and woman in the image and likeness of God imparts to them the divine qualities of intelligence and free will. God entrusts to them the custodianship of life on earth. God must now permit the exercise of their free will, which He cannot impede without destroying the human person as He intended them to be. Impeding the effects of man's free choices reduces the concept of free will to a game of “let's make-believe.” The destruction of the physical life of the human person certainly remains within his jurisdiction, for God did not make human beings to be immortal.

However, God works with the evil effects of our lives within our world, but it will be through the good will of human beings themselves--people who are willing to be God's partners in the restoration of God's lost kingdom on earth.

The evil that man has done, man must undo, if God's will is to be accomplished in human lives and on this earth. This is possible only when man surrenders his will to the power of God's will. When a person with purity of heart prays “Thy will be done on earth as in heaven,” he or she becomes a divine channel of God's power in the world. In such a condition, the freedom of God and the human person remains intact.

Chapter Five begins with the establishment of the role of fatherhood on earth--both the Fatherhood of God and the Fatherhood of Mankind. Eve, as already noted, has been named by her husband as *Hawhaw*--The Mother of all Living.

Some commentators have observed, with a bit of irony, the Hebrew word *hawhaw* is later used to signify a “snake.” Even for a misogynist, isn't it a bit too much to see

Eve as mother of reptiles--even if she does give birth to some sneaky and slimy creatures?

Chapter Five opens with a parallel between God and Adam. It opens with the words, *"This is a record of Adam's line."* What comes first relates to Adam's origin as we read in Genesis 5:1-2: *"When God created man, He made him in the likeness of God; male and female he created them. When they were created, he blessed them and named them 'Adam' [Man]."* God uses the name "Adam" for the first time. Within the ancient world of the Near East, the naming of a child by the father confirmed the fatherhood of the child. God acknowledges He is the Father of the human race. What now follows in this short narration establishes the fatherhood of Adam, and recognizes the divine filial-ship of all men and women that were being made in the image and likeness of God. *"When Adam had lived 130 years, he begot a son in his likeness after his image, and he named him Seth" (Gen 5:3).*

Adam confirms Seth as his son--created in his image and likeness, which is the image and likeness of God. Our author goes on to narrate, *"After the birth of Seth, Adam lived 800 years and begot sons and daughters. All the days that Adam live came to 930 years, then he died" (Gen 5:4-5).*

Our author desires the readers to see God in the role of the supreme patriarch, establishing and overseeing mankind--His Family. Not only is Adam the father of Seth, and Seth the father of Enosh, but God is the Father of All.

We find this belief confessed in later written Scriptures. We read in Psalm 33:14-15, *"From his dwelling place He gazes on all the inhabitants of the earth. He who fashions the hearts of all, discerns all their doings."* In the poem Moses recites to Israel we hear,

*For the name of the Lord I proclaim:  
Give glory to our God!  
The Rock! His deeds are perfect. Yes, all his ways are just;  
a faithful God, never false, true and upright is He.  
His children are unworthy of Him.  
That crooked, perverse generation, their baseness has played Him false.  
Do you dare requite the Lord, O dull and witless people?  
Is not he the Father who created you, fashioned you  
and made you endure! (Deut 32:3-6)*

Moses knows that regardless of the perversity of the children God remains their Father, and in the role of the Father He blesses His Children. We read in Genesis 2:5, *"When he created them He blessed them!"*

Genesis casts God in the role of a Father who cares for his children and blesses them. This remains a recurring theme throughout Genesis--9:26, 27:27, 48:15; 49:28. God's original plan of blessing for all humanity, thwarted by human folly, will nevertheless be restored through the seed of the woman--the seed of Abraham.

Within the Christian world, Saint Paul knows Jesus as the one through whom God has blessed us and adopted us as His Sons. *“All of us who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God...a spirit of adoption...through which we cry out ‘Abba!’”* (Rom 8:14-15).

Seen as a whole, the picture in Genesis that emerges is that of a loving father, ensuring the future well-being of his children through the provision of an inherited blessing. In Abraham the foundation is laid for the rest of the Scriptures.

As one commentator observes, “Throughout the Book of Genesis a recurring theme is that of the attempt and failure of human effort in obtaining the blessed--the good that only God can give. God continuously promised man a blessing and man pushed it aside in his own attempts at achieving his own blessing.”

To one of his chosen persons God gave this revelation:

Man sins, but it is precisely then that My infinite generosity shows itself. The more evil grew, the more My goodness urged Me to communicate with just souls so that they could transmit My commands to those who were creating disorder. I created and chose prophets to live among men. I told them My desires, My sorrows, and My joys so that they could communicate them to everyone.

I was sometimes obliged to be strict in order to reprove them, not to punish them--that would only have done harm--but to take them away from vice and lead them to their Father and their Creator, Whom they had forgotten and ignored in their ingratitude. Later, evil overwhelmed men’s hearts to such an extent that I was compelled to send calamities upon the world to purify men through suffering, the destruction of their possessions or even their death.

In Chapter Five the author lists the genealogies of ten men: Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, and Noah, and he lists the number of years of each one and then adds *“And then he died”* after each of them, with the exception of Enoch and Noah. Apparently, our author had something more specific in mind when including this list of names and dates of death. Obviously, they play an important role within the contents of this narrative. When in the enumeration he omits a date of death after Enoch and Noah, he obviously centers our attention upon these two men.

Enoch is number seven in the list, and instead of listing his date of death he writes, *“he walked with God.”* After mentioning the birth of Noah, there is no mention of his death. Lamech, Noah’s father, says of his birth, *“out of the very ground that the Lord has put under a curse, this one shall bring us relief from our work”* (Gen. 5:29). Later our author says of Noah, *“a good man and blameless in that age, for he walked with God”* (Gen. 6:9). However after the Flood we read, *“Noah lived three hundred and fifty years after the flood. The whole life time of Noah was nine hundred and fifty years; then he died”* (Gen 9:28-29).

Twice our author says of Enoch, *“he walked with God”* and added *“and he was no longer here, for God took him”* (Gen 5:24). Adam and Eve were driven from the Garden of Eden as they no longer walked with God; a Cherubim, with his flaming, swinging sword, was stationed at the Garden Gate to prevent them and their offspring from returning to the Tree of Life.

God demonstrates a preferential treatment for Enoch. There is something distinct about this man, his relationship with God, and his departure from this life. Enoch’s mysterious exodus from life is sufficient to give him special attention, but the author’s intention is deeper. He sees the expression *et ha elohim--he walked with God--of special importance. In the Ancient Near East the expression implies a continuous fidelity in man’s relationship with God. Our author said of Noah that he was “a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time” before he said of Noah “for he walked with God.”*

The scriptures teach that Noah is “unblemished” in the eyes of the Lord. He is virtuous in the eyes of God. It is important to note that he is not a Jew, and he is the one who becomes the father of all. As Paul reminds us, God shows no partiality; all who do right are acceptable in His eyes.

There is a reference in Wisdom seemingly applicable to Enoch: *“He who pleased God was loved...he who lived among sinners was transported. Snatched away, lest wickedness pervert his mind or deceit beguile his soul”* (Wis 4:10-11). We read in Hebrews: *“By faith Enoch was taken away without dying, and he was seen no more because God took him”* (Heb 11:5).

Genesis presents Enoch as a man who did not suffer the fate of Adam (*You will die!*). Enoch found life amid the curse of death because he walked with God. The curse of death does not have the final say of what has to be said of man. One can find life if one “walks with God.” There is a door open to return to the Tree of Life; Enoch found this door in his walk with God and, in so doing, became an example for all who seek to find life.

For the author of Genesis, walking with God is the Way of Life. The Lord appeared to Abram and said to him, *“I am El Shaddai; walk in My ways and be blameless. And I will establish my Covenant between me and you, and I will make you exceedingly numerous”* (Gen 17:1). We read these words of Moses to the Israelites in the desert, *“See I set before you today life and prosperity, death and destruction. For I command you today to love the Lord your God, to walk in his way and to keep his commands”* (Deut 30:15-16).

Moses knew the way to life would not be found by keeping laws, but by the heart seeking loving union with the heart of God. He called for a covenant of love which he graphically expressed as a circumcision of the heart

*so that you may love the Lord your God, with all your heart and all your soul, and so my live...For my command which I enjoin on you today is not too mysterious and remote for you...No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts, you have only to carry it out. (Deut 30:6,11,14)*



In man's mind, God's law without God's love in their hearts reduced union with God to legal observance. It failed and would continue to fail. Moses knew it and declared it, *“For I already know how rebellious and stiff-necked you will be. Why, even now, while I am alive among you, you have been rebellious against the Lord. How much more, then, after I am dead!”* (Deut 31:27).

Moses places before his readers great men of faith--Enoch, Noah and Abraham, who lived before the Covenant of Sinai as examples of men who walked the return road to Eden, hand-in-hand with Yahweh.

## CHAPTER SIX

### LIFE BEFORE THE FLOOD

With the birth of Seth, Genesis records the coming generation that will narrow down to a particular family, traced in an unbroken line back to Adam and Eve. It sets this family within the heart of the universal history of mankind. Within this family Jesus of Nazareth will be born.

The Genesis narrative continues exclusively with the Sethites referred to with the title “sons of God.” As Adam was the son of God and as his likeness was transmitted to the Sethites they, too, are sons of God. Later in the Book of Job this title will be applied to angels, but here it applies to men.

In Chapter Six we read, *“When men began to multiply on earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of heaven saw how beautiful the daughters of man were, and they took for their wives as many as they chose” (Gen 6:1)*. This text has been variously interpreted. One interpretation sees the “sons of God” as the descendants of Seth and the “daughters of man” to be the descendants of Cain. And so the Sons of God were enamored with these beautiful girls of the Sons of Men.

This is the death knell that rings forth from the heavens, *“The Lord said: ‘My spirit shall not remain in man forever, since he is but flesh. His days shall comprise one hundred and twenty years’” (Gen 6:3)*. In a word, the life span of man would be no more than three generations: three times forty.

Christians see the abrogation of the decree in Genesis at the Baptism of Jesus when John the Baptist proclaimed, *“I saw the Spirit descend like a dove from the sky, and it came to rest on him” (Jn 1:32)*. The concept “to rest upon” implies permanent residence in the soul of Jesus. We read in Psalm 104:29, *“If you hid your face, they are dismayed; if you take away their breath, they perish and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit, they are created and you renew the face of the earth.”*

Within this interpretation, the “sons of God,” by their union with the “daughters of man” i.e. descendants of Cain, had reduced themselves to earthiness incapable of being channels of the spirit of God. The Tree of Life is denied to them in order to limit evil upon earth. If human life continued beyond 120 years, which it does in the Genesis account, it is not because of human strength but because God willed it for His own purposes. We read in Deuteronomy 34:7, *“Moses was 120 years old when he died, yet his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated.”* Moses is in good health, and he dies as a result of unbelief and the punishment resulting from sin.

Because of the proximity of this text concerning the 120 years, to the coming deluge, many have seen it as period given to people to repent and avoid the impending destruction. They find a commentary of this in First Peter where we read, *“God waited patiently in the day of Noah while the ark was being built”* (3:20). Onkelos Targum speaks of a reprieve (*arka*) that will be given to them; the Targum Neophyti I reads, *“Behold I have given you a space [arka] of 120 years--perhaps they might do repentance and they did not do so.”* (A Targum is an Aramaic translation of the Hebrew Torah.)

We have another interpretation of why men are called “sons of God” and women are called “daughters of men,” which traces it back to the second creation story where men were created by the breath of God and woman was created from the side of man. Men are called “sons of God” denoting their origin from God and women are called “daughters of men,” denoting their origin from man. The marriage of men and women in verse two is seen as a fulfillment of the divine command to increase and multiply.

This interpretation implies that marriages between men and women were the normal course of life, and not a direct cause of the flood. This is more in keeping with what we read in the gospel account of Matthew concerning life at the time of the Flood: *“marrying and giving in marriage, up to the day Noah entered the ark; and they knew nothing about what would happen until the flood came and took them all away”* (Matt 24:38-39). This does not imply there was no warning of what was to come, but rather they put no faith in Noah's words and continued on with their ordinary lives.

The two following verses have been subject to much discussion: *“At that time the Nephilim appeared on earth (as well as later), after the sons of heaven had intercourse with the daughters of man, who bore them sons. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown”* (Gen 6:4). The best interpretation is to read it as *“At that time the Nephilim appeared on earth (as well as later)... They were the heroes of old, the men of renown.”*

Apparently, *Nephilim* is a word for “giant.” Giant is a relative term, implying usually tall stature relative to the race that uses the term. The Hebrew people were not a tall race. The phrase “as well as later” may serve as a clue for the interpretation of the Nephilim: just as there were these huge men in ancient times, they did not survive the Flood, but the Hebrew People did because God was with them.

However, the land of Canaan is inhabited by “Nephilim.” The spies Moses sent into the land of Canaan returned with this report: *“And all the people we saw there are huge men, veritable giants (the Anakim were a race of giants); we felt like mere grasshoppers, and so we must have seemed to them”* (Num 13:32c-34). The message to Israel was, just as the Nephilim did not survive the Flood but the Hebrew did, the Nephilim will not survive the invasion of Canaan, but by the grace of God the Hebrews will.

We read this message from the Prophet Baruch:

*O Israel, how vast is the house of God, how broad the scope of his dominion: vast and endless, high and immeasurable! In it were born the giants, renowned at the first, stalwarts, skilled in war. Not these did God choose, nor did he give them the way of understanding. They perished for lack of prudence, perished through their folly. (Bar 3:24-26)*

In the symbolism of numbers the “6” represents imperfection. How appropriately is the present chapter numbered, as it deals with the gross imperfection of the human race as descended from the line of Seth. The evilness is great enough to bring down the curtain upon the human race. What God once blessed seven times, will now be cursed: *“The Lord saw how great was man’s wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by the human mind was nothing but evil all the time. And the Lord regretted that He had made man on earth, and His heart was saddened” (Gen 6:5-6)*. We observed at the time of the Fall that the only sign of repentance and sorrow was in the heart of God. We see now if there is any change in man it is for the worse: a bit of evil leaven that is unchecked permeates totally. Deliberate rejection of the will of God is sin; unrepentant sin hardens the heart and turns a deaf ear to God. Scripture says it well: every plan devised by the human mind was nothing but evil, and not in the will of God.

Speaking on the Wrath of God Saint Paul writes:

*The Wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against the irreligious and perverse spirit of men who, in this perversity of theirs, hinder the truth. They certainly had knowledge of God: God's eternal power and divinity have become visible, recognized through the things made. Yet they did not glorify Him as God or give him thanks. They exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images representing man, birds, beasts and snakes.*

*They did not see fit to acknowledge God so God delivered them up to their own depraved sense to do what is unseemly. They are filled with every kind of wickedness: maliciousness, greed, ill will, envy, murder, bickering, deceit, craftiness. Gossipers and slanderers, they hate God, are insolent, haughty, boastful, ingenious in their wrongdoing and rebellious toward their parents. One sees in them men without conscience, without loyalty, without affection, without pity. They know God's just decrees [the demands of the law are written in their hearts (Rm. 2: 15)] that all who do such things deserve death; yet they not only do them but approve them in others. (Rom 1:18ff)*

This is the world God marks for “Termination!”

The Lord, with heavy heart and burdened spirit, now joins in step with Mankind's march to its destruction, and He brings it to completion. Throughout the heavens the earth's death knell for earth sounded: *“The Lord said, ‘I will blot out from the earth*

*the men whom I created--men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them” (Gen 6:7).*

One of the major problems faced in the Scriptures, and in individual lives, is the problem of evil in the world. Evil, in itself, is irrational and unintelligible. It is the corruption of good and the corruption of being. It has no reason and no justification for its existence, for if a thing exists at all, it ought to be what it ought to be; and there is nothing which can explain why it is other than it ought to be. Evil has been described as “the absence of a good due” in a created being. It is, therefore, of itself a “nothing,” but it is a “malicious embodied nothing.” Evil is pure destruction, and it tends to destroy all that is. Experience cannot deny the fact of evil—it is a fact that reason cannot understand. The spiritual crisis that arises out of evil in the world, and in ones own life, determines whether a person shall believe in God or deny Him.

We know from the Hebrew Scriptures that the Lord does not have one will for the course of nature and another for the moral life of man. God's will is directed to a universe that is harmoniously united, in which all its members co-operate under the single direction of His will. In this harmonious unity, the governing force, under the will of the Lord, is the will of man. Man, in his submission to the Divine Will, communicates to the rest of the world the harmony which is established by the divine government.

Sin is not merely a moral disorder--breaking a law. It is a cosmic disorder with repercussions that go far beyond the moral order, affecting the entire life of man--his biological, social, political and economic welfare. All these depend upon the cosmic harmony of man submitted to the will of God. Once the harmony is disturbed in one, the harmony of all is threatened.

If crops fail, hurricanes blow, the earth opens beneath man's feet, hungry locusts devour the harvests, plague spreads throughout the land, it is not the accidental disturbance of natural forces. The Jewish Prophets had the answer: God does not permit man and woman to enjoy indefinitely His gifts without a bitter reminder of the evil effects of their rebellious wills. It is man, through his rebellious will, that has set into motion the destructive and negative energy we call the “Wrath of God.”

The Jewish prophets had an intrinsic awareness of the personal reality of God, which more than any reality, pervades the whole people. They experienced sin as a personal offense against God. They would not let sin become merely an offense against man or society. First and foremost sin must be seen as an offense against God, an act of personal hostility toward God. Sin is evil in its essence, and it corrupts all that is good.

Sin is personal “rebellion, treachery, ingratitude against God whom we call ‘Abba’.” It is injustice towards God who is just and fair. In the deepest depths of the human soul, it is hatred for God who is “loving kindness.” It is a lie. Plato calls sin “the lie in the soul.” The sinners refuse to think the truth, to walk in the truth--to walk with

God. Jesus of Nazareth would say, “the truth is not in you.”

Jesus asks, “*Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my words*” (Jn 8:43). “*The judgment of condemnation is this, the truth came into the world, but men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were wicked. Everyone who practices evil hates the light; he does not come near it for fear his deeds will be exposed*” (Jn 3:19-20).

A human being is a responsible agent and he or she will have to be treated as such. Having in his or her power to do good, he or she does evil. A person does evil because he or she wants to. Love evil and not good, darkness not light. The Jewish Prophets accused the people of supreme infidelity--the faithlessness of one who has pledged love, has known love, and has withdrawn from love. In their minds, the prophets had already seen the handwriting on the wall--a belated return to the Lord would not reverse the forces of evil that the wickedness of the people had set in motion. The forces must come, there was no human power that could alter them, and it was folly to expect the Lord to avert the course of moral law of history, for this law is His justice in action. A people or society that failed to secure the common good will experience the terrible results of that failure.

Jeremiah had to proclaim the inevitable downfall of his people. It had to happen because the Lord would no longer tolerate the ingrained evil rooted in their lives. It became clear to Jeremiah that this punishment would come to them externally, at the hands of a godless world power. Jeremiah came to understand that evil cannot be explained away, nor can it be expelled by force or any human reason. The nation could take up arms against this foreign power, but it would all be in vain. Jeremiah had no other advice to give his people except that they should embrace it. He came to realize that such evil would only be overcome by suffering it, letting it overcome them.

The Scriptures reveal that the human person has a weapon no one can take from him: he has the power to suffer and to die, retaining his strong faith in the power and will of God for the good being realized in that suffering and death. If evil is permitted in our lives, it is an evil that the love of God permits, and from which He will bring an inestimable good. The mystery of human suffering is related to man's salvation.

The most powerful example in the Hebrew Scriptures we have of a human being personally accepting unmerited suffering in their life as the will of God, is found in Isaiah's account of the one called the Suffering Servant of the Lord. The Servant appears as an incredible man upon whom the Lord has laid an intolerable burden of suffering. His mission is to Israel and to the nations beyond Israel. It will not be through arms of war, and he will not speak with the authority of ruler. His mission will be through accepting and experiencing unbelievable suffering, leading to physical death. He will be reckoned among the evil, as one who bears the wrath of God. By submitting to this evil, the Servant accomplishes the mission that the Lord has given him; through his death salvation will come to many.

The prophet sees this death as an atoning death, an act of submission to the Lord, which the Lord accepts on behalf of many, who in some mysterious way share in his death. This death brings healing and salvation to many, even through they have no awareness of it.

The Servant of God becomes the final answer in the Scriptures as to how men shall meet evil that they cannot overcome except by surrendering to it and by becoming its victim.

The earlier Christian Community identified the Servant of the Lord with Jesus of Nazareth. Christianity has always seen in Jesus the “fulfillment” of these words of the prophet Isaiah. Jesus is the ideal Israel, who sums up in Himself the gifts, the mission, and the destiny of the people of the Lord. And his destiny was to die for the salvation of the world.

Let us now return to what some see as the Wrath of God, but for others it is God “fast-tracking” the destructive and lethal course man has set himself upon. God brings about the inevitable in order to begin again with the Second Plan for humanity.

We read *“but Noah found favor with the Lord” (Gen 6:8)*. Before the first course has run, God already strikes a spark of hope for humanity: *“Noah was a righteous man; he was blameless in that age, for Noah walked with God, begot three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth (Gen 6:9-10).*

Later, as the narrative of Genesis unfolds, the Lord reveals to Abraham the coming destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. The Lord tells Abraham, *“The outcry of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave! I will go down to see if they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has reached Me” (Gen 18:20).*

Abraham began to question the Lord, *“Will you sweep away the innocent with the guilty? What if there should be fifty innocent within the city; will You then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? Far be it for You to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent as well as the guilty, so that the innocent and guilty far alike. Far be it from You! Shall not the judge of all the earth deal justly?”* The Lord answered, *‘If I find within the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake’” (Gen 18:23-26).*

Abraham persisted in his questioning the Lord. He asked what if there were only 40, then what if there were only 30, then what if there were only 20, and he received the same answer from the Lord. Now Abraham said to the Lord. *“Let not my Lord be angry if I speak but this last time: what if only ten should be found there?”* And He answered, *‘I will not destroy, for the sake of the ten’” (Gen 18:32).*

Abraham did dare go on any further, and certainly would not have tested the Lord's patience by asking, “if there were only one?” To that unasked question—“What if

there were only one?"--we have the answer beginning in Genesis Chapter Six, verse 11.

Let us recall God's moral assessment of man at this time: *"The Lord saw how great was man's wickedness on earth, and how every plan devised by his heart was nothing but evil all the time" (Gen 6:5)*. The words of Isaiah expressed well the on-going relations between God and sinful man and woman: *"I have stretched out my hands all the day to a rebellious people who walk in evil paths and provoke me continually to my face" (Is 65:2-3)*.

Jesus of Nazareth teaches that evil does not come from the external things surrounding us but from the deep recesses of the human heart. This implies from the depth of the human soul that is rooted in a source of evil. *"The things coming out of the heart defile the man; from the heart comes forth evil thoughts, murders, adulteries, fornications, thefts, false testimonies and blasphemes--these things defile a man..." (Mt 15:18)*.

Concerning the baptized person, Saint Marcarius, around the fourth century, teaches that the Evil Spirit enters the human soul through the door of sin. The evil spirit acquires a residence within the soul of the impenitent sinner. As an evil force, it seeks to infiltrate deeper into the mind of the sinner through sinful thoughts, stimulates evil desires, and even adds his power to the human will in order to activate those desires into deeds. As sin is conceived and gives birth to evil deeds, the power of evil grows stronger, and human will weakens. If this evil process continues unimpeded, the evil spirit gains a masterful control of the human will. At this point the evil spirit becomes a "second soul." The person can no longer distinguish the activity of the evil spirit from its own spirit. Evil deeds become second nature, and the person identifies them with his or her nature saying, "it's just my nature to be this way." They will call night "day," and day "night," as they are now children of darkness.

We read of this darkness in Genesis: *"The earth became corrupt before God; the earth was filled with lawlessness. When God saw how corrupt the earth was, for all flesh has corrupted its ways on earth, God said to Noah, 'I have decided to put an end to all flesh, for the earth is filled with lawlessness because of them: I am about to destroy them with the earth'" (Gen 6:11-13)*. That last phrase certainly ties the destiny of the earth with that of man--the destiny of the creatures of this earth.

Once again we hear the echoes of Saint Paul teaching:

*Indeed, the whole created world eagerly awaits the revelation of the sons of God. Creation was made subject to futility, not of its own accord but by him who once subjected it; yet not without hope, because the whole world itself will be freed from its slavery to corruption and share in the glorious freedom of the children of God. Yes, we know that all creation groans and is in agony even until now. (Rom 8:19-23)*

Noah, we are told, found favor with the Lord and walked with the Lord. It was a lonely role to play--one moral man in an immoral society. It is just such a man who



now provides relief from the Lord's curse: *"I will blot out from the earth the men whom I created--men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky"* (Gen 6:7).

The Lord directly addresses Noah, *"Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make it an ark with compartments, and cover it inside and outside with pitch. This is how you shall make it: the length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, its width fifty cubits, its height thirty cubits. Make an opening for daylight in the ark, and terminate it at a cubit from the top. Put the entrance into the ark in its side; make it with bottom, second and third decks"* (Gen 6:14-16).

Let us note that the Lord gives Noah work to do, and he expects him to do it with the material at hand. There will be no miracles at work here. We have here faith and obedience to the Word of God, and a lot of tedious, hard work.

Now we hear what the Lord will do:

*For my part, I am about to bring the flood-waters upon the earth--to destroy all flesh under the sky in which there is breath of life; everything else on earth will perish. But I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall enter the ark, with your sons, with your wife and your sons' wives. And all that lives, of all flesh, you shall take two of each into the ark to keep alive with you; they shall be male and female. From birds of every kind, cattle every kind, every kind of creeping thing on earth, two of each shall come to you to stay alive. For your part, take of everything that is eaten and store it away, to serve as food for you and for them. Noah did so; just as God commanded him, so he did. (Gen 6:17-22)*

In Chapter six, verse 18 we are told of God's first covenant with mankind. The Lord says to Noah, *"I will establish my covenant with you."* In the ancient Near East, the covenant was an agreement in which partners swore before the gods an agreement that the gods would enforce with the blessings and curses of the covenant. As God is the chief partner of this covenant, it seen by many as more of a "pledge" on God's part. In Noah God finds the perfect partner--God commands and Noah obeys God without question and to the last detail. This is evidence of a man who "walks with God," and with complete trust and confidence has taken hold of the Hand of God, a Hand he will never ever let go for it is his "Rock!" Significantly, it will be noted that concerning this agreement God "remembers."

We must be careful not to get lost in the interesting details of the narration and miss the centerpiece--Noah! Because of this one solitary, righteous, and blameless man who walks with God, God enters into a personal covenant with Noah. Through this covenant--because of it--life on earth will survive and flourish once again. Noah's wife, sons, and their wives will be saved only because of their personal union with Noah. The animals will be kept alive because of Noah. We read, *"they shall come to you to stay alive."* The family of Noah and the other living creatures are saved, not because of their own importance, but because of their importance to Noah. One man becomes salvation for all. The Lord confirms it.

## GENEALOGIES IN GENESIS

### STUDY QUESTIONS (Read Chapters Five and Six)

1. What do you see as the purpose of the author listing these genealogies in Genesis?
2. Genesis confirms a relationship of fatherhood and sonship existing between God and mankind. What does Psalm 33:14-18 and Deut. 33:3-6 tell us about this relationship?
3. How does the free will of man affect his relationship with God?
4. How does God deal with evil in this world and still respect the freedom of man?
5. What does Romans 1:18ff. teach us about the Wrath of God?
6. Enoch appears in Genesis like a shooting star across a darkened sky, what do you see as his message to mankind?
7. What does Genesis tell us about the man Noah and his relationship with God?
8. What role do we see this man playing in our life on earth?
9. What does this teach you about the potential effect of one human life?
10. What does this teach you about the power of your own life to affect God and other persons?
11. What do you learn from Noah about the concrete work obedience to God requires from us to fulfill His will?
12. What do you see God accomplishing through the goodness and obedience of this one human being?
13. What effect does the example of Noah teach you about your relationship with God and its affect upon your family?
14. Why are there no unicorns on earth, and what does it mean “to miss the boat?”
15. Why do Christians view Noah as an exemplar of Jesus of Nazareth?

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### AND THE RAIN CAME

Then the Lord said to Noah, *“Go into the ark, with all your household, for you alone have I found righteous before Me in this generation”* (Gen 7:1).

The word translated “ark” is *tebah*, signifying a “box.” The measurements of the ark are rectangular. It is not a boat; it has no keel, no rudder, no sails. It is an enormous wooden structure. The word *tebah* appears once again in the Hebrew Scriptures. We read in Exodus:

*A certain man of the house of Levi went and married a Levite woman. The woman conceived and bore a son; and when she saw how beautiful he was, she hid him for three months. When she could hide him no longer, she got a wicker basket [tebah] for him and caulked it with bitumen and pitch. She put the child into it and placed it among the reeds by the bank of the Nile. (Ex 2:1-3)*

The Ark is a floating box, and all who are in it are as utterly helpless as a cork floating on an open sea in which they have no control. As one observed, “...this helpless box of life, tossed about in a violent universe that is breaking at its seams.” The inhabitants were temporarily “safe” but not “saved.” Only the subsequent action of God would bring salvation. Noah must patiently await deliverance. In the meantime, he can open a window and look out in hope.

Later, the Christian Church will see Noah and the Ark as exemplars of Jesus of Nazareth, and the Church established by Him. Noah is the one just man in his time that walked with God; Jesus is the Beloved Son in whom the Father is pleased--the One who is the Servant of Yahweh, and gives his life as a ransom for the many.

Saint Paul will later write about the Righteous One, in whose righteousness we enter into through our baptism into Christ. Paul sees Jesus as fulfilling the Covenant of Sinai and establishing a New Covenant with His disciples. The New Covenant is the Ark which offers salvation to all mankind.

The Lord reveals to Noah that the hour of the deluge has come, saying *“In seven day's time I will make rain upon the earth for forty days and nights and will blot out from the earth all existence that I created”* (Gen 7:4). Along with the divine intent to destroy is the divine will to preserve the lives of the righteous. Destruction will not have the last word. Mercy prevails along with justice, as this narrative promptly displays.

*Noah did just as the Lord commanded him. Noah with his sons, his wife and his sons' wives went into the Ark...the animals entered into the Ark with Noah: two each of all flesh that had the breath of life--comprised male and female of all flesh as the God had commanded him. And the Lord shut them in! (Gen 7:5,7,15-16).*

There is tale told of the two unicorns who frolicked away the time and missed the sailing time, arriving after the Lord had shut the door. Noah called to them from the third deck saying, "I will pick you up on the next trip!" And this is why there are no more unicorns on the face of the earth.

Jesus of Nazareth spoke of this moment: *"In the days before the flood people were eating and drinking, marrying and being married, right up to the day Noah entered the ark. They were totally unconcerned until the flood came and destroyed them" (Matt 24:38-39a).* We are told "they were totally unconcerned." and upon this thought Jesus goes on to add, *"So it will be at the coming of Man" (Matt 24:39b).*

*In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, on the seventeenth day of the month, on that day*

*All the fountains of the abyss burst forth,  
and the floodgates of the sky broke open.*

*It rained forty days and forty nights on earth. The subterranean ocean broke into the river beds: the waters swelled and increased greatly upon the earth, and the ark drifted upon the waters; all the highest mountains were covered by fifteen cubits of water.  
(Gen 7:11-12, 17-20)*

The baptized earth became one vast ocean on which one small craft safely floated, sheltering in itself the seeds of new life for the earth, purified and redeemed. And so it floated for a 150 days. *"Only Noah was left and those with him in the ark" (Gen 7:23).*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### GOD REMEMBERS

*“GOD REMEMBERED NOAH!” (Gen 8:1a).*

All will be well as mercy triumphs over justice. *“God caused a wind to blow across the earth, and the waters subsided” (Gen 8:1b).* Hearing these words, how can we not return to where it all began, where we heard *“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, and darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters” (Gen 1:1-2).* God’s Second Plan unfolds with a New Beginning for life on earth.

We read in Genesis, *“The foundations of the deep and the floodgates of the sky were stopped up, and the rain from the sky was held back, the waters receded steadily from the earth. At the end of one hundred and fifty days the waters diminished, so that in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat. The waters went on diminishing until the tenth month, and in the tenth month, the tops of the mountains became visible” (Gen 8:2-5).* We note the unfolding of the Plan with clock-like precision as the Lord of Order and Design controls all.

Rabbi Jacob tells us that at this time there was no mountain named “Ararat.” The mountains of Ararat refer to the hill country of ancient Urartu, a country in eastern Asia Minor, occupying parts of what are now Turkey, Iraq, Armenia, and Iran. Eventually, the Ark would come to rest on one of the hills in this region.

After about forty days, Noah made a window in the Ark and sent out a raven. In ancient times mariners, when disorientated by a storm at sea, would release ravens in order to find direction to the nearest land. The raven flew back and forth because there was no place to land. Later, Noah sent out a dove, but it, too, returned because it found no place to land. He waited seven more days and sent out a second dove, which returned with an olive leaf, forever making the olive branch a symbol of peace. Noah waited another seven days and again sent the dove out. This time the dove did not return; it had found its own home.

With this evidence that the earth was drying out, Noah removed the covering of the Ark and could plainly see that the surface of the earth was drying. In the six hundred and first year, *“in the second month, on the twenty-seventh day of the month, the earth was dry” (Gen 8:14).* The flood and its effects lasted a lunar year, 354 days, plus 11, which makes it a solar year of 365 days. At some point in Jewish Tradition, the first day of the first month occurred in spring--two weeks before Passover--and was listed as the “New Year.” Genesis presents a new beginning, with Noah as the New Adam.

The words that Noah so longed to hear, he now heard. *“God spoke to Noah, saying, ‘Come out of the ark together with your wife, your sons and your sons’ wives. Bring out with you every living thing of all flesh that is with you: birds, animals, and everything that creeps on the earth; let them abound on the earth and be fertile and increase on earth’”* (Gen 8:15-17).

And once again let us say, *“NOAH DID SO; JUST AS GOD COMMANDED HIM, SO HE DID!”* (Gen 6:22).

Many people question, why a flood of such massive destruction? Especially when the Hebrew Scriptures and other ancient documents agreed that God, or the “gods,” authorized it. The Genesis account informs us that the human race had traveled a fast-track toward self-destruction with the force of a mega wave, carrying before it both the good and evil into an infernal chaos. Recalling the relationship that exists between God and the human will, it seems that the only door open to God that does not negate the freedom of the human will would be to end the human race, because it had totally frustrated the purpose of its creation. The barren fig tree of the New Testament symbolically expresses the divine mind. Why does such an unprofitable creature take up space on the earth? Cut it down and turn it into firewood.

We read in Isaiah,

*O Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are the Potter, we are the work of your hands. Do not remember iniquity forever. Oh, look upon us, we are your people.* (Is 64:7-8)

*Ha! Those who would hide their plans deep from the Lord! Who do their works in dark places and say: “Who sees us, who takes note of us?” How perverse of you! Should the potter be accounted as the clay? Should what is made say to its Maker, “He did not make me.” And what is formed, says to Him who formed it: “He does not understand.”* (Is 29:15-16)

We read in Jeremiah:

*So I went down to the house of the potter and found him working at the wheel. And if the vessel he was making was spoiled, as happens to clay in the potter's hand, he would make it into another vessel, such as the potter was fit to make. The word of Lord came to me, “O House of Israel can I not deal with you like the potter? Just like the clay in the hands of the potter, so are you in my hands.”* (Jer 18:3-6)

*Thus said the Lord: I am devising disaster for you and laying plans against you. Turn back, each of you, from your wicked ways and mend your ways and your actions! But they will say, “It is no use. We will keep on following our own plan; each of us will act in the willfulness of his evil heart.”* (Jer 18:11-12)

Just punishment came upon the wicked to whom a time of repentance had been allotted *“when the patience of God waited in the days of Noah”* (1Pt 3:20). Unlike the people of

Nineveh, the sinners of Noah's time paid no heed to the warnings given to them from the words of Noah and the sight of Noah's prolonged labors in constructing the Ark.

The flood came as the means of freeing the “the sons of God” from the dangers of the corruption around them. In the words of Wisdom, God “*hastened to bring them out of the midst of iniquities*” (*Wisdom 4:14b*). The ancestors of Noah were given the opportunity to bring up new generations in virtuous surroundings. Can this not be compared to God's command to Abraham to leave his home and begin life in a new land?

We pointed out in our Introduction to the study of Genesis how we possessed no information concerning the times, beliefs, and customs at the time of the writing of the Hebrew Scriptures, other than from the Old Testament itself. However, we noted that the great archeological findings of our times are throwing much needed light on that ancient world, in which the Hebrew People lived and were part of. We now know of ancient events and beliefs that affected our authors and their writings.

Well documented archeological findings confirm that a flood of astronomical proportions occurred in the Near East, sometime around 4000 BC. Many legends and myths surfaced in the Near East as a result of it. We have the written account of this flood, not only in Genesis, but in an ancient document that came to light in the last century. The most famous and popular of these is the Epic of Gilgamesh.

In the 11<sup>th</sup> tablet of the Gilgamesh epic, we have a list of ten kings who existed before the flood and reigned a combined 200,000 years: King Alulim ruled 28,000 years, King Alulem reigned 36,000 years. The great flood caused a major break in the history of mankind. After the flood had swept over the earth, the reign of kings was more comparable to the life-span of men in Genesis.

Through these ancient documents, we come to know of the seven great Anunnak gods, among whom are Anu, Enlil, and Enki. We discover that these gods are beings with extraordinary powers, and possess immortality. Nevertheless, they have clay feet, possessing the same moral failings as human beings.

There existed a lower order of gods, the Igigi. The great gods enslaved them to care for the universe in their place. The Igigi rebelled against this tyranny, and so the human being was created to take their place. The gods mixed clay with the blood and spirit of a slain god to make man. We read “twelve hundred years had not passed when the land extended and the people multiplied. The noise from earth became like the bellow of bulls, and it disturbed the sleep and rest of the gods.” The god Enlil led a movement by the gods to destroy mankind from the face of the earth. They were torn between using a plague or a flood for the destruction. They decided on the flood, and declared their intention “top secret!”

Nevertheless, the god Enki had a beloved human friend, Utnapishtem, whom he secretly informed of the gods' plan. Utnapishtem built a boat smeared with pitch, similar to the one Noah built. There, with his family and animals, he rode out the flood, lasting one week until the boat was grounded on Mt. Nizir. He, too, sent out birds to determine the condition of the earth.

The gods, realizing their imprudence in killing off their food supply, became angry with Enlil. When the flood subsided, Utnapishtem left the boat and offered up a sacrifice to the gods. We are told that when the surprised gods smelled the sweet odor of the offering they “came like hungry flies around the offering.” So pleased were the gods with the prudence of Utnapishtem, they made him and his wife immortal.

The Epic of Gilgamesh also tells of a young king so terrified by the evidence of death that he went on a long journey in search of the gift of immortality—a quest that remained unfulfilled. In the end, Gilgamesh accepted his mortality and determined to use well his allotted time on earth.

It is of interest to note that in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the gods came to the conclusion that the problem was over-population; they must do something to control the birth of humans. Their decision was that some women will bear children, other women will be sterile, other women will bear demons (?) and they will form a group of celibate women (presumably to serve in the temples).

The striking similarities between the Epic of Gilgamesh and Noah have led scholars to maintain that one of these accounts depends upon the other. Others see the possibility of a more ancient source from which both draw.

These ancient documents seemingly testify that, at the writing of Genesis, people believed life on earth had existed for thousands of years. The author of Genesis, using a literary form in order to express the continuity of God's choice of the Hebrew people, had been consistent since the beginning of the race. The ancient Epic of Gilgamesh reveals man's innate desire for eternal life. When we read of the nature and characteristics of these gods, we know the God of Israel is incomparable. Yahweh cannot be compared with the gods of Mesopotamia, Greece, or Rome.

What was the extent of the Flood? It is no longer acceptable among scholars that it was universal. It has thus become widely recognized that the sacred writer expressed in this narrative the universality of the world in terms of the Sethite People. There is an implicit expression of the author's concept of the world before the flood, when he lists the origins of seventy nations that come into existence after the flood, all of which descend from the seed of Noah.

In keeping with Hebrew spirituality, the first act of Noah is one of glorifying God and giving Him thanks. *“Then Noah built an altar to the Lord and, taking of every clean animal and every clean bird, he offered burnt offerings on the altar” (Gen 8:20).*

The act pleased God, and moved him to accept the irreparable harm sin has wrought in the human heart. *“The Lord smelled the pleasing odor, and the Lord said to Himself: ‘Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the desires of man's mind are evil from his youth; nor will I ever again destroy every living being, as I have done. So long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease” (Gen 8:21-22).* God speaks these thoughts within Himself; these thoughts he will externalize in the covenant that he will establish with mankind through Noah.



## CHAPTER NINE

### THE FIRST COVENANT

The call to Noah to come out of the Ark--to go forth into a new world--finds its echo in Genesis with the Lord's call to Abraham, *"Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you"* (Gen12:1). Both Noah and Abraham represent new beginnings. Noah is taken out of a corrupted world to raise up a people pleasing to God; Abraham is called forth from the pagan life of Mesopotamia into the insular life of a nomad in the land of Canaan. Both men are blessed by God and called into covenant relations with Him.

At this point in the narrative, Noah stands as the sole representative of the human race before God. Genesis emphasizes that it is a new beginning for mankind as God reaffirms His original command to man, *"Be fertile and increase, and fill the earth"* (Gen 1:28). Above all, God reaffirms the innate dignity of the human race, having been made in the Image of God, *"For in His image did God make man"* (Gen 9:6).

However, man's relationship with the creatures of earth has been altered by his sinful condition, *"The fear and dread of you shall be upon all the beasts of the earth and upon all the birds of the sky, and upon all the fish of the sea; they are given into your hand"* (Gen 9:2). Perhaps this gift of fear to the creatures of the earth is for their own preservation, as they are now added to man's food supply. *"Every creature that lives shall be yours to eat; as with the green grasses, I give you all these"* (Gen 9:3).

God makes one stipulation concerning the eating of animals, as there is a sacredness of animals that needs to be recognized. The Lord expresses this to the Hebrews in these words, *"The life of flesh is in the blood, and I have assigned it to you for making expiation for your lives upon the altar; it is the blood, as life, that effects expiation. If any Israelite or any stranger who resides among them hunts down an animal or a bird that may be eaten, he shall pour out its blood and cover it with earth. Its blood is its life"* (Lev 17:11,13). The Hebrews believed that God is the Source of all life, and blood is sacred because it is the channel of God's life. "This is the origin of koshering, the Jewish practice of salting meat so as to absorb the blood before cooking" (JSB).

God establishes His first covenant with mankind that has universal application for all men, in all times. He reaffirms the foundation for the sacredness of the human person and human life. *"For your own life-blood I will require a reckoning; I will require it of every beast; of man, too, will I require a reckoning for human life, of every man for that of his fellow man! Who sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for IN HIS IMAGE DID GOD MAKE MAN"* (Gen 9:5-6).

The Sacred Scriptures sharply distinguished human life from all other forms of life--the human being alone has been created in the Image of God. The Jewish Talmud interprets *“for your own life I will require a reckoning”* as a prohibition against suicide. Jewish law strictly forbids suicide. In addition, verse six is interpreted: *“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed”* is a prohibition against abortion and allows abortion only in extreme situations and never for the purpose of birth control” (JSB pg.25).

Reflecting upon the teaching of the first covenant in light of subsequent revelations, the Jewish authorities promulgated the Nomadic Code to be binding upon all human beings because they all flow from the essential relationships of man with God, man with one another, and man with other living creatures:

1. to establish courts of justice,
2. to refrain from blaspheming God,
3. to refrain from idolatry,
4. to refrain from sexual perversion,
5. to refrain from bloodshed,
6. to refrain from robbery,
7. to refrain from eating meat cut from a living animal (kindness to animals).

The Rabbis maintained that Gentiles who observe these seven commandments can meet with God's approval.

God establishes his covenant with Noah:

*And God said to Noah and to his sons with him, “I now establish my covenant with you and your offspring to come, and with every living thing that was with you--every living thing on earth. My covenant with you: never again shall all flesh be cut off by waters of a flood, and never will there be a flood to destroy the earth. I have set my bow in the cloud, and it shall serve as a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and all living creatures, all flesh that is on earth.” (Gen 9:8-16)*

In the centuries to come, when the storm ceases and the rainbow appears, we would know *“Though the mountains leave their place and the hills be shaken, my love shall never leave you nor my covenant of peace be shaken for the Lord has mercy on you. In an outburst of wrath, for a moment I hid my face from you; but with enduring love I take pity on you” (Is 54:10,8).*

The intention of our sacred writer has been to record the beginning of life on earth, and particularly, God's preferential care and concern for the Chosen People from the very beginning of man's origin. Moses traced the “chosen seed” of his people through the genealogies enumerated after the expulsion from Eden down to Noah, who now

embodies this “chosen seed,” and through him it shall proceed on down to Abram, son of Terah, the Patriarch of the Hebrew People.

It is appropriate at this time to recall the sage advice given in the Introduction concerning the material in Genesis: “Nothing is here by chance, everything must be considered carefully, deliberately, and precisely.” With this reminder, let us return to our seat in the synagogue as Rabbi Jacob unrolls the scroll and reads, “*The sons of Noah who came out of the ark were Shem, Ham, and Japheth--Ham being the father of Canaan. These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the whole world branched out*” (Gen 9:18-19).

Before continuing, Rabbi Jacob pauses and tells us to note the insertion of the name “Canaan” in the narration. He goes on to explain that in the unfolding of Genesis, our author will attribute an unholy origin to those people who later will oppose the People of Israel; bad seed stands in opposition to the Good Seed. He continues to read from the scroll: “*Noah, the tiller of the soil, was the first to plant a vineyard. He drank the wine and became drunk, and he uncovered himself within his tent*” (Gen 9:20-21).

Our Rabbi sees the placement of Noah's drunkenness at this point in the story as part of Moses' plan of casting the Flood narrative in the light of the creation account. He tells us, “As God planted a garden for man to enjoy, so now Noah plants a vineyard for man to enjoy. The outcome is similar to the outcome of the story of the Garden of Eden. Noah drank of the fruit of his orchard and became naked. Adam and Eve ate of the fruit of the Garden and realized they were naked. Moses shows that even here, after salvation from the Flood, man's enjoyment of God's gifts could not be sustained. Noah, like Adam, sinned, and the effects of that sin were to be felt in the generations of sons to follow.”

As in Chapter Three, the effects of Noah's sin are seen in his nakedness. Adam says to the Lord, “*I was afraid because I was naked and I hid*” (Gen 3:10). Noah in his drunkenness “*uncovered himself in his tent.*” Our Rabbi goes on reading, “*Ham, the father of Canaan, saw his father's nakedness and told his brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a cloth, placed it against both their backs and, walking backward, they covered their father's nakedness; their faces were turned the other way, so that they did not see their father's nakedness*” (Gen 9:23).

Rabbi Jacob tells us that ancient Rabbis saw in Noah an objective lesson concerning the dangers of intoxication, and he reminds us that mentioning the failures of biblical heroes is common in the Torah. Only God is perfect.

He acknowledges that this has been a perplexing passage for the Rabbis. In general, it expresses the sexual perversion that the Israelites attributed to the people of Canaan. As for the particular act perpetrated by Ham, there is much uncertainty. We see from Leviticus 20:17 that to “*uncover the nakedness*” of a man, means to have sexual relations with his wife. Also, “*to see the nakedness,*” means to have sex with another. Our rabbi goes on to point out that the generally accepted interpretation

has been to see the words “*saw his father's nakedness*” to be taken literally. Within this context, Ham violated two norms highly regarded in rabbinic Judaism: the ethic of bodily modesty, and to honor and respect one's parents.

Whatever the details of the actual act might have been, the actions of the three sons enables Moses to contrast the deeds of Ham to those of Shem and Japheth, That contrast becomes the basis for the curse and the blessings that follow. We read, “*When Noah woke up from his wine and learned what his younger son had done to him, he said: ‘Cursed be Canaan; the lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers,’ and he said, ‘Blessed by the Lord, my God be Shem; let Canaan be a slave to him. May God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be a slave to them’*” (Gen 9:24-27).

Why was Canaan cursed rather than Ham? As we have suggested, it is common in the narratives of Genesis to anticipate the deeds of later generations from the acts of their fathers. Ham will father the Canaanites.

Some years ago, a bank president in a small southern town had a large safe moved. A ledger was found behind the safe listing transactions dating back over seventy years. On analyzing the contents of the ledger, the bank discovered the credit ratings of their present customers were the same as those of their great, great grandparents. Apples don't fall too far from the tree.

The sons of Noah are shown here as belonging to two groups of mankind-- those who, like Adam and Eve, hide the shame of their nakedness; and those who, like Ham, have no sense of their shame before God. To the one group, the line of Shem, there will be blessing; but to the other, the Canaanites, there can only be the curse. We find within the narrative the importance of acknowledging the guilt of one's sins. Along with this, our author teaches that these three sons, as the “seed of Abraham” and “the nations,” represent two responses to human guilt and disobedience. He will demonstrate that it is not simply because one is born into a certain family that he is blessed or cursed, but because he is like Abraham—“*he believed the Lord, and He credited it to him as righteousness*” (Gen 15:6).

Rabbi Jacob interprets for us—“*May Japheth live in the tent of Shem*”—to mean, “May Japheth enjoy the blessing along with Shem.” The hope is that the future family of Noah will live together in harmony as brothers. As the palmist sings, “*How good and how pleasant it is that brothers dwell together--like the dew of Hermon that falls upon the mountains of Zion. There the Lord has ordained blessing, everlasting life*” (Ps 133:1,3).

Rabbi Jacob points out that Noah would out-live many of his descendants. For many, many years he would enjoy the fruit of his labors as a man of the soil and the founder of the first winery. Learning from his earlier indiscretion with wine, he came to see wine to be a divine blessing. Later Scriptures confirmed this blessing. We read in Genesis 14:18, when Abram came forth from his victory over his enemies, “*King*

*Melchizedek of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was a priest of God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, and he blessed Abram.*”

Leviticus 23:13 tells of an offering to the Lord, *“the libation with it shall be wine, a quarter of a ‘hin.’*” Ecclesiastes 9:7 gives this instruction: *“Go, eat your bread in gladness, and drink your wine in joy for your action was long ago approved by God.”* Psalm 104:15 speaks of wine as a blessing from the Lord—*“wine that cheers the hearts of men.”*

The Book of Proverbs stresses the therapeutic value of wine: *“Give strong drink to one who is perishing and wine to the sorely depressed: When they drink they will forget their misery and think no more of their burdens”* (Prov 31:6,7).

It is this good effect of wine that can lead to its misuse. People chronically depressed may find that consuming wine to relieve their depression may well lead to a dead end street: the solution becomes a greater problem than the depression. However, Saint Paul still instructs his young disciple Timothy, *“Stop drinking water only. Take a little wine for the good of your stomach, and because of your frequent illnesses”* (1Tm 5:23).

Saint Augustine left us with this wise principle, *“Abuse does not destroy use!”*

Genesis takes leave of Noah with these words, *“Noah lived three hundred and fifty years after the flood. The whole lifetime of Noah was nine hundred and fifty years,”* and it finally adds these words, *“then he died”* (Gen 9:28).

## CHAPTERS SEVEN, EIGHT AND NINE

### THE FIRST COVENANT

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

(Please read Chapters 7,8 and 9)

1. What was required of Noah to be an instrument of salvation in the world?
2. How do you see the Ark as a symbol of the Christian Church?
3. What comparison did Jesus draw between the people of his time and those of Genesis?  
What does that teach us?
4. What does 1Peter 3:20 teach about not delaying repentance?
5. (Ch. 8) What does archeology teach us about the flood?
6. What is the importance of the ancient myths in our study of Genesis and human nature?
7. What truths concerning human nature are revealed in the epic, Gilgamesh?
8. What do the Scriptures teach us about the importance of acknowledging God and expressing our gratitude and worship?
9. (Ch. 9) How do you see the conditions after the Flood altering our relationships with other living creatures?
10. What does Leviticus teach about the sacredness of living blood?
11. What does the First Covenant confirm about human nature and the sacredness of human life.
12. How did the Jewish Rabbis interpret Gen 9:5-6?
13. To whom did the Hebrews direct the Nomadic Code? What is its importance for human life on earth?
14. What do you learn from Gen 9:8ff about God's relationships with man and this earth?
15. What does the episode of Noah and his sons teach us about human nature after the Flood?

## CHAPTER TEN

### NATIONS OF THE WORLD

When Rabbi Jacob unrolls the scroll containing Chapter 10, he informs us, “Moses painted a panoramic view against which the remainder of Genesis unfolds along with the whole Torah.” He reads *“These are the lines of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah: sons were born to them after the Flood” (Gen 10:1).*

He pauses for a moment and says, “The best understanding of Chapter Ten is to read the last sentence in this chapter. *‘These are the groupings of Noah’s descendants, according to their origins, by their nations; and from these nations branched out over the earth after the Flood’ (10:32).*”

“You have a kaleidoscope of nations,” he tells us, “equaling the exact number of ‘seventy.’” He points out that seventy is a “numerical symbol” carrying the concept of “totality;” here it implies the whole world. Moses teaches all peoples on earth find their ultimate origins in the three sons of Noah.

He expresses the unity of mankind. Later, he will demonstrate how Abram is called forth “from his father’s house.” Abram will stand apart from the rest of humanity as representative of a New Adam. From the Seed of Abraham will come forth the Son of Israel, and from his seed, a universal blessing in which *“all the communities of the earth shall find blessing...” (Gen 12:3).*

Rabbi Jacob tells us that when we come to the end of Genesis, the seed of Abraham will number “seventy,” the same as that of the nations. Moses implies that these seventy descendents of Abraham are representative of a “new humanity,” of which Abraham is its “Father”—a father of many nations—and through whom divine blessing will come to the whole world. (John Sailhamer)

The world as seen through the eyes of Moses is bound by the Black Sea to the North, by the Caspian Sea to the North East, by the Mediterranean Sea to the West, by the Persian Gulf to the South East, and by the Red Sea and the River Nile to the South. Nations are dotted along the banks of the great Nile, Tigris and Euphrates rivers. The seacoast people along the Mediterranean are called the “Islands of the Nations.”

Chapter Ten of Genesis presents a remarkably good classification of the various nations and peoples known to Israel around 900 BC. This is theologically important in that it stresses the basic family unity of all people of the earth.

The beginning of the list of nations starts with an enumeration of the descendants of the youngest son, Japheth. Here we have a reversal of the customary proper order, in which the older son would be presented first. Moses gradually eliminated the descendants of both Japheth and Ham, as they play no major role in the story to follow. Moses will relate, in detail, only matters dealing with Shem and his descendants.

Rabbi Jacob calls our attention to the fact that the names of the nations correspond with the names of the descendants of the three sons of Noah. In Genesis, Moses desires to emphasize the privilege conferred on Israel by its election to play a decisive role in God's plan of salvation for the world. Indeed, although Israel is the "sparrow" among the nations, God casts his eye upon Israel out of all those great and powerful people and their nations.

We read in Deuteronomy, *"He found them in a wilderness, a wasteland of a howling desert. He shielded them and cared for them, guarding them as the apple of his eye. As an eagle incites its nestlings forth by hovering over its brood, so he spread his wings to receive them and bore them up on his pinions"* (Deut 32:10-11).

Rabbi Jacob now reads to us the names of the descendants of Japheth, and the nations bearing their names: *"The descendants of Japheth: Gomer, Magog, Madai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech, and Tiras. The descendants of Gomer: Ashkenaz, Riphath and Togarmah. The descendants of Javan: Elishan and Tarshish, the Kittim and the Dodanim. From these the maritime nations branched out--each with its language--their clans and their nations"* (Gen 10:2-5).

This listing deals with the nations out on the horizon of Ham's and Shem's world. It is what would be seen in our eyes today as a "third world." It covers the area around the Black Sea and the Greek world, and comprises what is known as "Islands of the Nations"--the cities along the Mediterranean Sea and its island-states.

Our Rabbi continues his listing of the descendants of Ham from the scroll: *"The descendants of Ham: Cush, Mizraim, Put and Canaan. The son of Cush: Seha, Havilah, Sahtah, Raamah and Sabteca. The sons of Raamah: Sheba and Dedan"* (Gen 10:6-7). Rabbi Jacob pauses his reading, calling our attention to a brief insertion in the text that interrupts the enumeration of the descendants of Ham; we are introduced to an extraordinary character—"Nimrod."

Continuing with the text he reads: *"Cush also begot Nimrod, who was the first man of might on earth. He was a mighty hunter by the grace of the Lord; hence the saying, 'Like Nimrod a mighty hunter by the grace of the Lord.' The mainstays of his kingdom were Babylon, Erech, Accad, Calneh in the land of Shinar. From that land Asshur went forth and built Nineveh, Rehoboth-ir, Calah, and Resen between Nineveh and Calah; that is the great city"* (Gen 10:8-12).



Laying down the sacred scroll, Rabbi Jacob shares his thoughts with us on Nimrod:

“It’s likely these verses allude to a lost epic about the figure of Nimrod. He was the first great emperor in the world; calling him ‘a mighty hunter blessed by God’ implies his royal connotations. The kingdom of Nimrod consisted of the great city of Babylon, located south along the Euphrates River, and Asshur (Assyria) and Nineveh to the north along the Tigris River. He appears to be the founder of a great empire that played a large role in history of ancient Near East. The other cities mentioned are also found along the Tigris River.

“Some scholars identify Nimrod with Tokulti-Ninurtra, a 13<sup>th</sup> century king, who was the first to rule effectively Babylon and Assyria. The word *nimrod* is a form of a Hebrew word meaning ‘to rebel.’ A Jewish midrash (a Jewish study) sees Nimrod as an Arch-rebel against the will of God.

“By means of this narrative insertion, Moses has not only introduced a key city, Babylon, but has taken Assyria out of its natural association with Shem, and given it a new identification with the city of Babylon. The Prophet Micah speaks of ‘*the land of Assyria...and the land of Nimrod*’ (*Mi 5:6*). Identifying any city with Babylon increases the symbolic value of the name ‘Babylon.’ (Many centuries later it will be written in the Book of Revelation: ‘*On her forehead was written a symbolic name, “Babylon the great, mother of harlots and all the world’s dominations”*’ (*Rev 17:5*).”

Returning to the scroll our Rabbi continues the reading of Ham's genealogy beginning with a list of the sons of Mizraim:

*Mizraim was the father of the Ludites, Anamites, Lehabites, Naphtuhites, Pathrusites, Casluhites (from whom the Philistines came) and Caphtorites.*

*Canaan was the father of Sidon, his firstborn, and of the Hittites, Jebusites, Amorites, Girgashites, Hivites, Arkites, Sinites, Arvadites, Zemarites and Hamathites. Later the Canaanites clans scattered and the borders of Canaan reached from Sidon toward Gerar as far as Gaza, and then toward Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zebolim, as far as Lasha. These are the sons of Ham by their clans and languages, in their territories and nations. (Gen 10:13-20)*

Rabbi Jacob points out that Moses is especially interested in the exact boundaries of the area of Canaan, since that area will encompass the land promised to Abraham, though “*at that time the Canaanites were in the land*” (*Gen 12:6*).

The descendents of Ham occupied the cities along the western and southern coasts of the Mediterranean Sea. On western shores we have Hamath, Arvad, Sidon, Canaan, Gaza and Gerar, and the on the southern coast there is Put/Libya, Egypt, Ethiopia, Seba and the area west of Red Sea.

The Rabbi reads of Shem and his sons:

*Sons were also born to Shem, whose older brother was Japheth; Shem was the ancestor of all the sons of Eber.*

*The sons of Shem: Elan, Asshur, Arphaxad, Lud and Aram. The sons of Aram: Uz, Hul, Gether and Meshech.  
Arphaxad was the father of Shelah and Shelah the father of Eber.*

*Two sons were born to Eber: one was named Peleg, because in his time the earth was divided: his brother was named Joktan.*

*Joktan was the father of Almodad, Sheleph, Hazamaveth, Jerah, Hadoram, Uzal, Diklan, Obal, Abimael, Sheba, Opir, Havilah and Jobab. All of these were sons of Joktan.*

*The region where they lived stretched from Mesha towards Sephar, in the eastern hill country. These are the sons of Shem by their clans and languages, in their territories and nations. (Gen 10:21-31)*

Rabbi Jacob asks if, in the enumeration of Shem and his descendents, did we note the family circle of Noah growing smaller? It identifies Japhath as the older brother of Shem, but there is no mention of Brother Ham. Are Ham and his descendents that part of the family about whom they do not care to speak? Perhaps the author reinforces the fact that Noah blessed only Shem and Japhath.

Our teacher reminds us that Moses continues to make allusions to past narratives in order to keep our attention focused on his primary concern--the line of the divine blessing. "Note!" he tells us, "the enumeration of the line of descent is interrupted with the information that '*Shem was the ancestor of all the sons of Eber.*' Putting the spotlight here implies that the line of blessing will come through the sons of Eber."

The first son of Eber is called "Peleg," and the reason for this is because "*in his time the world was divided.*" With this mysterious thought still in mind, immediately his brother Joktan is mentioned. As we get more familiar with the ways of Moses, may we safely presume that Joktan will have an essential part in this "divided" world?

Immediately following in the text, Joktan's descendents are enumerated along with the land they will occupy, "*all the way to Sephar, the eastern hill country.*" Within this area will arise the City of Babylon and the seed of Joktan. The line of Shem through his son Joktan will be instrumental in building the City of Babylon; the line through his son Peleg leads to Abraham. Rabbi Jacob leaves us with this thought: "Two great lines of humanity diverge from the midst of the sons of Shem--those who seek to make a name for themselves in the building of the city of Babylon, and those for whom God will make a name through His call to Abraham."

When we return to the study of Genesis, we will find another enumeration of the descendents of Shem; no mention of Joktan and his descendents are found there.

## THE COVENANT WITH THE WORLD

As recorded in Chapter Nine, God establishes His Covenant with the Universal Man, in which the Lord enters into relationship with all humanity. In this Covenant, the Lord accepts the frailty of human nature and reaffirms the Image of God in every man and woman.

Here we tread on sacred soil--this Covenant establishes the innate dignity of every human person. There is a divine foundation in the human soul that opens the door to an intimate relationship between God and mankind. The Divine Father calls each of His children into personal union with their Father. In the heart of every lost child in the universe there is the cry, "Abba!" It does not fall on deaf ears—"God is not dumb!" The Sacred Scriptures reveal: *"The faithful shall abide with him in love--grace and mercy are with his holy ones and his care is with his elect. Those who trust him will know the truth"* (Wis 3:9).

The Lord reveals in the Book of Wisdom, *"I do not desire the death of any man!"* (Wis 1:13). He tells us, *"Court not death by your erring way of life, nor draw to yourself destruction by the works of your hands"* (Wis 1:12). The author of Wisdom teaches us, *"For God formed man to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made him"* (Wis 2:23).

God establishes a Covenant of Life. Human life is sacred in the eyes of the Lord, and each of us is our brother's keeper, a watchman over the lives of one another. Each of us will one day give an account before the Lord for the life we lived in the body. Pope Paul VI reminded us, "We are all responsible for our times and our brothers. "

Genesis reveals a commonality and oneness between all nations and all peoples, which is founded upon being made in the "Image of God." This first Divine covenant is applicable to every human person, and essential to human creation as a divine gift; God imprinted the Divine Image into the human soul as a divine gift. If we fail to understand what this implies, we remain ignorant of ourselves and of our responsibilities in life. We will fail to recognize the brotherhood of humanity and our responsibility to it.

Before we get lost in our differences or become disoriented in our human relationships, let us seek a deeper understanding of the mystery of being in the Image of God, and what it demands of us.

God expressed his will for all mankind in the Primary Covenant. The subsequent Jewish and Christians Covenants neither annul nor alter this First Covenant. It existed before the temple, synagogue, church, or mosque; before Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam; before all our differences of

philosophies and religions. To understand what truly unites us to God and one another is a wise step toward unity, before we get involved in our differences. We need to know and experience ourselves in the light of divine revelation in order to know the person God calls us to be.

Unity of heart calls us to come forth from our Father's House, as we experience it. Not to leave it, but go forth to discover the presence and love of the Lord among peoples and lands unknown to us.

But, prudence advises us not to enter unknown lands of the human spirit without a wise guide. Such a guide for us is the Benedictine monk Father Bede Griffiths. He was ordained a priest in 1940 for the Prinknash Abbey in England. With the permission of his Abbot, Father Bede went to India in 1955 to study the religions and cultures of India, with the intention of relating its religious beliefs to Christian beliefs. He would later author many books on the subject, the most popular being *The New Vision of Reality* and *The Marriage of East and West*. Father Bede remained in India, living in a Christian Ashram in Tamul Nader, dedicated to the Most Holy Trinity, from 1968 to his death in 1993. He died barefooted and clothed in the colors of the sun, in his thatched hut at Shantivanan in South India. We are told "this man, monk and mystic, left us a message, not only in his words, but most of all by his very life."

From our brief study of Genesis, it should already be apparent how the Word and the Spirit are present from the beginning and, as the narrative unfolds, it should become more apparent that the Word and Spirit are creating a new world--a new humanity.

It is generally recognized among scholars of antiquity that there occurred an extraordinary breakthrough in human consciousness almost simultaneously among the peoples of India, Greece, China and the Semitics.

The spiritually insightful teach us that "the whole of human history is a passage from our present mode of existence and consciousness into the internal world, where all diversities of this world are seen in their essential unity. Our present mode of consciousness is dualistic, but as the mystics of all religions have discerned, the ultimate reality is non-dual." As St. Paul says, "*now we see in a glass darkly but then face to face*" (1Cor 13:12).

Around the fifth century before the birth of Christ, the Dawn from on high shone into the darkness of the human mind, becoming a light of life, awakening human awareness to its potential to soar above its material inheritance. The human mind discovered its wings and a sky to fly in. Self-discovery leads to a greater knowledge of God.

**INTERLUDE**

**PEOPLE OF THE INDUS  
VALLEY**

## PEOPLE OF THE INDUS VALLEY

### IN THE IMAGE OF GOD

In the light of divine revelation on Mt. Sinai, Moses wrote in Genesis the idyllic story of God's creation of the heavens, the earth and its inhabitants. The major divine revelation concerning the nature of the human person is: God created the man and woman in his own image and likeness. Being in the Image of God implies the divine Presence within the human person. Following the devastating account of the destruction of life on earth, the author of Genesis confirms that the Image of God remains in fallen humankind.

Father Griffiths also reminds us that among students of the ancient world, it became evident that around the sixth century before Christ a vast expansion of human consciousness occurred. The human mind was passing beyond the limitations of sense consciousness and rational consciousness to experience absolute Reality. It was as if the bird cage opened and the bird discovered the sky, and that the bird is an eagle, not a barnyard chicken.

The awakened spirit within calls its senses and mind to seek beyond itself, beyond its present horizon, to experience the Ultimate. The awakened human consciousness, energized from within, began its ascent. This occurred in all the great religions of the known world: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, and within the philosophical and theological world of the Greeks and the philosophies of the Chinese.

Through God's Image in Man, we can discover the presence of God in the four corners of the world in mysterious and remarkable ways. Our conscious awareness of his *past presence* in the external world has historically centered upon the Mediterranean World and its environs: a world that is presented in Chapter Ten of Genesis, a world of 70 nations with strange and exotic names.

At this point, we will briefly digress from our study of Genesis to study the effects of the Image of God in a people beyond the light of Sinai. We will center our attention on a world more than a thousand miles east of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, to an ancient people beyond the cultural melting pot of the Mediterranean area and its environs: the People of the Indus Valley.

We discover there relics of a civilization existing four thousand years before the birth of Christ. We find written records echoing a thousand years of oral teaching of a people worshipping God only in the light of sense experienced, rising steadily to a more glorious understanding of themselves and a God, which transcends all

sense experiences. Our purpose is to discern the glory of God that shines in and through the Hindu People; a divine presence, we believe, that glorifies and honors the Father of us all. Psalm 65 proclaims, *“The ends of the earth stand in awe at the sight of your wonders. The lands of sunrise and sunset you fill with your joy.”*

We enter into a world where there has been, as far we know, no external supernatural revelation from God. The foundation for their beliefs lies in the external evidence within the created universe, and within their own internal experience of the presence of God. Psalm 19 speaks of a soundless voice that is heard daily throughout the earth. The Book of Wisdom reminds us, *“For from the greatness and the beauty of created things their original author, by analogy is seen”* (Wis 13:5).

Recall St. Paul’s words to the pagan people of Lystra, *“In past ages he let the Gentiles go their way. Yet in bestowing his benefits, he has not hidden himself completely without a clue...your spirits he fills with food and delight”* (Acts 14:16-17). And the words Paul spoke at Athens, *“God wanted them to seek him by themselves, even if it were only by groping for him and succeed in finding him. Yet he is not far from any one of us. For in him we live and move and have our being, as some of your poets have said: for we too are his offspring”* (Acts 17:27-28).

Paul plainly taught us in Romans: *“It is not those who hear the Word of God but those who do the Will of God...And this will of God is written in the human heart”* He insists that the human heart intuitively knows the Will of God, *“The conscience of every person bears witness”* to the Will

of God (see Rom 2:13-16). St. James reminds us, *“If a man knows the right thing to do and does not do it, he sins”* (Js 4:17).

For a better appreciation of the material to be covered here, we need a brief review of our understanding of the concepts of conscience, conscious awareness, and the degrees of conscious awareness.

As noted above, Paul used the concept “conscience.” Its use is surprising in a man trained in Judaism. The concept itself only began to appear in Greek writings around the second century before Christ.

The Greek word *syneidesis*, translated as “conscience,” conveys the concept of intellectual awareness, of being awakened to the moral value of a human action. Conscience for us is an internal faculty or power that discerns the moral goodness or evilness of our behavior. In psychology it is seen as the part of the “super ego” that transmits commands or admonishments to the “ego.”

From our understanding of the writers of the Old Testament, ego would be a foreign concept to them. It appears later, however, in Sirach, a later Jewish work, and is translated as “heart.” We read there, *“He plumbs the depths and penetrates the heart; their innermost being he understands”* (Sir 42:18).

The word “heart” best translates the Hebrew concept of *leb*, which indicates the inner person--the seat of understanding, knowledge and will. In the Jewish context a person is seen in his or her totality. In the Greek concept the heart is an organ of the body—the source of feelings and emotions. In the Old Testament the heart is the center of life, and it testifies to the presence of God in a living person. Theologically, the heart is the place in which God is encountered within a person, and in which religious life has its firm ground. It is here that the ethical conduct of the person is determined.

The concept of conscience appears thirty times in the New Testament and fifteen times in Paul's letters. We may see in this the tendency of the early Christians to adapt their teachings to the Hellenistic world.

Conscience bears witness to moral truth. It is the intellectual faculty of the soul under the inspiring light of the Spirit of God. The operation of God's Spirit within the human conscience is in relation to the natural spiritual growth of conscious awareness.

The power of knowing is comparable to the power of the human eye. The ability of the eye to see depends on its reception of light; the light must be adapted to the ability of the eye. A brilliant light, such as sunlight, shining directly into the human eye causes blindness, not sight, because the light is greater than the capacity of the eye to receive. It may be helpful to look at the growth of conscious awareness as a lamp with a four way switch: low light, medium light, bright light, and brilliant light. As the soul develops, the light of conscious awareness increases, and reveals a clearer and deeper vision of reality.

We agree with Aristotle that our knowledge of the external world comes to us through our five senses. The world presents its material images to the human intellect, and the measuring mind abstracts ideas from the material presented to it. The chief product of this activity is scientific knowledge. This is considered the lowest level of conscious awareness in Hinduism. This belief is completely contrary to the Western tradition, which holds scientific knowledge to be the mind's supreme achievement. In the Eastern tradition, the mind has only just begun with intellectual development. From that platform of the intellect, one goes beyond the world of the senses, and enters into the subtle world of transcendent reality.

In Hinduism, “this holding back of the senses is what is called *yoga*.” Later it is spoken of as the cessation of the movements of the mind. When the mind stops moving and centers upon itself, *yoga* begins. *Yoga* means union; in English we note that “yoking” implies the same concept. The intellect is the path to transcendence; however the higher states of consciousness lie beyond the operations of the mind and the intellect.



You can read in a work called *Katha Upanishad*, dated around 500 B.C., a description of what Ken Wilber, a scholar of spiritual evolution, has called the “spectrum of consciousness.” Beyond the senses (*indriyas*) is the mind (*manas*). Beyond the mind is the intellect (*buddhi*), and beyond the intellect is the great self (*mahat*)--the purely psychic world. Beyond great self is the Unmanifested (*A vyakta*). (In Christianity we would say “the Trinity.”) Beyond the Unmanifested is the Godhead (see *Katha Upanishad*).

In its early stage of conscious awareness, the human mind is enlightened by the input of the five senses. The conscious awareness itself is limited to discerning sense experience. The conscious mind experiences oneness with its sense experience, but no sense of individuality.

The first chapters of Genesis present the human person in its first stage of consciousness: an oceanic experience of sights, sounds, smells, tastes and touches that flood the mind with awareness of the world through sense experiences. Because the Spirit of God permeates all creation, the human soul experiences itself in peace and harmony with creation. This experience is what some see as “nirvana.”

The second stage of conscious awareness brings “self awareness.” The first step would be the personal awareness of being physically separated from the external world--awareness that self is something *other* than the world around it. The self experiences an inner world filled with thoughts and desires, and with it, the inner sense of power to act harmoniously with the external world. The self becomes aware of an inner “spirit” that enlightens and encourages external behavior, a “spirit” within one, but is not one of itself, that draws into union the whole person.

The consciousness becomes aware of the necessity to interact with the external world, but at the same time experiences its freedom to act or not act. The guidance of the inner voice is present, but there is a voice from another place that suggests choices of its own making.

Between the Self and the Spirit arises an “I-ness,” a sense of individuality, giving birth to Ego. Self identifies with Ego, recognizing its “otherness” from the Spirit within. Ego is free to follow the Spirit, or to “walk one’s own path.”

It is in the Third Chapter of Genesis that man confirms this freedom. Man rejects the guidance of the Holy Spirit and becomes the “Separated Self.” He rejects being a Man of God in order to be the Godly Man. This division from God becomes the source of divisiveness: man from God, man from woman, woman from man, man and woman from nature, and nature from man and woman. The “separated self” is the tragedy of human existence, as it sets its foot on the road to the Deluge.

The bright light of the third stage of conscious awareness reveals the presence of a complete spiritual dimension, into which the human spirit is called to enter and participate. It is a spiritual world, but it is also the psychic world of the human spirit; it is a natural world, but not a material world. It is, as we would say, a world of gods and demons--the psychic dimension of spiritual beings.

With the fourth stage of conscious awareness comes the vision of God, and the desire for union with God. Deep down in the human heart remains the innate desire to return to Eden. As the Jewish psalmist expressed it, "*O God, you are my God, for you I long; for you my soul is thirsting. My body pines for you like a dry, weary land without water*" (Ps 63:2). However, no easy return road exists because many unconscious forces impede the way home. "*Few there are who enter upon this less traveled road*" (see Mt 7:14).

A denial of the divine presence within the human spirit blocks all transcendence of the human spirit and moors it in the material, turning its spiritual hunger and thirst toward the Ego, which substitutes for True Self and--for God. Every human soul without the Spirit of God becomes a Haunted House.

Always, there is something in us that yearns for Unity, a yearning that wears many masks. It was G. K. Chesterton that observed, "The man who knocks upon the door of the brothel, is looking for God." Saint Paul never doubted that the God, "in whom we live and move and have our being," was present in the lives of all men and women, urging them within the depths of their souls to seek him, to become a "yes group" for him, and to come to know God and discover His will written within their hearts.

Every religion attempts to offer a way to rediscover our lost unity, the return to paradise. At this point in our journey, let us listen attentively and respectfully to a voice from the People of the Indus Valley.

For a deeper understanding of the spirituality and mysticism of this Eastern culture, we need to understand their teaching on conscious awareness. The Hindu scriptures, the Vedas, speak of four levels of consciousness: the waking state, the dream state, the state of deep sleep, and the transcendent state.

In the awakened state, which a person imagines to be real, we are in the world of senses and the mind--the mind at this point is considered to be the lowest level of consciousness. Unfortunately, this is the level in which the Western mind normally remains.

In the dream state, we retire from the outer world of the senses and mental creation, and we begin to experience the inner world. This does not mean ordinary dreaming, but the deeper, inner world, the subtle dimension that leaves behind the material world.

Beyond this lies the deep sleep (*turiya*). In this state the senses and mental operation are completely left behind; the spirit enters into a deep center of being of which the mind is not usually conscious.

It is the fourth state that is the ultimate goal, for it brings one to “the Self” in its own pure state, the awaked life of supreme consciousness. We read in the Isa Upanishad, “He who sees all beings in his self and his self in all beings, he loses all fear.”

The goal of yoga is to discover this Inner Reality. It is the discipline, the practical method, of how to explore and how to discover ultimate Reality. One committed to this discipline is a yogi.

A very wise Yogi gives this instruction to his students, “If a wise man holds his body with parts erect--chest, neck and head--and turns the senses and the mind toward the heart [the “heart” is the term used for the inner center, both in Hindu and Hebrew spirituality] we are told he will then, in the boat of Brahman, cross all the torrents.” One goes beyond all this world of conflict and violence and enters into peace.

A wise Yogi goes on to explain to his students how to control one’s breathing and restrain one’s mind--in other words, how to control the faculties of the body so that they become handmaids in assisting, not hindering, meditation. He emphasizes that the human mind is like a chariot drawn by vicious horses: the body is the chariot, the horses are the senses, and the mind is the reins. One has to control the horses--the senses--through the mind. “Let the wise man without fail restrain his mind, that chariot yoked with vicious horses.”

It is in the Fourth State of Consciousness that the spirit goes beyond the waking, the dreaming, the deep sleep states, and enters into transcendent consciousness. This is the goal of meditation--supreme consciousness, which is neither consciousness nor unconsciousness. For at this stage, one has gone beyond the opposites--the dualities--altogether, and has arrived at the pure state of its own Soul: the true and eternal Self in which the Absolute is experience.

The soul at this point is recognized as “the Atman,” the Spirit that cannot be seen or touched, above all distinction, beyond thoughts. The Atman is ineffable; the experience is beyond description.

It is the place where neither the senses nor the intellect can take you. One has gone beyond one's senses, one's imagination, one's mind, and beyond words, as one comes to the Absolute. Union with God is the supreme proof of one’s reality; only when one enters into the Divine Reality does he know God. This may appear totally unreal to the ordinary mind, but when experienced, one knows the supreme Reality.

Perhaps St. Paul spoke of it when he said, “*eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it entered into the mind what God has prepared for those who love him*” (1Cor 2:9). Was Teresa of Avila speaking of this when she said, “I know that I know that I know!”

Before we begin a more in-depth study of the ancient people in the Indus Valley, let us listen to the wise advice Father Bede gives to us:

Looking back at myths and rituals, we can see that through myth God revealed himself in the ancient world--before the development of reason, human beings had to learn through myths, and myth was expressed in ritual. So all the ancient myths and ritual were the way in which the Spirit was made present and through which the Word, who enlightens “every man coming into the world,” was revealing himself through myths, and rituals of the ancient people.

Father Bede teaches,

It is important to be clear that when we speak about the experience of God, what is meant is the subjective aspect of that which objectively we call revelation. Revelation and experience are always *interdependent*. As the human soul opens to the divine mystery, so the divine mystery reveals itself to the soul.

It is the mystery of existence: human beings have been explorers of that mystery since the beginning of human life on earth. On the one hand the mystery is revealing itself as the human soul is open to it, and on the other hand the human person is striving to comprehend the mystery.

Father Bede also reminds us of the importance of symbolic language when it comes to matters of religion and spirituality: we need to bear in mind the difference between symbolism and abstract language. An abstraction is a mental presentation of any object, independent of its sense presentation; symbolism is a concrete image used to express a Reality of which human language has no words with which to describe it.

God cannot be expressed in human terms. We can only speak of Him through analogy—the resemblance in some particulars between things otherwise unlike. Symbols are concrete images, and we normally approach God through symbols--through the external symbols of rites and ceremonies, and then through mental and imaginative symbols. Through concrete and imaginative symbols we approach the transcendent beyond.

Father Bede reminds us that “symbolic language is the language of the intuitive mind; it is associated with the right hemisphere of the brain; the analytical and rational mind is associated with the left hemisphere of the brain. If one is to

understand spirituality and spiritual growth and development, it is important that these two hemispheres of the brain come together.”

Father Bede confirms that they do come together in Christian mystical tradition. He speaks to our Christian hearts when he tells us, “We are either open to the Spirit and take part in the work of redemption, or we close in ourselves and settle for substitutes for the Spirit, in which case we isolate ourselves from God, from Truth.” In other words, we make the human soul a barnyard chicken.

**STUDY QUESTIONS**  
**NATIONS OF THE WORLD**

(Read Chapter 10 through “The People of the Indus Valley.”)

1. What is the symbolic relationship between the 70 nations from the Sons of Noah and the 70 descendents of Abraham?
2. Who is Nimrod and what did he come to signify in the history of Israel?
3. What was the path traveled in Genesis to bring the line of divine blessing down to one man and family?
4. In the First Covenant what teaching of the Lord re-established the innate dignity of every human being?
5. What do you see to be the essential message of the First Covenant and why is it applicable to all people at all times?
6. What does it teach us about our own relationship to ourselves and life on earth?
7. (People of the Indus Valley) From Acts 14:16-17 and 17:22-31, what do we learn about the presence of God in people of other religions?
8. In what way do you see us honoring and giving glory to God by studying His Presence in other religions?
9. What do you understand by the concept “levels of consciousness”?
10. What do you understand by “the intellect is the path to transcendence”?
11. What are the four levels of consciousness for the Hindu?
12. What do you understand by the words yoga and yogi?
13. What do you understand to be the difference between symbolism and abstract language?
14. What are the importance of myths and rituals in this ancient religion?
15. For Fr. Bede what does it mean to have a heart open to the Spirit or a heart closed within itself?

## IMAGE OF GOD IN THE HINDU PEOPLE

Our study will be limited to the time around 1500 BC to around 200BC. When the Hindu People speak of a Supreme Being in their writings, they are speaking about the same God the Jews and the Christians worship. Their theology is different, but they are speaking about the One Supreme Being. In Judaism we find at least twenty-one different names for the same God (see *Rose Book of Bible Charts, Maps and Time Lines*, Rose Publishing, 2005, pg 54).

It is the poets among ancient people who are the “seers” and the prophets. In the Old Testament, a pagan prophet gives this description of himself, “*The utterance of Balaam, son of Beor, the utterance of the man whose eye is true...one who sees what the Almighty sees, enraptured and with eyes unveiled*” (Num 24:3-4).

Four poetical works, called *Vedas*, are our first written records. The *Vedas* of India are considered the most ancient poetry in the world. They were originally composed by priestly poets, and confined to the priestly elite. A primary work, the *Rig Veda*, appeared around 1500 BC. It concerned itself with gods and their worship.

As noted earlier in our study, gods in the ancient world personified the forces of nature that lay beyond the control and understanding of the human mind. These forces were conceived as immortal and powerful beings, affecting the lives of people for good or ill. All the characteristics of human beings, both good and evil, were projected onto these gods. As earthly leaders could be appeased and flattered by gifts and praises, so could the gods. As kings on earth argued and fought among themselves, so did gods.

People understood these gods within the limitation of their own experiences. Saint Paul spoke of them as “cosmic powers,” “*the principalities and powers, the rulers of this world of darkness, the evil spirits in regions above*” (Eph 6:12).

It would not be fair to impute this knowledge to the ancient pagan people. However, they did experience that some of these “cosmic powers” were not nice gods, and one must tread around them as on egg shells. The dealings of the people with their gods are somewhat similar to our relationships with our Christian saints--we attribute to certain men and women the power to aid us in some particular way; we erect shrines to them, make statues of them, and ask for their intercession. In the pagan culture, these people (our saints) would have been seen as “demigods”--extraordinary human beings who excelled in virtue and power, performed extraordinary deeds during their lives, and after death were lifted up to immortality to share life among the gods.

Despite the existence of many gods, there prevailed a belief in the existence of a Supreme Power over the universe. It was believed that the nature of this Supreme Being was present in matter, mind and soul, eminent in the universe, but transcended it.

The *Rig Veda* expresses belief in Eternal Energy as the divine source of creation. Energy permeates the physical and psychic world. Fire is its physical manifestation, and it centers itself in the Sun. The ancient Indus People worshiped the Eternal Energy in the form of *Agni*--god of fire—who was centered in the sun from which it manifested itself and permeated all creation.

In a Vedic hymn of praise of Agni we read, “The fire which is in the sun; the fire which is in the earth; the fire which is in my own heart.” The fire comes down from the sun into the earth; it lies deep in the center of the earth and permeates all things. You can detect its presence in a fiery spark when hitting two stones together; you can find it in wood--the fire caused by rubbing two sticks together.

The Vedic worship centered on *yajna*, the fire of sacrifice. The priest built elaborate altars upon which fire would burn. Into the fire, the produce of the earth was placed as votive offerings. The fire that had come down from above into the earth, producing these offerings, was now returned to the heavens in the fire of the sacrifice. Agni, in the form of fire, carries the sacrifice back to heaven. Agni is the mediator between heaven and earth.

Fire, returning everything to heaven, expresses the Hindu belief in the universal law called “the turning of the Wheel”--all things must return to their source. In the *Veda*, it is called the Law of Dharma Chakra: the law of righteous duty. As such, it is the proper path in life, and leads to peace both in one’s earthly life and in life to come.

When we return all things to its source, we live in harmony with the universe. If we reject the “turning of the wheel” and appropriate the gifts of life to ourselves, we sin.

Sin, in the Vedic tradition, is the separating of ourselves from the order of the universe, making self the Individual Self, the Isolate, the Self-Sufficient One. It goes beyond making oneself “one of the gods;” it makes oneself “the God.” Such action introduces chaos into the harmony of the universe.

In everyday life of the people, “every meal becomes a sacrifice when we receive our food with thanksgiving. The fire in the heavens and the fire in the earth is the same fire in our bodies, and when we consume the food of the earth, it is returned to God in sacrifice and at the same time becomes the energy of our lives.”



When a person takes food that will become energy in their body, and fails to give thanks for the food received, the Vedic makes it clear that the person is a thief; he appropriates the gifts of the earth to himself and fails to receive them as gifts and to give thanks to the Lord.

At this point in earlier religious development, people worshiped God as the force recognized as “energy,” the nature of which remained largely undefined. They recognized “fire” as a physical manifestation of the divine energy, and deified it as Agni, god of fire. This offered them a visible means of worshiping the Unimaginable.

I would like to introduce a brief lesson in modern physics concerning creation:

In modern physics the universe is conceived as a field of energy, which is so constructed by an organizing power. This field of energy is described as “a dynamic web of interdependent relationships.” Everything is interdependent and forms one complex network, in which the whole is present in all its parts, and no part can be understood apart from the whole.

Our modern physicists might have felt right at home with those earlier physicists of the Indus Valley. Perhaps some of them who find difficulty with the God of Israel would be more comfortable with “Agni.”

Three worlds existed for the Hindu: the physical, the psychological, and the spiritual. These three worlds were not separated one from the other: all were simultaneously present because nothing was considered to be merely material. The physical and the psychological were understood as manifestations of the one supreme Spirit that is manifested in all levels of the universe.

As the spirit transcends from the physical to the mental and to the spiritual, there is increasing freedom with each transcendence. In addition, there is an increase in spiritual powers, powers that are experienced, not as supernatural, but as supreme psychical powers.

Such transcendence is not without its own particular dangers. The person must not reject its lower levels of consciousness or leave them behind. As Father Bede points out to us, “There is the tendency to suppress the previous relationship to nature, to our emotional consciousness, and sexual consciousness, which may result in serious splits in the person. If the mental consciousness is not properly integrated with what went before and what comes after, it can result in madness.”

There were examples of this among the early Christian desert fathers. Some among them believed themselves to be so spiritual that they could fly; their first solo flight was their last, and it was not to the heavens above but the rocks below. (Perhaps they had too much bread and water before flight?) Father Bede advises,

“When one seeks to enter into the third stage of integration--seek the guidance of a qualified teacher.”

The understanding of this state of higher consciousness would not be written about until around 600 B.C. in the writings called the *Mundaka Upanishad*. It would be another two hundred years before the development of the spiritual science needed to direct devout souls on their pilgrimage to obtain the transcending end of prayer. It would be the science of Yoga that would teach the practices and exercises needed to reach such a lofty goal. As already mentioned, the practitioner or teacher of Yoga would be known as a “yogi.”

In our introduction we have already been introduced to the teaching of the “wise yogi,” concerning the importance of posture and breathing in the practice of Yoga. These teachings are found in the *Svetasvatara Upanishad*) written around 400 BC.

One point becomes clear to me in our study of Eastern mysticism. It demands that if you will to make progress on the road to union with God, you must become a spiritual athlete, and do what you need to do to prepare yourself for the power of the Holy Spirit. God does not do in us what we have the power to do ourselves.

In the last of the *Veda* poems, known as The Forest Book, it became apparent that a turning point within the Hindu religion took place. A growing dissatisfaction among the learned with temple rituals and sacrifice, strong distaste for external religious practices, and an awakened hunger within the heart made men aware of their spiritual emptiness.

Men begin to withdraw from public life to seek the solitude of the forest. An inner fire flamed up within, and the altar of their heart called for the sacrifice of their own self. The spiritual hunger that lay dormant in the human heart awakened and blossomed. A new understanding of the human person and the world developed.

A new group of spiritual leaders arose, wise men known as the Rishis. The new literature known as *Upanishad* came from their teachings to their disciples. Religious leaders and their disciples were turning inward for the answers to life's problems and the understanding of human nature. No longer merely “puppets of capricious gods,” they were becoming self-conscious centers of their own life, understanding the importance of finding a meaningful path through life.

As we continue our study, we note the change and growth in theology--their belief in God and their interrelationship with God. We know from the experience of both Judaism and Christianity in the flowering of its theology, that it was a slow process, unfolding with the passing of generations, as the Holy Spirit silently worked in the spirits of the believers. This growth in revelation, no doubt, paralleled the conscious and spiritual growth of the believers. Recall Jesus' words to his disciples: “I have much more to tell you, but you cannot bear it now. When he comes however, being the Spirit of Truth, he will guide you to all truth” (Jn 16:12-13).

We find in the earliest written *Upanishad*, *Brihadaranyaka*, the understanding that the universe is sustained by a divine power. This divine power and presence is identified as “Brahman,” which is the power of Life, of Consciousness, and of Awareness that permeates the entire universe. Therefore, the consciousness of Brahman permeates the souls of all men. When a person arrives at the point at which they can no longer distinguish their consciousness from that of Brahman, they are one with Brahman, and they have arrived at “The Inner Awakening.”

The content of inner self-awakening is to experience Brahman-and-I-am-One; to know self is to know Brahman. This “knowing” implies “I must go to the depths of my own being--beyond body, thoughts, and feelings, and come to ‘I’--the ‘Ego.’ I have arrived at my Soul/Atman. At the point I experience my naked soul, freed of all materiality, I know that I am in Braham and Braham is in Me, and it is impossible for me to distinguish between the Two-of-Us.” This is to discover the “Secret Essence” of Creation! This is the Great Reality.

The Roshis take the next logical step and teach that the whole universe is a Spiritual Person. This “Person” fills creation and, as the “Lord of Immortality,” is all that has been and all that will be. This Spiritual Person is both transcendent--beyond human experience, and immanent—within the limits of human experience; 3/4 of his being fills the heavens and 1/4 of his being fills the earth. All unified creation reflects this Spiritual Person. The Roshis call the Spiritual Person *Purusha* which in Hindu means “man.” *Purusha* is both transcendent and immanent. The Unified Creation bears and expresses the character of *Purusha*.

The concept of the “*Purusha*” that emerges now as the Lord of Immortality has an ancient history in Hindu spirituality. The person of *Purusha* reappears in Hindu theology as He first appeared in the ancient doctrine *Rig Veda*, as a Cosmic Person--the foundation of the whole world.

It is recorded in the *Rig Veda* that the ancient gods offer this Cosmic Person, *Purusha*, in sacrifice. From the sacrificial body of *Purusha* the created world comes into existence. We find here the foundation for the ancient caste system in India--human beings are created out of the body of *Purusha*. Thus is the record of the creation of human beings--from his mouth of *Purusha* comes the priestly caste of the Brahmins, from his arms comes the ruling class of the Kshatriyas, from his thighs come the merchants and farmers—the Vaisyas, from his feet come the workers--the Shudras.

Many hundreds of years later, *Purusha* reappears in the earliest writings of the *Upanishad*. There we are told of another “genesis”-- “In the beginning was the Atman in the nature/form of *Purusha*”--with the understanding that the “Atman” is the “Spirit/Soul” of the universe.

The Eternal Spirit appears in the form of *Purusha/Man* as a personal manifestation of the Spirit--the Source of all creation. These scriptures speak of *Purusha* as “the

person of light consisting of knowledge, a conscious Being, the source of Consciousness--the light of consciousness is the Light of the Spirit.”

The path to Purusha--the summit of creation—is presented in the last of the *Upanishad*, the *Katha*. It begins with the world as it is presented by the five senses, which becomes your mover into the World of the Mind/Manas--rational consciousness. From the point of rational consciousness, you move into the Intellect (Buddhi), which transcends the world of the Mind (reason, empiricism). The Intellect is the door into the spirit world, which is the psychic world. This is the spiritual world that is the true home of the human spirit. The nature of the human spirit places it on a level with “god” and angels; we have entered into the Manifested World, the world of spiritual beings.

Only when the soul arrives at this point of consciousness does it become possible to move on into the Unmanifested, the Ground of Creation which is Purusha. Beyond Purusha is Nothing! (Nirvana).

The use of different names for God is confusing, but if we keep in mind the basic belief in Hinduism, that there is a one supreme Being, Brahman and Purusha, and others such as Vishnu and Shiva, are all symbols of the one Supreme God, as Yahweh, Adonai, El Shaddai are in the Old Testament. In the doctrine of Purusha, we have the further revelation of God as “Person.” In the *Upanishad Svetasvatara* that appears around 300 B.C., the figure of Purusha appears more clearly, with interest centering upon the Person of Purusha. The text speaks of “an insight of great profundity.”

Purusha embraces the whole--the material, the psychic, the spiritual are all contained in Him as its Creator. He is the supporter of the gods, but supreme above them, as all the cosmic powers, gods and angels, are subjected to Him. Purusha, the Lord, is beyond all.

The text goes on to say of him “who is more subtle than the subtle, in the midst of chaos creates all things.”

It is in the same *Upanishad* that the Supreme Being is called *Shiva*, meaning the “Blessed/kindly One.” This became the acceptable name of God among the Dravidian people of the South. (We should note--there developed in India the Aryan India of North and the Dravidian people of the South.) The majority of Hindus today worship God either under the title of *Vishnu* in the North--the god of the heavens, a gracious God who pervades all things; and *Shiva* in the South--the Blessed/Kindly One.

In summary, the Cosmic Person is the Supreme Being in the universe, and it is he who unites the entire universe and maintains its existence. He is a Divine Person possessing self-consciousness with the power of understanding and love. He may be called either Vishnu or Shiva, and is known today in India as Krishna.

## IMAGE OF GOD IN THE HINDU PEOPLE

### STUDY QUESTIONS

(Read Image of God to great Epic poem)

1. What are the *Vedas*, their nature, their age and importance in the Hindu religion?
2. What did the *Rig Veda* teach about the nature of God?
3. What was the nature of Agni and how was he worshipped?
4. In the Vedic tradition what is seen as the essential sin?
5. At this early stage how would you define the Hindu religion?
6. What were the three worlds of the Hindus and how do you see this affecting the nature of God, themselves and earth?
7. What danger did Fr. Bede often see occurring in spiritual transcendence?
8. What major changes began to occur in the Hindu People around 600 B.C., and who were the Rishis and how do you see their teachings and writings affecting their spirituality?
9. What did the concepts “Brahman” and “Purusha” come to signify in the Hindu religion?
10. What did the *Katha Upanishad* teach about the transcendence of the soul?
11. What did the *Svetasvatara Upanishad* teach in 300B.C. about the nature of Purusha?
12. How do you understand the concept of “Cosmic Person” as it appears in 300 B. C. Hinduism?
13. What do you understand by the terms “Shiva” and “Vishnu”?
14. What is the Mahabharata and its importance in the Hindu religion?
15. What does Gandhi teach about this epic work and other great literary and religious writings?

## THE EPIC

Let us turn our attention at this time to one of the greatest literary works of Hinduism: the *Mahabharata* (Ma-hab-ha-ra-ta). It brings us deep into the spirituality of the People of the Indus Valley. Written in Sanskrit it is simply called *The Epic*. An understatement! The *Mahabharata* is the longest poem in the world; with over a hundred thousand verses, long prose passages, and about 1.8 million words in total, it is about fifteen times the length of the Bible. It became the origin of thousands of beliefs, legends, thoughts, teachings and characters, which even today are part of Indian life.

Attributed to the poet Vyaso, the *Mahabharata* tells the story of the long and bloody quarrel between two groups of cousins. This family quarrel was about who will rule, and it ends with an enormous battle where the fate of the world is at stake.

Around seven hundred stanzas of this poem composed the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which many hold to be the jewel of Hindu thought, expressing the very soul of India. The words of a Hindu poet apply well to this work, "When the night of one's mind has turned to dawn, one comes into the presence of God." We will give special attention to *Bhagavad-Gita*!

Mahatma Gandhi wrote an inspiring commentary on the *Bhagavad-Gita* that continues to direct his disciples. Gandhi did not see this as a historical work, but one that describes "the duel that perpetually went on in the hearts of humankind, and the description of external warfare was brought merely to make the description of the internal duel more alluring. The persons in the poem may be historical, but the author uses them only to drive home his religious theme."

We are presented with a great religious poem and, as with all inspiring works, the deeper you enter into it, the richer its message becomes; it carries into every new age an expanded meaning.

Gandhi gives us this brief meditation on the nature of such poetry, "A poet puts a particular truth before the world, it does not necessarily follow that he has known or worked out all its great consequences or that having done so, he is not always able to express them fully. In this lies the greatness of the poem and the poet: A poet's meaning is limitless--great writing suffers evolution. In the history of language, important words change and expand."

Gandhi tells his students that this work "sings the praises of knowledge that goes beyond the intellect. It is essentially addressed to the heart, and is capable of being understood by the heart." Gandhi would have agreed with the author of "The Little Prince," who tells us "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye" (Saint-Exupéry).

Using the narrator's own words, Gandhi tells us that the "*Gita* is not for those who have no faith. As Krishna warns: 'Do not entrust this treasure to him who is without devotion, without desire for this teaching and who denies Me. Those free from malice will with faith absorb this teaching and, having attained freedom, live where people of true merit go after death.'"

This reminds me of the teaching of the New Testament concerning faith, "*Faith is the conviction about things unseen...Through faith we perceive that the worlds were created by the Word of God, and what is visible came into being through the invisible...Anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists and he rewards those who seek Him*" (Heb 11:1,3,6).

Let us now enter into the spiritual school of the *Bhagavad-Gita* as inquiring students or, at least as silent, attentive observers.

*The Epic* begin to unfold with Arjuna, a noble warrior, who is preparing for battle. His charioteer is Krishna, whose true personality remains unknown to Arjuna. Krishna, in the assumed role of Arjuna's charioteer, will serve as his spiritual guide though the coming battle.

The person of "Krishna" is one of the most outstanding personalities in the Hindu religion. Generally, in the Hindu religious history, the person of Krishna appears as an *avatar*--an incarnation of the Supreme Being who comes down from heaven in many different disguises in times of great need.

Gandhi tells us, "In Hinduism, incarnation is ascribed to one who has performed some extraordinary service to humankind. Future generations pay homage to one who, in his own generation, has been extraordinarily religious in his conduct during his lifetime. When Krishna says that he incarnates himself as a human being, he only uses the idiom of common speech. When, from our human point of view, we see special excellence in some individual, we look upon him as an *Avatar*."

Gandhi saw in the belief of reincarnation a testimony to the lofty spiritual ambition of the human soul. He says, "'Man is not at peace with himself until he becomes like God.'" It is the supreme state, and the desire to achieve it, that is the only ambition worth having. He equates this with the desire for self-realization. The *Gita*, in Gandhi's opinion, describes self-realization in the clearest possible language.

There is a saying, "Adam is not God but he is the spark of the divine." It is maintained among the Hindi that this "spark" shines most brightly in the holiest of people. Hinduism sees in Krishna the most perfect incarnation of this divine spark.

The *Gita* describes how the perfect man is to be known. It presents Krishna as the perfect person: his is perfection and right knowledge personified but, as Gandhi says, "he is an imaginary person of which his incarnation is 'afterglow.'"

In the section of the *Mahabharata* believed to be the earliest part, nothing indicates that Krishna is a divine incarnation: “He is a man who tires, who ages; sometimes he is surprised and distressed by what occurs; he dies, more or less a failure, by an accidental death from the arrow of a hunter.”

It is from this presentation that some see Krishna, not as a god, but as “Vasudev.” The title is applied to one who is the best and greatest man alive who may appear at any given moment in history.

What does the spirit of the Lord say through his prophet Krishna? He speaks to us of knowledge and worship of God and reveals,

“I am the source of all. All proceeds from me. Knowing this, the wise worship me with hearts filled with devotion. With me in their thoughts, their whole soul devoted to me, teaching one another, with me ever on their lips, they live in contentment and joy. To these ever in tune with me, worshiping me with affectionate devotion, I give the power of selfless action, whereby they come to me” (Ch. 8-10).

“He alone comes to me who does my work, who has made me his goal, who is my devotee, who has renounced attachment, and who has ill will towards none” (Ch. 11-55).

The Lord says, “It is I who penetrate the earth, uphold all beings with my strength (Ch. 15-13) and I am seated in the heart of all (Ch. 15-15). From me processes memory, knowledge and intellect. It is I who am to be known in all the Vedas. “

“To whom I regard the best are those who riveting their minds on me, ever attached, worship me with the highest faith. But those who worship the Indefinable, the Unmanifested, the Omnipresent, the Unthinkable, the Rockseated, the Immovable, the Unchanging--keeping the whole host of senses in complete control, looking on all with an impartial eye, engrossed in the welfare of all beings--these come to Me.”

“Greater is the travail of those whose mind is fixed on the Unmanifested; for it is hard for embodied mortals to gain the Unmanifested Goal” (Ch 12:2-5).

To those who cannot travel the supreme highway to God, the Lord offers other roads:

“If you cannot set your mind on Me, then by the method of constant practice seek to win me. If you are also unequal to this method of constant practice, concentrate on service to Me, even thus serving Me you shall obtain perfection. If you are unable even to do this, then dedicate all to Me, with mind controlled, abandon the fruit of actions. From the renunciation of the fruit of all action directly issues peace.” (Ch. 12:8, 10-12)



“Anyone who has become free from the egotistic idea of being the author of anything, and who recognizes every moment in life the Dweller within, will never commit sin. It is in egotism that sin has its source. There is no sin where there is no consciousness of the ‘I’.”

The question is asked, “What about those people who do not follow the proper rule of life and worship, yet they do worship and they have a faith?” “With faith” is implied “with a little humility.” Krishna’s response is that such people find their own god.

“It is our nature,” he tells us, “to have faith. Those who reject the ‘guiding light’ will express their faith in something in keeping with their own innate character. Man is made up of faith. Whatever his object of faith, even so is he (Ch. 17:3).

The Lord adds that although such people do not properly know him and worship him properly, it is he in compassion that answers their prayers:

“Men, bereft of knowledge by reason of various longings, seek refuge in other gods: pinning their faith on diverse rites, guided by their own nature. Whatever form one desires to worship *in faith and devotion*, in that faith I make their faith secure. Through his faith he seeks to please his god and obtain from him the longings of his heart. In truth these blessings come to him by none but me. But limited is the fruit that falls to those shortsighted ones. Those who worship gods, go to gods, those who worship me, come unto Me (Ch 7:20-23).

We know that to understand the proper worship of God, we must have some understanding of both the nature of God and of our own nature. Let us try to understand the nature of the human person in the light of Hindu philosophy.

The *Gita* teaches us that the human body is called the “field,” and those who understand the body are called, “Knowers of the Field.”

One who is a “Knower of the Field” understands there is both body (*prakitt*) and soul (*purusha*), and both are without beginning. It speaks of the “body” as the “human nature.” All human qualities, characteristics, and what is called *gunas* reside in the body. Human nature is the source of all cause and effect.

The soul resides in the body, and the body causes pleasure and pain; these are experienced in the soul. What is done through the body affects the soul; all the actions that flow from our *gunas* resound in the soul. However, the quality of the soul is so pure in itself, that it is not soiled and corrupted by actions within the body.

What are the *gunas*? They are three qualities of nature that are difficult to define. The first superficial impression is to see them as desires, but after close examination they appear as sources of power that are under the control of the human will. I see them more as three spirits in residence within the human body. In keeping with the *Gita*’s image of

“charioteer,” I see them as three different charioteers, standing in the wings ready to take control and lead a person into life's battles.

However, in human nature one of the “charioteers” always has the reins in hand--the position is never unoccupied; one is running the show and the other two are contending to do so. The charioteers are named Sattiva, Rajas and Tamas. These three, the Gita confirms, keep “the imperishable Dweller” bound to the body. These are the chains that hold the spirit earth-bound.

Sattiva is the quality of nature that embraces light, harmony, purity, and goodness. It is a stainless quality that is light giving and healing. Sattiva brings a person to happiness; the fruit of its presence is knowledge and truth. “When the light of knowledge shines forth from all the gates of this body, then it may be known that the Sattiva thrives” (Ch. 14:11). Sattiva binds the soul to happiness and knowledge with threads of gold. If Sattiva embodies a person at the end of earthly life, the person attains the spotless world of “the knowers of the Highest.”

Rajas is the quality of nature that embraces passion, heat and energy. It is the source of thirsts and attachment. It is associated with desire, and is probably the cause of desire. It is attached to action. “Greed, activity, assumption of undertakings, restlessness, and cravings give evidence to the dominion of rajas.” If Rajas is the charioteer at the time of the end of one's life on earth, the person is reborn among those attached to action.

Tamas is the quality of life that embraces inertia, sloth and ignorance. It is born of ignorance, and gives birth to delusions about earthly life. Heedlessness, sloth and slumber bind the soul. If one dies in the state of tamas, that person is born into a species without reason (Ch 14-16).

No soul remains inactive even for a moment: the three forces of Gunas drive everyone to action, whether he wills or not. One is always driven to activity by one or another of these powers of nature, or a combination of them.

Therefore we find three types of people in the world: the Sattivic Person--the one who works with peace of mind and heart; the Rajasic Person--a restless one who is always doing something or other, a rider of many horses; the Tamasic Person--the one who works and lives in a mechanical fashion, not in control of their lives, but controlled by its circumstances.

Through the soul the Lord enters into the world of the senses and the mind, and there He experiences the fruits of our works (*gunas*)--our pain and pleasure. Through the soul the Lord draws the person away from attachment to the effects of their deeds (Ch. 15:10).

What the Lord acquires through the body, He carries with Him wherever he goes as the wind carries scents from flower beds (Ch. 15:8). With this knowledge the Lord always knows us better than we know ourselves.

Let us now turn our attention from the human body to review the Map of the Mind as presented in the Gita:

The Mind travels from the smell of the rose in the garden to the vision of God's glory. It begins with the presentation of the senses to the *Manas*--the logical and scientific mind, which St. Thomas Aquinas calls the ratio /reason, which interprets for us material reality. Above the *Manas* lies *Buddhi*, which St. Thomas Aquinas calls *intellectus*/intellect, which is pure intelligence. *Buddhi* takes what the *Manas*/Reason offers, and opens the Mind to the "source of reality." As our highest spiritual power, *Buddhi* carries the Mind beyond the senses and the ordinary mind, and opens the Mind to "the Great World" called *Mahat*. *Mahat* is the psychic world that is the world of the human spirit. The *Mahat* opens the Mind to the Unmanifested: the world of angels and cosmic powers, which opens upon the World Soul/*Purusha*, beyond which lies the Unimaginable--the sublime road--The Ultimate. The Goal!

The holy man (*yogi*) strives to see the Lord seated within his own heart. The Lord gives these instructions to help the devout center upon the presence of the Lord within their spirit:

Fix for yourself, in a pure spot, a firm seat, neither too high nor yet too low. Sitting on that seat, with mind concentrated, the functions of thought and senses in control, keeping himself steady, holding the trunk, the neck and head in a straight line and motionless, fixing his eye on the tip of his nose, and looking not around, tranquil in spirit, free from fear, holding his mind in control, the prayerful one should sit with all his thoughts on Me, absorbed in Me (Ch. 6:12-14).

The man who excels keeps all his senses under control of the mind; engages his faculties in good deeds without attachment (Ch.3:7).

Contacts of the senses with their objects bring cold, and heat, pleasure and pain. They come and go and are gone. Endure them! (Ch. 2:14).

Each sense has its settled likes and dislikes towards its object. You should not be controlled by these. They are constant besetters--attacking us and oppressing us.

Do your allotted task: action is superior to inaction. Within inaction even life's normal course is not possible (Ch.3:8).

Action alone is the province; never the fruit thereof. Let not the motive be for the fruit of action, nor should you desire to avoid action (Ch 2:47).

Act without attachment, even-minded in success and failure. Pitiably are those who make fruit their motive (Ch 2:48).

Every action done suffers bondage except those done in the spirit of self-sacrifice (Ch. 3:9). People have forgotten the art of working without attachment and aversion (Ch. 4:1). Any action done without reference to one's own interest is a form of sacrifice (Ch. 4:24).

Better one's own duty, bereft of merit, than another's well performed. Better death in the discharge of one's duty. Another's duty is fraught with danger for you (Ch. 3:15).

The teaching that is most unique to Hinduism is the Caste System. We read in the *Gita* that the caste is a creation of Krishna, "I have created four castes/*varnas* on the basis of character and work: Brahmin, Kshtriya, Vaishya and Shudra" (Ch. 4:13). We have already seen in the story of creation that they were formed from the body of Krishna.

Brahmin is created to know God, and live in the consciousness of God. The Brahmin's work in life is to teach and help people to know God. He needs to possess the characteristics for the work: serenity, self-restraint, austerity, purity, forgiveness, uprightness, knowledge, discriminative knowledge and faith in God.

Kshtriya is to protect society. He needs valor, spiritedness, constancy, resourcefulness, bravery in battle. His natural duties are to always be ready to help the poor, and the capacity to rule. There is no higher good for one who is of Kshtriya than a righteous war. A fight, coming unsought, as a gateway to heaven thrown open, falls only to the lot of a fortunate man. If one will not fight this righteous fight then, failing in his duty and losing his honor, he will incur sin: for a man of honor, disgrace is worse than death (Ch. 2:31-33).

Vaishya is both a business-man with knowledge of economics and a farmer who is a tiller of the soil, protector of the cow and commerce.

Shudra serves society. He is able to work with his body to fulfill the needs of society. Service is his natural duty.

Krishna teaches that each caste has its place and duty in society. One caste does not place one person above the other, does not make one person higher or lower than another. If one in the Shudra cast completes his work in a spirit of self-sacrifice, he will win his life (no-rebirth).

The work itself does not affect one's relationship with God; through Krishna God reveals, "Actions do not affect me, nor am I concerned with the fruit thereof" (Ch. 4:14).

The law of God is proper action/*dharma*. The Law of Being was set in motion at the beginning. There is no question of God suspending his law. The Castes are part of the order of the World, needed for the proper operation of the world.

Each person first ascertains his work; the first work is self-realization. We need to discern our work, for it is the unfolding of our work in that self-realization occurs.

Once discerned, one becomes totally immersed in the work, and loses oneself in it, becomes one with it. If one is free from evil desires, one becomes one with God. For such there will be no rebirth.

Each man by complete absorption in the performance of his duty wins perfection. Hear now how to win such perfection by devotion to that duty. By offering the worship of one's duty to Him, who is the moving spirit of all being, and by whom all this pervaded, man wins perfection (Ch. 18:45-46).

One who knows God's will desire nothing through work; the work itself is the All. "Who does feel the strain of work? The one attached to the 'I' within, the source of impatience and worry." "When you work for God, the work is yours, the fruit is God's. The work is entirely yours to do; the reward of work is entirely for Him to give."

An Indian Poet, Mirabai sings of the relationship of the soul to the Lord, "By a slender thread had God tied me to Him, and I turn as He pulls the thread." Another, adding to it, says, "The thread is slender, a single one besides,"

A Master of Knowledge, who has seen the truth, will impart knowledge. When I say that men of knowledge will impart knowledge to you, I do not mean that they will convince your reason; I mean they will awaken in you the faith that it is so (Ch. 4:34).

You will see that it is because of your reason that you see things as separate from one another, that in truth they are not; all in the universe are in essence one reality (Ch. 4:35).

There is a tree the Hindu calls the "Asvattha Tree." In Hindu the word *shavah* means "tomorrow." The word "asvattha" means "it will not last a day." The Tree has its roots in the sky and its limbs and branches on earth. The branches of the tree find their source deep down in the action of men and women in the world. It is an up-side-down tree.

The Asvattha Tree is a symbol of this world as seen through the eyes of the unspiritual--those who fail to discern that the world is rooted in God, and they remain devoted and attached to the objects of their senses. To these people the Lord of the Gita says:

First hew down the Tree; pray to win the haven from which there is no return; find refuge in the Primal Being from whom this ancient world emanates (Ch 15:3-4).

Even through you be the most sinful of sinners, you shall cross the ocean by the Boat of Knowledge (Ch. 4:36). It is ignorance that veils knowledge and deludes all creatures (Ch. 5:15).

A man of doubt, without knowledge and without faith, is lost. For him who is given to doubt, there is neither this world nor the beyond, nor happiness (Ch. 4:40).

STUDY QUESTIONS  
BHAGAVAD-GITA

1. What is the *Mahabharata* and its importance in the Hindu religion?
2. What does Gandhi teach about this Epic work and other great literary and religious writings?
3. What does Krishna teach about those who should and those who should not read these teachings? What does this tell you about the Christian Scriptures (see Mt. 7:6)?
4. What does it mean when we say that Krishna was an *avatar*?
5. What is Gandhi teaching about incarnation and how is it similar to our teaching concerning saints?
6. What does the Lord teach through Krishna concerning the true worshippers of God (Ch. 8-10)?
7. Who does the Lord consider the best of worshippers and what are the difficulties they face (Ch. 12:2-5)?
8. What does Krishna reveal about those who have faith but do not exercise true worship of the Lord (Ch 17:3; Ch 7:20-23)?
9. What does it mean to be a “Knower of the Field” and how does such a one understand human nature?
10. With this understanding, who would you say are is “charioteer” in your Body--Sattiva, Rajas or Tamas?
11. How do you understand the “Map of the Mind” as presented in the *Gita*?
12. What does the *Gita* teach about the purpose and method of Meditation (Ch 6:12-14)?
13. What does the *Gita* teach us about the nature of our work done in the Lord and its purpose (Ch. 18:45-46; Ch. 4:34)?
14. What do you understand by the teaching, “When you work for God, the work is yours, the fruit is God’s”?
15. What does this teaching say to you, “The way of self-realization is the renunciation of fruit of Action”?
16. What does this mean to you, “The soul is the Friend of self and the Soul alone is the foe of self” (Ch 6:5), and what does it tell you about your own soul?
17. What would it mean to say that your life is an “Asvattha Tree”?
18. What does the *Gita* teach you about the power of sin and how does it teach us to overcome its power over the soul?
19. What does it teach us about “men of the devil” (Ch. 16: 120)?
20. “The Threefold Gate to Hell is lust, wrath and greed.” What does that teach us about our own lives and our culture?
21. What do you learn from the dying words of Krishna?
22. All these teachings were written around 300 B. C. Can you see the presence of God in these teachings? Please explain your answer.

## TANTRISM

### SPIRITUALITY OF SOUTHERN INDIA

The people of southern India are the Dravidians who were not touched by the Aryan invasion in the north. The religious spirit and practices of the Dravidians remained very much centered in matter.

As we have seen in our study of the Hindu religion as practiced in the north, it is a religion that aims to go beyond the physical and psychological view of life to spirituality within the light of Divine Reality. This doctrine entails a strong tendency towards asceticism that prevailed on the whole--a spirituality leaving behind the body, the soul, the mind, and all its activities in order to unite as a pure spirit with the supreme brahman, the Atman. Its spirituality is one of renunciation--*sanyas*.

The religious school called Tantrism developed among the Dravidians, becoming a very important movement. It arose as a more earthly doctrine, with a strong sense of body, senses and sex that was largely suppressed in other traditions. Tantrism teaches people to nourish the body's existence and regard the power of the senses as gifts from God. There is a saying in Tantrism: "That by which we fall is that by which we rise." As we fall through our attractions of the senses, sex, passion and desire, so we are to use them as means of going on beyond them.

The Tantric Doctrine has a vision of the whole Cosmos as Energy. It called this "energy" by the name of *Shakti*. The world came into existence through Shakti. It moves the universe. Everything comes forth from Shakti, and cannot be separated from it (God).

The Tantric Doctrine conceives all Shakti to be concentrated in one single point, called *Bindu*. Bindu is the origin of the universe. All energy in the universe is centered in Bindu. From this highly concentrated point of energy all creation goes forth, in mathematical forms of triangles and squares.

The universe is pictured to be in the form a *Yantra*: a kind of diagram that is composed of triangles and squares. In the Yantra coming forth from Bindu, all the powers of the universe are centered. As energy comes forth from the Yantra, it does so in mathematical forms. The Yantra is the structure of the universe. Meditating on the Yantra by centering the mind upon external figures called Mandalas--the human can unite with the universe.

Tantrism teaches its disciples that all energy comes forth from Bindu in centers of energy called *Chakras*. The human body is pictured as a microcosm into which the Energy enters in the form of Chakras for the life and growth of the person.

Tantrism developed methods to release energy within the human person; energy that culminates in the human consciousness at the highest center of the human body-the mind. Tantrism maintains that there are seven centers of energy in the human body beginning at the lower ending of the spinal column and ends at the crown of the human head. The growth and development of the human person depends on the energy in the lower level of the human body moving up and joining the energy of the higher level. As the energy, the Shakti, rises up through body, the whole being is gradually transformed from the physical, through the psychological, to the spiritual in which it comes to human consciousness and union with the divine.

This energy is divine power working within the human body in cooperation with human faculties. This energy is not matter but spiritual-divine. In the Tantric doctrine the supreme God is given the name Shiva and Shiva is Pure Consciousness and Shakti is Divine Energy. Human perfection is achieved when Shakti unites with Shiva-which is visualized as a spiritual marriage of matter with the divine.

One of Tantric methods is the Mantra-the use of Sound. One approaches Reality through uttering sound "OM" and other sounds believed to be vibrations of divine energy having great power. Breathing is another important means: Breath is no purely human breath but the life force of the universe: it is the Breath of God:

We are living in God, the Supreme Being, through our breathing.

The methods of Tantra work with Matter along with Hatha Yoga: the body, breath, sound and sex are seen as means of union with God. Sex is a means of union with God but one has to learn to control the energy of sex and not let it be dissipated in normal sexual intercourse and relations with others: in such a case one gets lost along the way in sexuality and may remain its prisoner.

One has to turn it back through yoga and then it becomes a creative force; this is achieved through Kundalini Yoga; "kundalina" is the serpent power coiled like a serpent at the basic of the spine. Kundalina is all psychic energy and the Yoga methods enable the energy to rise up through the body producing higher levels of consciousness: A marriage between Shiva and Shakti as in the rising of the Divine Energy/Shakti to Shiva it returns to its origin.



## SIDDHARTHA GAUTAMA

Siddhartha was born around 563 BC, son of Prince of Shakyas, whose small kingdom in the foothills of the Himalayas lies in the present day Nepal. He had an insular world, an Eden, created by his father to guard his son from the evil realities of human existence. When Siddhartha was around thirty years of age, the reality of the external world broke into his conscious awareness with the suddenness of a summer storm, shaking him to the core of his soul.

Siddhartha reacted against the Hinduism of his day. Nevertheless, Hinduism had formed his roots, and it would never be entirely uprooted; what he would be and say would carry elements of it, just as "the wine must taste of its own grape."

Four incidents initiated Siddhartha's conversion: a sick man, an old man, a corpse, and a monk. The tragic existence of ordinary human existence shocked and troubled his heart. The desire to understand the cause and cure of human suffering possessed him; the compulsion of it drove him from his Eden into the naked realities of human suffering. In the monk he, recognized his call to a new mode of life.

Around the age of thirty, Siddhartha abandoned his wife, his son, and his former way of life. He joined the company of wise and holy Hindu men, and later, those of the Jain Sect. These holy men saw asceticism as the only way to realize freedom from suffering and rebirth. For five years he traveled in their company, five years seeking the truth his heart desired. But, the despair in his own soul was testimony that the truth he sought did not lie in the company of wise men who were immersed in the self-absorption of Hinduism, or even in the austerity of the Jainism. For Siddhartha, these practices led to a dead end.

Leaving the company of the holy men with five companions, Siddhartha began a solitary journey into his own soul. He realized his ascetic practices left him near death so he began to take food, which scandalized his companions, and they abandoned him. Siddhartha was around 35 years of age when he arrived alone in the vicinity of the village of Bodhigaya, and rested under a bodhi tree.

Let us look closely at the image of Siddhartha Gautama beneath the Bodhi Tree. It is around 530 B.C. Siddhartha knew nothing of the wee Kingdom of Judea, of the Hebrew People and their God Yahweh. It would be nearly three hundred years before Alexander the Great would stand before the Indus River. The only scriptures available to him were the four Vedas poems, but their teaching had spoken nothing to his hungry heart, and he rejected them. He had sought the company of holy and wise men, listened to their wisdom, walked in their company

for five long years, but it left him a man frail in body and with a soul empty as a sea shell. Closing his eyes to thirty-five futile years of life, entering into the deep darkness of his own being, Siddhartha Gautama became a prayer under the bodhi tree.

It was an undetermined amount of time beneath the bodhi tree--Jewish scriptures record the number of days as forty, Siddhartha's friends say "seven weeks"--certainly a symbol of a fullness of time. In the darkness of his own soul he sat in naked faith and expectation, before the Unmanifested.

Did light come like the dawn creeping upon the night, with its light growing brighter and brighter? Some report it as four stages of enlightening. And others say it was more like the sun breaking into midnight darkness. Siddhartha awoke, as if from a long dream, into the brightness of a world of order, harmony and beauty, knowing the Oneness of all creation. He had attained Enlightenment! The experience came first; the understanding of it followed. It would remain a continuous illumination the remainder of his life.

In the light of his "awakening," Siddhartha understood truths concerning human existence, truths experienced in the depths of his heart. He knew the way to a mode of existence beyond suffering and death, leading to a transcendence of being, beyond expression, to which he would never give a name. Siddhartha made the wise decision not to speak about the "Transcendent," but to teach the Way to Transcendence. He would later be called the "Buddha"--the Awakened One.

Siddhartha Gautama understood that the disorder of human existence destroyed the harmony and beauty of life and caused all suffering. Did his vision take him beyond the quest of his immediate goal? If it did, he remained silent about it. It would have been ineffable, inexplicable; people would become entangled and lost in the theological explanation of it. He entered into his "new Eden" and remained silent.

Siddhartha's five companions returned and were amazed at the "new man" they found. They beseeched him to teach them the way that would lead them to share in the life he was now experiencing.

The sufferings of people consumed Siddhartha with compassion. He responded to the call of his people to share with them his inspired insight into the cause and cure for this dreadful human condition of suffering and death. He began to show the Way that leads to the "Experience." This he would do until the day of his death.

In this teaching, he focused on one's immediate experience. One has to begin with the present human condition independent of any metaphysical speculation. We may say, "If you take care of today, it will take care of tomorrow." He recognized that the current belief among people in the immortal soul and life after death only aggravates the problem of the importance of life here and now. He saw the belief of life after death as an impediment to his teaching.

His five companions became his first disciples. Together they went from place to place teaching the people. In Deer Park of Benares, he enumerated his “Four Noble Truths.” He delivered for the first time what we may call his “Keynote address,” setting in motion the wheel of teaching Pratitya-samutapada—“The doctrine that teaches that all psychological and physical phenomena constituting individual existence are interdependent and mutually conditional upon each other; at the same time this describes what entangles sentient beings in suffering.”

The first noble truth is Life is Suffering (Dukkha). A very self evident truth, one would say--you grit your teeth, bear it, and move on. Siddhartha would agree, but he adds, “Yes, but it should not be so.” Suffering results when our lives are out of harmony with the order and design of the universe. Human lives become disordered by cravings and desires--we have to have this, and then that, which initiates an unending circle. “I do not,” he would say, “advocate either total deprivation or submerging oneself in hedonism. Why spend the time of life and the gift of energy upon what is here today and gone tomorrow?”

The first truth leads logically to the second noble truth: “Cravings cause suffering.” Here, he reminds us that the Hindu concern for liberating the soul was just one more unhelpful form of craving, and was a serious distraction from the most pressing project of all--attending to one's experience here and now.

Following the same logical path, we have the third noble truth: “End suffering by ending cravenness!” Easier said than done! There are conditions called addictions, little self-spawned demons in the driving seat of the human will--alcohol, cigarettes, food, sex etc. We excuse our addictions as sickness. One wise man response to this is, “You are sick because you do sick things!”

Siddhartha's answer to this is the fourth noble truth: “Follow the Noble Eight Path!” In a word, you get sick by doing the wrong thing, do the right thing and get well.

Siddhartha offers his disciples an eightfold plan living based on wisdom, morality and emotional balance--the foundation for the eight Right Steps to purity of heart. Briefly, wisdom leads to Right View and Right Intent, which lead to morality. Morality brings Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood which lead to emotional balance. Emotional balance results in Right Effort, Right Mindedness, and Right concentration. These last steps lead to Purity of Heart, which leads to Wisdom. So we come full circle.

The secret of right living is *Dharma*--to live one's human life in harmony with the universe. Dharma is the Path to Life--it is the path to happiness, and it is the Noble Eightfold Path as taught by Siddhartha. If followed it leads to the discovery of nirvana, and when one reaches nirvana all will be well.

Siddhartha described nirvana as a state beyond becoming, beyond change--a state of unchanging permanence. It is seen as a sudden “exploding” out of this present existence, and an awakening to the transcendent unity. Siddhartha refused to give nirvana a descriptive name. He observed, “Once named then begins the ‘talk’ and ‘argument,’ and therefore missed--the main purpose to ‘know’ life not to ‘talk’ about it.”

For Siddhartha, the first step, the “right view” is to understand the essential unity of all. “Beyond all the diversity of the world, of time and space, and behind all the diversity of human individuality and behavior, all suffering and death, there is ultimately a total unity.” We can either see the world in its diversity and get lost in it, or see one unity of all and separate ourselves from all diversity. Father Bede observes: “Wisdom is when one learns to see the whole created world, and oneself within it, in that great unity and the unity manifesting in the whole creation.”

The second step, “right intent,” is Compassion (Karuna) for all sentient beings and Kindness (Maitri) toward all sentient beings. Compassion prompted Siddhartha to choose an active role as a teacher rather than keep his enlightenment to himself.

Compassion would become the hallmark of his disciples who became the teachers of the Path to Life. Compassion became the determining factor of their life--a life of selfless service to all beings, moving them to renounce entry into nirvana, to remain and help others on their path to life, ready to take on the sufferings of others and to transfer their own achieved merits to others. Such compassion is devoid of egocentric clinging and possessiveness--it is genuinely selflessness. It is a compassion that must turn into practice in the face of the fundamental needs of others.

Morality (Shila) includes the next three steps on the path, namely, “right speech”--refraining from all sins of the tongue; “right action”--refraining from killing, stealing, and inappropriate sexual behavior; and “right livelihood”--engaging only in non-harmful occupations, avoiding trading in human beings and in harmful weapons.

The last three steps are elements of emotional balance. “Right concentration (Samadhi) requires right effort--just enough attention to properly do one's work; right mindfulness--reflection on the deeper meaning of the Four Truths; and right absorption--a foretaste of nirvana in which one learns to seek happiness without anxiety or over eagerness” (John Renard: *101 Questions and Answers On Buddhism*).

Under the need for concentration--right mindfulness and absorption-- we have what is called the “Divine states of dwelling” (*Brahma-vihara*), a meditation in which the practitioner arouses in himself four states of mind and radiates these into his environment.

The four are: limitless kindness toward all beings; limitless compassion to those who are suffering; limitless joy (*mudita*) over the salvation of others from suffering; limitless equanimity (*upeksha*) toward friend and foe. “Arousing these states of mind permits the practitioner to overcome ill will, gloating over others’ misfortune, discontent, and passion” (*The Shambhala Dictionary of Buddhism and Zen*).

Siddhartha, as already suggested, denied the existence of the individual human soul. He will speak of rebirth, but not of the soul. He saw the belief in the immortal soul as a fundamental obstacle to his doctrine of freedom. Therefore it must be abandoned.

What is the soul for Siddhartha? It is a collection of five aggregates--a collection of particles into a mass, a body, “cultures of experiences that constitute physical form, sensation, perceptions, mental formation, and consciousness, all blended together by cravings. Destroy the craving, you destroy its togetherness, and all dissipates--nothing of self lasts. Self is but a collection of energy held together by desire. It ceases with physical death.”

Things and persons are impermanent because they have no substance, and no indestructible core. It is the mistaken notion that they possess such a core that causes all sentient beings to suffer.

Siddhartha remained silent concerning the existence of God. Some of his followers maintain that he did not teach about the existence of God, but he did teach the way to come to God.

During Siddhartha’s lifetime, a ruler, King Bimbisara of Magadha, gave Siddhartha and his disciples a monastery for monks, which became important in the establishment of a community, and the preservation of his teachings.

Siddhartha had enemies in his own household. His cousin Devamata wanted to be head of the community and planned to kill Siddhartha. Failing in this attempt, Devamata brought about a schism among the monks by advocating a return to the ascetic life in opposition to Siddhartha’s way of life.

According *Mahaparinibbana-sutta* (a literary form of passing on oral tradition), Siddhartha, while sitting under a tree in 486 or 483, ate some spoiled food and felt sick. Lying on his right side, facing the West, he entered into oneness with the inexpressible reality that always existed--Forever the Buddha.

Buddha's life was a tree from which many shoots would be cut and grafted into other lives, through which the Buddha would assume different forms and expressions among people of other lands and times.

## SIDDHARTHA GAUTAMA

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What was the first major conversion experience in the life of Siddhartha and how did it alter his life style?
2. How would you describe his life between age thirty and thirty-five, and what caused him to reject this way of life?
3. How do you understand Siddhartha's "awakening" under the Bodhi Tree?
4. What effect did suffering have upon the life of Siddhartha and how did it direct his life's mission?
5. Why did Siddhartha reject the doctrine of the immortal soul and life after death?
6. How do you understand the doctrine of Pratitya-samutpada that is so essential to his teachings?
7. What did he see as the major cause of suffering in the world?
8. How do you understand his teaching "cravings cause suffering"?
9. How do you understand the teaching "You are sick because you do sick things"?
10. What is meant by "the secret of right living is 'Dharma'"?
11. What do you understand as Siddhartha's "right view" of life?
12. What does he see as the "right intent" in life?
13. What was his understanding of "compassion," and how is it expressed in one's life?
14. Siddhartha teaches there are three steps to a moral life: how do you understand the steps of right speech and right action?
15. What did he understand by "right concentration" and its needs?
16. How do you understand his belief concerning the human soul?
17. How do you understand Siddhartha's silence concerning the existence of God?
18. What do you understand by his teaching on "nirvana"?

## **THE AFTER GLOW**

**We have endeavored to reflect attentively upon Hindu religion and spirituality prior to 200 B.C., with few cross references to Judaism or Christianity. From our view, Hindu religion is considered a natural- based belief; it rises out of a people's experience of reality as experienced in the external world around them, and the internal world experienced within themselves. We have sought to discover the Spirit of God that is present innately within them and expressed through them.**

**The Jewish/Christian view of Hinduism is one of pantheism. We can view this concept as a doctrine that "equates God with the forces and laws of the universe," or the worship of all gods of different creeds and cults, as was common among the early Romans.**

**Without diving into waters too deep for the swimmer in analyzing the theological differences between Hinduism and Judeo/Christian beliefs, we desire to leave our presentation as it now stands in itself, as it honors and glorifies God within its own lights.**

**For our own benefit, we will briefly review certain Judean and Christian beliefs that differ from those of our Hindu brothers and sisters, keeping in mind that our religions rest fundamentally on external divine revelation.**

**Father Griffiths reminds us that--**

**every religion tends to center on itself, to build up its own exclusive structures and law and authority and so to close itself to the action of God: to turn in on itself, to defend its religion against the surrounding people; its laws and regulations become its protective bulwark and can assume more importance than the creed, as happens in legalism. This becomes the danger of every religion: as a religion feels itself to be threatened, it clings to its old traditions and centers on itself. It can render itself incapable of further growth or responding to the movement of the Spirit. A religion has to preserve its own values, but in doing so it has to learn to respect the values of other religions.**

**Saint Augustine reminded the Church, "That which today is called the Christian Tradition existed among the ancients and never ceased to exist, from the origin of the human race!"**

One thing we need to be reminded about the past is that it is not “the past;” it is the present, in the sense that the past has been integrated into the present. The present is what it is today because of what has been. The more we understand our past, the more we will understand our present. That applies both to our world and to our personal lives.

We close this subject with these inspiring words of Father Griffiths: “We are always either open to the Spirit and take part in the work of redemption, or we close in on ourselves and settle for substitutes for the Spirit, in which case we isolate ourselves from God, from the truth.”

In order to demonstrate the differences between Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity, we will present different beliefs side-by-side as a means of clarifying differences.

In Hinduism, the supreme Reality is experienced and manifested primarily in the cosmos and in the human soul. In Judaism, God--the Supreme Reality--is manifested in history, the history of the people. Judaism is concerned with the origin and growth of a people who were destined to bring a divine blessing to all humanity; the blessing comes in the form of a personal experience.

In the Hebrew tradition there is a profound dualism. The God of heaven and earth is totally above all creation. God is entirely separated from creation and humanity. Hinduism is always concerned with the eminent presence of the Divine Reality, and there is no problem with realizing God as within oneself and oneself within God. Hebrew belief is the opposite, and emphasizes the total transcendence of God--humanity is separated from God by its creation and by its sinfulness. One never sees the divine being itself, but only “under the cloud”--never reality in its fullness. In the Hebrew tradition God is always seen as personal and distinct. Human nature is viewed in its relationship to obedience to God: Yahweh is seen as essentially holy, and separated from sinners, but filled with mercy and compassion for sinful people.

In Israel's God the moral order is primary, whereas in Hindu revelation it is the cosmic order that is primary--God is the cosmic Lord, the Lord of creation. However, the Hindu recognizes the moral law of Dharma--right conduct in life--as deriving from the Lord.

In Judaism, God's primary characteristic is righteousness--his justice, and his concern for justice. This the Jewish Prophets highly emphasized. The concept of righteousness was certainly contained in the Law of Dharma, but it plays a subordinate role.

In the Hebrew religion, God is righteous in Himself, and He demands righteousness in those who serve Him. This is an essential demand of the Hebrew religion, and a basic principle of the prophetic revelation.



In the Jewish temple, the presence of God in Judaism was symbolically represented within the Holy of Holies; therein resided the mercy-seat, where God is present. There is no visible presence of God in the temple. God is present but without form.

Jewish law forbade the making of any form or image of God, or the making of any human form for that matter. In Hinduism, God is worshipped under many forms but he is ultimately recognized as formless.

At this point we come to a major difference between Judaism and Christianity. We read in the Christian Scriptures, *“Yes, God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen his glory: The glory of an only Son coming from the Father filled with enduring love” (Jn 3:16; 1:14).*

Jesus of Nazareth is this divine incarnation. Father Bede Griffiths encourages us to see Jesus “in the context of his history, as a man who experienced God as His Father in a unique way. Through Him a new relationship to God opens up to all. He sees himself as God's Son and as one who includes others as his brothers and sisters. His intimacy with God He shares with others that they, too, will experience themselves as Children of God.”

As we read in the Scriptures, *“Any who did accept him he empowered to become children of God” (Jn 1:12).*

Recalling the third chapter of Genesis, Father Bede says, “Adam, the primal Man, had fallen by disobedience, by following his own mind and will rather than surrendering to the Spirit of God. Jesus of Nazareth comes as man who offers his life in sacrifice as a total surrender to God. He died as man--a man representing all humanity--and the salvation achieved by Jesus became applicable to all humanity: Jesus, the New Adam, by his obedience even to death upon a Cross, reconciled humanity, in himself, to the heavenly Father.” And as we quoted above, *“any who did accept him he empowered to become children of God”--a New Creation.*

Father Bede makes four important points concerning Christian mysticism.

1. It embraces all creation: matter, life, time, history, man and woman. In Christ the whole of humanity is taken up into the life of the Godhead and restored to unity.
2. Creation is not God! Creation is not a Fall: it is the sphere in which human existence is to be worked out. Creation is an outpouring of divine love and, as such, is a glorification of God. It is not a Fall. Disintegration and death within creation results from human sin, but the love of God is greater: the grace of God comes, restores and draws it back to God.
3. The human spirit possesses a capacity for God: it can be filled and

transformed by God. All is pure grace!

4. In the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth this fullness is fully realized: "*In Him dwelt the fullness of the Godhead bodily*" (Col 2:9). The outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the resurrected humanity of Jesus is the fullness of the Spirit to humanity through Jesus Christ. In the resurrected body of Jesus human nature is totally transformed and, in and through Jesus, it returns to the Father *in enduring love*. The resurrection and the ascension release a power in the universe so that now it is working through-out all creation and the whole of humanity to bring back creation and humanity into life in God.

5. In Hinduism and Buddhism, there is the tendency to lose the person in the Ultimate and ultimately there is no individual left, and everything dissolves in the pure oneness of Being. In Christianity, the human person is not lost in the divine, but enjoys perfect oneness with the divine nature yet maintaining a unique being in itself.

Perhaps the fundamental difference between Christian mysticism and that of Hinduism and Buddhism is this: in both Hinduism and Buddhism the goal is primarily a transformation of consciousness. The heart of Christian mysticism is love. When one enters into the abyss of love and loses himself in love, he is not lost--one finds one's true self.

The nature of love is such that we become persons by loving. As human beings we have a capacity to transcend ourselves in love, to go out of ourselves and to experience one another in love, and grow as we communicate in love.

The nature of love is such that the exercise of the power of love brings the human person into the fullness of their humanity. Human life is a matter of interpersonal relationships. The basic need of human existence is growth in interpersonal relationships in love, and that is so basic that we are called into being by love.

A contemporary physicist describes the universe as a complex web of interdependent and interrelated phenomena on the physical level, and also on the psychological and spiritual levels. Gazing into the astronomical world of outer space, astronomer Andrea Ghez observed: "In this magnificent setting, the laws of physics are wonderfully twisted."

Father Bede observes, "We no longer see the material world as separated from the spiritual, but rather we are coming to grasp that the whole material world is pervaded by consciousness. As has been said often, everything has a three fold character. Everything has a physical character where it obeys mechanical laws and can be studied by the physical sciences. Then every material thing has a psychological or psychic character, a relationship to human psyche and a kind of latent consciousness in it."

The simplest expression of Christian belief concerning Jesus of Nazareth was expressed in a joint statement of agreement between Pope Paul VI and the Coptic Orthodox Pope Shenouda III, May 1973:

We confess our Lord and God and Savior and King of us all, Jesus Christ, is perfect God with respect to his divinity, perfect man with respect to his humanity. In Him, his divinity is united with his humanity in a real, perfect union without alteration, without division, without separation. His divinity did not separate from His Humanity for an instant, not for a twinkling of an eye. He who is God eternal and invisible became visible in the flesh and took upon Himself the form of a servant. In Him are preserved all the properties of the divinity and all the properties of Humanity, together in a real, perfect indivisible and inseparable union.

The basic Christian understanding of the Image of God is that the human person is the *ikon* of God. In our study of the Second Chapter of Genesis, we discussed this concept in general, but at this point I want to share with you a deeper vision of the image of God in the human soul.

The Flemish mystic Ruysbroeck shares his insights with us: God is the Archetype of the Image of God in the human person; as an archetype or prototype, God is the original model of which the human person is the pattern. As the Image of God, the human person eternally came forth from God. Ruysbroeck explains it in this manner: “God utters himself in the Spirit eternally without intermediary [He utters the Word] and in this Word he utters himself and all things.” In the utterance of the Word everything is present, the whole of creation and humanity; we are present and all created things.

Ruysbroeck teaches: “The Image of God is that in which God reflects Himself, and in this image all creatures have an eternal life outside themselves, in their eternal archetype.”

In his vision, we come forth in time and space with all our differences, all our contradictions, with all the evil of this world, but we are being drawn back by God's love for us. Divine love draws us out of our sin and the limitations of this world into the *inner image*, the archetype within, and within that image we return in the Spirit through the Son to the Father, and we reach unity again. We know ourselves in God.

In Christian teaching, the Father and the Son give themselves totally in love and are united in the Spirit in an unfathomable unity. Ruysbroeck sees this interpersonal relationship within the Trinity as the model and exemplar of all interpersonal relationships, and the unity of all being in love.

## ON THE SHORE OF THE INDUS

Let us give to Dante Alighieri the last word on the People of the Indus Valley. Dante wrote around 1315 A.D. in the *Divine Comedy*: Canto XIX,

A man born on the shore of Indus, and there is none who can speak, nor who can read, nor who can write of Christ: And all his inclinations and his actions are good, so far as human reason sees, without a sin in life or in discourse: He dies, unbaptized and without faith; where is this justice that condemns him? Where is his fault, if he does not believe? Now who are you that on the bench would sit in judgment at a thousand miles away, with the short vision of a single span?

But look, many cry, "Christ, Christ!" who at the judgment shall be far less near to him than shall he who knew not Christ.

## THE AFTER GLOW

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What do you understand by the doctrine of Pantheism and how does this differ from Hinduism?
2. What do you see as the fundamental differences between the Scriptures of Hinduism and the Judean-Christian Scriptures?
3. What do you see as the danger of a religion closing within itself?
4. What does St. Augustine remind us about our own Christian Traditions?
5. According to Father Bede what does it mean for us to be open to the Spirit's working in the world?
6. The Hebrew concept of God is one of profound dualism, how does this differ from that of Hinduism?
7. What do you understand to be the major difference between Judaism and Christianity as expressed in Jn 1:14; 3:16?
8. How do you understand Father Bede's concept of Jesus' relationship with His Father and humankind?
9. How do you understand John 1:12?
10. What do you understand by Father Bede's first two principles of Christian Mysticism?
11. What does principle number five teach us about divine union?
12. How would you explain the fundamental distinction between Christian and Hindu mysticism?
13. How does Father Bede encourage us to see the relationship of our spirit to the material world?
14. What does the joint statement of the Roman Catholic Church and the Coptic Church teach you about Jesus Christ?
15. What does the mystic Ruysbroeck teach you about the nature of God and our union with God?

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### TOWER OF BABEL

Our brief and insightful visit with the People of Indus Valley has ended. We have seen the salvation of God working through the People of the Indus Valley and it testifies to the love of God for them. With gratitude we say goodbye to Father Griffiths, our excellent tour guide. Perhaps we shall meet again along our tour through Genesis.

Let us orient ourselves back to our study of Genesis and rejoin Rabbi Jacob and his other students in the synagogue. He reminds us that we have seen the end of an ancient world and the beginning of a new world with Noah and his sons. However a bitter residue of the old remains within the heart of the human person, *“the desires of man's heart are evil”* (Gen 8:21).

No change here in the human heart, but a change in the heart of God: *“I will never again, says the Lord, strike down all living beings, as I have done”* (Gen 8:21). *“See,”* says the Lord to Noah and his sons, *“I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between Me and the earth”* (Gen 9:13). Life is at the heart of this covenant--life on earth is sacred in the eyes of God. God loves human beings and He commands us to do the same: *“I will demand an account for human life; for in the Image of God has man been made”* (Gen. 9:5-6). Although we have read in Genesis 8:21, *“the desires of man's heart are evil from the start,”* this does not alter mankind's status quo in the eyes of God.

Our Lord goes on to confirm: *“As the bow appears in the clouds, I will see it and recall the everlasting covenant that I have established between God and all living beings--all mortal creatures that are on earth”* (Gen 9:16). It is an everlasting covenant and not abrogated by the subsequent Covenant at Sinai. Divine love endures for all human beings and all living creatures. The compassion of the Creator hovers over the earth and blesses all people. Men and women are subjects and channels of God's mercy and compassion for all creation. The Lord of heaven notes the fall of a sparrow from the sky,

The Covenant of Sinai will be a covenant with the Hebrew People, and through them blessing will come to the whole world. The Covenant of the Last Supper will be with the disciples of Jesus Christ through whom Jesus brings the good news of salvation for all mankind.

At this point Rabbi Jacob says, *“Let me remind you that at the very beginning of the study of Genesis, we noted the concept of ‘land’ plays a major role within the story to unfold.”* The first chapters of Genesis clearly demonstrate the supreme dominion of Yahweh over the land of the earth. As man is made in the Image of God, he is given dominion over the earth. The expressed will of God is that man and woman be fertile, multiply, fill the earth

and subdue it (see Gen 1:27-28). To subdue the earth means to cultivate and care for it (see Gen 2:15).

With the expulsion of man and woman from the God of Eden, it was the Lord who settled them east of the garden of Eden *“for man to till the ground from which he had been taken”* (Gen 3:23). When Cain murdered Abel out in the fields the Lord informed him, *“You shall be banned from the soil. If you till the soil, it shall no longer give you its produce. You shall become a restless wander on the earth”* (Gen 4:11-12). To Cain the Lord allotted no land: *“Cain left the Lord's presence and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden”* (Gen 4:16). In a sense, Nod is nowhere, as it is the land of nomads.

Out beyond the presence of God, Cain builds the first city--a fortified structure to protect him and his family. As he no longer “walked in the presence of the Lord,” he considered his life to be in his own hands.

After the Flood, Noah established his own garden, and there he and his family dwelt. There he cultivated the first vineyard. He and his sons tilled the earth and fulfilled the command of the Lord: they multiplied and filled the land. In time their descendants would *“each dwell in their respective lands--each with its own language within their own nations”* (Gen 10:5).

We read in the Hebrew Scriptures, *“When the Most high assigned the nations their heritage, when he parceled out the descendants of Adam, He set up the boundaries of the peoples after the number of the sons of God (70)”* (Deut 32:8). (The Ugaritic text speaks of “the seventy sons of El”) We read in the Christian Scriptures, *“From one stock He made every nation of mankind to dwell on the face of the earth. It is He who sets limits to their epochs and fixed the boundaries of their regions”* (Acts 17:26).

Rabbi Jacob calls to our mind the concluding words of Chapter Ten, *“These are the groupings of Noah's descendants, according to their origins. From these the other nations branched out over the earth after the flood”* (Gen 10:32). He points out once again, how finely and subtly Moses weaves through the tapestry of Genesis the seed of divine predilection through which all mankind will be blessed. It was present in Noah before the Deluge, and afterwards in his son Shem, and now through Abner the son of Shem.

The line of Abner does not continue a straight line of descendants; a division occurs within the lives of his two sons Peleg and Joktan. We read in Chapter Ten, *“The first son of Eber is called ‘Peleg,’ and the reason for this is because in his time the world was divided.”* Immediately following this mysterious pronouncement, brother Joktan is mentioned suggesting he and his descendents will play a divisive role in the mystery mentioned. We are informed that the land Joktan and his descendants occupy will be in the eastern hill country.

Once again that mysterious direction “east of Eden” occurs; it symbolizes a separation from the Garden of Eden. It implies the further “east” one goes the greater grows the separation between God and humankind.

Rabbi Jacob reminds us that God's plan is to bless mankind by providing him with that which is "good." The good land is the place of blessing. To leave this "land" to seek another is to forfeit good provisions; it is to live east of Eden. As we continue our study our rabbi warns us, "Caution! You are about to enter into a mine-field."

The last personal encounter between God and mankind, prior to the history of the nations, is one of harmony. God's blessing rests upon his people, "*Be fertile, and multiply and abound on earth and subdue it*"(Gen 9:7). These were men of the soil--they made a garden on earth, planted their vineyards, and their fields yielded their fruit. "*They were one people speaking the same language, using the same words*" (Gen 11:1). Rabbi Jacob unrolls the scroll until he comes to what is now Chapter Eleven in Genesis and reads,

*Everyone on earth had the same language and the same words. And as they migrated from the east, they came upon a valley in the land of Shinar and settled there. They said to one another, 'Come, let us make bricks and burn them hard.' Brick served them as stone, and bitumen served them as mortar-and they said, 'Come, let us build a city, and a tower with the top in the sky, to make a name for ourselves, else we shall be scattered all over the world. (Gen 11:1-5)*

In the ancient Akkadian text, *Enuma elish*, we find this description of the building of Babylon and its temple tower called "Esagila," which literally means "the structure with upper raised head." The first year they molded its bricks, and when the second year arrived they raised the head of Esagila toward Apsu, which signifies the boundless expanse of the sky.

*Babylon!* Memorialized in the mind of man as the "City of Man," a terrestrial kingdom glorifying the power and name of man, indifferent to the existence and will of the Divine as it raises its Tower of Babel, reaching beyond the bitter waters of the gods.

Upon first appearance, the scene is an innocent display of man's ingenuity and industriousness, but the intent of it all reveals an evil heart. The scene reveals the rebellious will of humanity; it hurls a gauntlet in the face of the Creator: We will do it our way! Man uses the God-given materials of the earth to build a tower to the sky that proclaims, "I will not serve!" The kingdom of the earth is established, and there is no true temple within it! Man does not trust the Word of God. Cain-like he takes matters in his own hands.

What follows gives the impression that the earth has become a giant chess board: man freely makes his move and God freely checkmates it, which gives birth to a famous refrain: "Man proposes, God disposes!"

*"The Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men had built" (Gen 11:5).* "It should be noted," says Rabbi Jacob, "that in order to see this 'great' monument reaching to the sky, the Lord has to come down to earth to behold this wonder, which, in his eyes, is no more than a sand castle on a sea shore."



Nevertheless, the Lord is impressed. *“Then the Lord said, ‘If now, while they are one people, all speaking the same language, they have started to do this, nothing will later stop them from whatever they presume to do. Let us go down and confuse their languages that one will not know what the other says.’ Thus the Lord scattered them from there over the face of the whole earth; and they stopped building the city” (Gen 11:5-7).*

The scene recorded here precedes the formation of the nations, each possessing their own languages. Our author revealed to us the source and the reason for these different languages, and why the descendents of Noah were scattered all over the face of the earth.

God had willed that men go forth and fill the earth, but men had desired not to migrate, but to settle in the lovely valley of Shinar. With their combined energy and power they had built a kingdom and a glorious name for themselves. The man “Nimrod” became a symbol of all such ambitious men who built their own kingdoms on God’s earth and made a name for themselves; hence the saying “like Nimrod.”

Concerning the differences of languages, Rabbi Jacob tells us, “It is not generally believed that God Himself imposed different languages upon the peoples. The text as it now stands implies that nothing occurs outside of the will of God—even the natural happenings in the world and within mankind. The text tells us that once human beings had lived in complete harmony—*‘All saying the same thing,’* but eventually fell out among themselves and could not agree on a common cause, and thus separated. Families often fall out among themselves and, in a sense, speak different languages.” St. Gregory of Nyssa in the 4<sup>th</sup> century quite emphatically held that God did not impose language differences.

Isaiah put these prideful words into the mouth of the King of Babylon, *“Once you thought in your heart, I will climb to the sky: Higher than the stars of God I will set my throne. I will sit in the assembly of the gods. I will mount the back of a cloud; I will match the Most High” (Is 14:13-14).*

The Scriptures confirm that God leaves such men as these and their adoring followers to follow their own designs. Of such men Paul maintains, *“They certainly had knowledge of God, yet they did not glorify Him as God or give him thanks. They did not see fit to acknowledge God, so God delivered them up to their own depraved sense to do what is unseemly (Rm 1:21,28).*

St. Paul maintains, *“He made from one every nation of mankind...so that people might seek God, yes, to grope for him and perhaps eventually to find Him--though he is not really far from any one of us” (Acts 17:26-27).*

Ancient written records indicate that the City of Babylon was built around 3250 BC. It is known that King Sargon around 2850 BC took soil from this holy city that was dedicated to Marduk to consecrate his new capital of Agrale (CAH 1 407).

There is no mention of the Tower of Babel being in the city, but there is evidence that it had been erected at Birs-Nimrod, some seven miles from the city. King Nebuchadnezzar recorded that an earlier king had erected this tower and had raised it up to 42 cubits

(60feet) without, however, being able to complete it. In Nebuchadnezzar's time it had suffered great damage from the weather. Out of devotion to Marduk, the king undertook a complete restoration (KIB III ii 52f). This suggested the tower had been erected in the beginning to a pagan god.

The deeper archeologists dig into the ancient past, and the wider they dig, the more they discover the ruins of temples. Men, haters of man and God, destroy temples. However, the need for a place for their god lies deep in the human heart. Destroying the temples is like destroying the kudzu vine whose roots reach deep into the earth: cut down one vine and it springs up in three new places.

A temple is the house men build for God. God is everywhere, but man has a need to localize the presence of God. He needs a place to meet with God and for God to meet with him. God wills to be present to man, but He wills for man to will it also.

The temple seeks to make a place for God in our world and in our lives; a place to go in hopes of finding God, a quiet place to pray or offer sacrifice, hoping God will be present to make a difference in our life. Alongside a temple rises a *ziggurat*, as was the Tower of Babel, without its prideful intent. The *ziggurat* is a tower built adjacent to the temple, with winding stairs reaching higher into the sky than the temple. On the flat form at the top of the temple rests a small shrine inviting God to be present and communicate with his people.

People call a temple a "holy place," presumably because they experience God in that place. Genesis records an experience of Jacob, a patriarch of Judaism, making camp in a place called Bethel. He laid a rock beneath his head and went to sleep, and he dreamed a dream so powerful that when he woke he cried out, "*Yahweh is actually in this place. How awesome is this place? This is no other than God's house and this is the gate of the skies.*" Then he set up a pillar upon which he sat the stone upon which his head had rested during the dream, and over the stone and pillar he poured oil" (Gen 28:16-18). Jacob's actions laid the foundation for a future temple.

We read in Exodus that when Moses approached the Burning Bush in the Desert of Sinai, a voice said to him, "*Don't come any closer...the place upon which you are standing holy ground*" (Ex 3:5). Moses stood on dirt and sand and was told the dirt and sand were holy. What made it so? The Presence of God. If dirt and sand can become holy, then temples can become holy, and men and women also.

I believe people can be holy, people who believe in God and seek Him. Does God play "hide-and-peek" with those who search for Him? I see many temples in the land where people worship a God I do not know. I worship a God they do not know. I know there is only One God who wills the salvation of all people. The Christian Scriptures confirm this truth as we read, "*God wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth*" (1Tm 2:4). To know the truth is to experience it in one's own life. Is this the waterloo of many people?

Saint Paul observed, "*Some men, by rejecting the guidance of conscience, have made shipwreck of their faith*" (1Tm 1:19). The voice of conscience is the voice of God in the

depth of the human heart. The Scriptures encourage us: *"If you hear the voice of God today--harden not your hearts."* A hardened heart turns a deaf ear to God.

Concerning the matter of "truth," we know the skeptics ask, "What is Truth!" Saint Paul declares, *"And the truth is this: God is one. One also is the mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself up as a ransom for all" (1Tm 2:5-6)*. I believe this. I worship in the Christian Temple where I am told *"in him you also are being built into this temple, to become a dwelling place for God in the Spirit" (Eph 2:22)*. Herein lies my path to be "holy." I wish all men and women who believe in God and search for Him a safe journey home. Jesus teaches us *"in my Father's house there are many mansions."*

Genesis certainly seems to imply that the "city" is not a part of the divine plan, but is man's design. God seemingly prefers that we feel the earth under our feet rather than cement and asphalt. Can it be said that our urban problems are ours, not God's concerns, and we reap what we sow? Whatever! May God in his compassion help us as we seek to survive in our concrete jungles.

The city spoken of in Genesis is the infamous "Babylon" of ancient history, with that ambitious tower known as The Tower of Babel. The name "babel" derives from the Hebrew word *bll*, meaning "confused or babbled." As we read in Genesis 11:9, *"because YHWH babbled the language of all the earth."* Rabbi Jacob remarks that the people of Babylon would have been surprised by such an interpretation because they maintained the name "Babylon" derives from the word *bab-ilu*, "the Gate of God." History seems to infer such gates led more to chaos than divine harmony.

The one phrase in this text that impressed me personally is *"then nothing they may propose will be out of their reach" (Gen 11:6b)*. Although these words of the Lord are expressed within a negative environment, they reveal the innate power possessed by the human spirit made in the Image of God. It implies tremendous power that lies within the human spirit--for good or evil. And it is a divine concern!

Perhaps a thousand years ago such a statement would have caused little concern. In the light of present day scientific discovery, and its continued acceleration, we stand in breathless awe before man's potential, not without a bit of foreboding. We can only ask with the Jewish psalmists, *"What is man that you should be mindful of him. You have made him a little less than the angels and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him power over the works of your hands, putting all things under his feet" (Ps 8:5-7)*.

How does God deal with a rebellious world? Perhaps there is an answer to this question in Jesus' response to his disciples, as they informed Him that the Pharisees had been scandalized by the truth He had spoken. He replied, *"Let them go their way; they are blind leading the blind" (Mt 15: 14)*. As Paul put it later, *"They did not see fit to acknowledge God, so God delivered them up to their own depraved sense to do what is unseemly" (Rm 1:28)*. Paul sees it as "abandonment" by God.

We arrive at a major division in the Genesis story that turns its attention away from the universality of the human race and the development of kingdoms of this earth. Now God centers His attention upon a singular human person and upon his offspring.

As the eleventh Chapter of Genesis ends, it centers our attention on particular individuals with whom God enters into a personal relationship. It relates again the descendants of Shem through his son Peleg, but omits any mention of his brother Joktan and his descendants. Apparently they are occupied with building the city of Babylon.

From the line of Shem we read these excerpts: *“When Eber had lived thirty-four years, he begot Peleg...when Peleg had lived thirty years, he begot Reu... when Reu had lived 32 years, he begot Serug...when Serug had lived 30 years, he begot Nahor...when Nahor had lived 29 years, he begot Terah...when Terah had lived 70 years, he begot Abram, Nahor, and Haran” (Gen 11:16-26).*

Chapter Eleven of Genesis brings us to the twentieth descendant of Shem. We are told of the birth of Terah son of Nahor, and when Terah was around seventy years old he begot three sons Abram, Nahor and Haran. Haran gave birth to Lot but Haran’s life was relatively short: *“Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah, in his native land, Ur of Chaldeans” (11:28).* Haran also had two daughters, Milcah and Iscah. His brother Nahor took Milcah for his wife and Abram married Sarai, whom we are told *“was barren” (Gen 11:30).*

Chapter Eleven concludes, *“Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot the son of Haran, and daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and they set out together from Ur of the Chaldeans for the land of Canaan; but when they had come as far as Haran, they settled there. The days of Terah came to 205 years; and Terah died in Haran” (Gen 11:31-32).*

The eleventh chapter, ending with the genealogy of Terah, brings us down to the twentieth generation from Noah. Noah, a righteous man, became the new beginning of the human family. Rabbi Jacob observes that a righteous man's descendants may not themselves be the same as their progenitor. Noah's descendants chose to go their way. We are reminded of the words of Psalm 81: *“The people did not heed the voice of God; they would not obey and God left them in their stubbornness of heart to follow their own designs” (Ps 81:12-13).*

The story begun in Chapter One of Genesis is concluded. The eleventh chapter brings to a close the universality of Genesis. God turns to one man and his family through which His compassionate love will be channeled to all mankind. A new episode in the divine economy of the salvation begins. It begins with a mustard seed!

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### TOWER OF BABEL

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. As Chapter Eleven brings to a close a major section of Genesis, what is its most important lesson to you?
2. What would you say is God's relationship with man and earth?
3. How do you see man's relationship with God?
4. How do you understand "the desires of man are evil"?
5. What do you see as the importance of the First Covenant in our world today?
6. How does Genesis picture the land and God's relationship to it?
7. Why does land seemingly play such a large part in Genesis?
8. What does Genesis 11:1-5 reveal to you about the human spirit?
9. Where does this place God in his His relationship with the earth and its inhabitants?
10. What do the Lord's words, "*nothing will later stop them from whatever they presume to do*" imply about the potential of the human person?
11. The erecting of temples by human beings seemingly was universal, what does it reveal about the nature of human beings?
12. What purpose did the temple serve in the lives of people?
13. What does 1Timothy 2:4, "God wants all men to be saved and come to know the truth," reveal about universal salvation?
14. What does 1Timothy 1:19, "Some men by rejecting conscience have made a shipwreck of their faith" reveal about the relationship between faith and conscience?
15. How do you understand the words of Jesus, "In my Father's house there are many mansions"?

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### THE WANDERER

With the death of Terah at the age of 205, Genesis closes the old world and opens on a new world Abram, who was born when Terah was seventy years of age.

Terah himself, as already noted, is from Ur of the Chaldeans, located in South Mesopotamia along the banks of the Euphrates, a place in modern times called Tell-el-Muquayya.

At the beginning of our study of Genesis, we noted the importance of “land” in the author's mind. We have arrived at a key point in the narration of Genesis: the divine right of the Hebrew People to the land of Canaan—“the Promised Land.” With the birth of Abram, son of Terah, the seed of the Nation of Israel is sown. It will be to Abram and his descendants that God allots the land of Canaan. Abram is the chosen vessel of God to be the founding father of a Chosen People, called by God to play a major role in the divine salvation of the world.

A great drama unfolds on a small ancient stage, in which Abram plays a major role at the side of God Himself. It is a danger that the person of Abram will get lost in this decisive role. We do not want this to happen. We desire to know the person called “Abraham,” to walk, as much as possible, the path he walks, and come to know, as best we can, the man who will be called “Friend of God.”

Let us recall the few facts that Chapter Eleven has given us concerning Abram and his family. The story opens with Terah and his family, living in the Ur of the Chaldeans, west of the River Euphrates. Abram, born of Terah who was the son of Nahor, is twenty generations from Shem, son of Noah. At the time of Abram's birth his father was around seventy years of age. Following the birth of Abram, his two brothers were born--Nahor, named after his grandfather, and Haran. Naming the two brothers of Abram implies they will play some role in the narrative to follow. There is the presumption that the three sons of Terah were all born in Ur, and grew up amidst an extended family, as their grandfather Nahor had other sons and daughters.

Nevertheless, as the narrative unfolds, discrepancies occur concerning the place of Abram's native land, the place of his birth. Many commentators merely accept the discrepancy as they find no satisfactory explanation for it. Rabbi Jacob reminds us that elements presented in Genesis are not necessarily in their chronological order; Genesis does not record history as such, but relates the salvific work of God in the world. The problem is that the Scriptures place the birth of Abram in Ur, but also in the city of Haran.

Rabbi Jacob asks, "Is it not possible that when the Scriptures speak of the sons of Terah being in the city of Ur at the time of Terah's migration to Haran, they were only potentially present in the seed of Terah, and were born after he arrived in Haran? It is only a thought," he said, "to be taken with a grain of salt. It is not a perfect solution to the problem, but neither are any of the other solutions."

Returning to Abram's family, his younger brother Haran fathered three children—a son, Lot, and two daughters, Milcah and Iscah. Haran dies relatively young, and Haran's older brother, Nahor, marries Milcah, Nahor's niece. Abram marries Sarai; there is nothing said of her origin. However, we are immediately informed that Sarai has no children--she is barren. Now that note, we may presume, plays an important part in the unfolding of the narration to follow.

Here the story of the nations ends, and our attention is turned from the universal world to a particular person. Genesis centers upon that single man and his descendants: Abram son of Terah.

Many centuries later, we hear the account of these descendants of Abram from scripture sources other than Genesis. Achior, the leader of all the Ammonities, gives this account to Holofernes, commander in chief of the Assyrian army: *"I will tell you the truth about these people that live near you. These people are descendants of the Chaldeans. They formerly dwelt in Mesopotamia, for they did not wish to follow the gods of their forefathers who were born in the land of the Chaldeans. Since they abandoned the way of their ancestors, and acknowledged with divine worship the God of heaven, their forefathers expelled the presence of their gods. So they fled to Mesopotamia and dwelt there a long time. Their God bade them leave their abode and proceed to the land of Canaan..."* (Judith 5:5-11). This account was written around the second or first century B.C.

We find recorded in the Book of Joshua: *"Thus said the Lord: 'In olden times your forefathers Terah, father of Abraham and Nahor, lived beyond the Euphrates and worshipped other gods. But I took your father Abraham from beyond the Euphrates and led him through the whole land of Canaan'"* (Josh 24:2-3).

The author of Sirach says of Abraham: *"Abraham, the great father of many peoples, kept his glory without stain: He observed the precepts of the Most High, and entered into an agreement with him; in his own flesh he incised the ordinance, and when tested he was found loyal. For this reason, God promised him with an oath that, in his descendants, the nations would be blessed"* (Sir 44:19-21).

The Prophet Isaiah records these words of the Lord concerning Abraham, *"He was only one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many"* (Is 51:2b).

We read in the New Testament of Saint Stephen's address to the Grand Sanhedrin in Jerusalem:

*The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was still in*

*Mesopotamia and before he settled in Haran. God said to him, leave your country and your kinsfolk, and go to the land of the Chaldeans and settle in Haran...After his father died, God made him move from there to the land where you dwell. God did not give him any of it as his heritage, not even a foot of land, but he promised to give it to him and his descendants after him as a possession--although he had no children. These are the words God used, that Abraham's posterity will be strangers in a foreign land four hundred years. (Acts 7:2-6)*

The author of the Book of Hebrews tells us:

*By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called and went forth to the place he was to receive as a heritage; he went forth, not knowing where he was going. He sojourned in the promised land as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents--for he looked forward to the city with foundations, whose designer and maker is God. (Heb 11:8-10)*

*By faith Abraham, when put to the test, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was ready to offer his only son, of whom it was said, "Through Isaac descendants shall bear your name." He reasoned that God was able to raise the dead, and so he received back Isaac as a symbol. (Heb 11:17-19)*

Saint James, inspired by the Old Testament (Is 41:8), writes: *"the Scripture was fulfilled which says 'Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as justice,' and for this he received the title 'God's friend'" (Jas 2:23).*

In our own times, a modern author, Bruce Feiler, researching the life of Abraham for his book *Abraham: a Journey to the Heart of Three Faiths*, discovered there were many versions of this one man's life. Feiler writes, "Probably less than one percent of the stories about Abraham appear in the Bible. The vast majority did not even come into circulation until hundreds, even thousand of years after he would have lived." Feiler asked Professor Avraham Biran, "What do we know about Abraham?" The ninety-three old man replied, "All we know about Abraham is in the Bible. In the ground, there's nothing."

The person of Abraham is forever in memoriam--God willed it so!--as the man who put his faith in the Word of God, and had absolute trust in God's love for him.

Feiler gives an insightful reason for the phenomenon of the many historical roles of Abraham, "The desperation at the heart of Abraham's early years--as appealing as it might make him to God--proved frustrating to his descendants and contributed to one of the more complex realities of Abraham's life: his unending evolution."

What is the source of motivation of these good men who share their fantasies about Abraham with us? Why must we gild the lily? Is it too common a flower for us? We need our idols and heroes without clay feet. They become very personal, even an extension of our conscious self. If their humanity becomes too evident, admiration can turn to disgust.



Psychologically they let us down. They had been for us what we are not able to be ourselves. As a bystander observed, "Perfection we demand from others--our imperfections we bear with indulgences."

The evolution of Abraham comes from those who recognize him as their father. For them he must be special from day one, and they made him so. It is the "wise" who insist that the hero of God possess in abundance the same qualities their self respect strives to possess.

Jesus of Nazareth stands in contrast to the "wise" of the world. "*Learn of me,*" he says, "*I am meek and humble of heart.*"

For we "wise ones," our error lies deep in our concept of naked humanity--we have lost sight of its divine source. Before we give our devotion and admiration to a man or woman, we insist they must be cut from cloth of gold and silver, not from common cotton material. To be special you must be "somebody."

The French writer and mystic Simon Weil wrote,

If no one consents to take notice of the thoughts that, though I cannot explain why, have settled in so inadequate a being as myself, they will be buried with me. If, as I believe, they contain some truth, it will be a pity. I am prejudiced to them. The fact that they happen to be in me prevents people from paying any attention to them.

It is a great sorrow for me to fear that the thoughts that have descended into me should be condemned to death through the contagion of my inadequacy and wretchedness ... for other people, in a sense I do not exist, I am the color of dead leaves, like certain unnoticed insects. (*Waiting For God*, pp. 52-53)

All the Simon Weils of this world can take comfort in being in great company. The Gospel of Mark records of Jesus of Nazareth,

*He departed from there and returned to his own part of the country followed by his disciples. When the Sabbath came he began to teach in the synagogue in a way that kept his large audience amazed. They said, "Where did he get all this? What kind of wisdom is he endowed with? How is it that such miraculous deeds are accomplished by his hands? Is this not the carpenter, the son of Mary, a brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? Are not his sisters our neighbors here?" They found him too much for them...He could work no miracles there! (Mk 6:1-3,5a)*

We need to recall the page one teaching of the Holy Scriptures, "*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness...God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them*" (Gen 1:26,27). There we have the bare, substantial image of the human being--cut not from cotton cloth but from divine linen. Every human person images God. Herein lays the intrinsic worth of every man and woman. They are "somebody" before they do anything.

When humanity reflects the spirit of God, the human person radiates a likeness to God. As human beings enter deeply into the will of God, they nourish this divine likeness and it grows more radiant. The life of Jesus of Nazareth reflects fully the image and likeness of God. Nevertheless we personally eclipse the likeness of God when we sin.

Recall the words of the Jewish hymn concerning the glory of man and woman:

*When I behold the Your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and stars you set in place, what is man [the human person] that you should be mindful of him, mortal man that you have taken note of him? Yet you have made him little less than divine, and adorned him with glory and majesty; You have made him master over Your handiwork...O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your name throughout the earth! (Ps 8:4-7,10)*

When we disdain the image, we offend the Designer. It is prejudice that asks the question, “*Can anything good come from Nazareth?*” (Jn 1:46).

Customarily, we judge people by their externals and primarily by their deeds. To his critics Jesus says, “*Stop judging by appearances, but judge justly!*” (Jn 7:24). The Lord, we are told, sees into the depths of the human heart and knows what we have become. He justly judges us and his judgment has weight. Seemingly, divine judgment begins with questions.

As we move deeper into the life of Abraham the friend of God, the prayer of Jesus to the Father is applicable to the man Abraham, “*I offer you praise, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because what you have hidden from the learned and the clever, you have revealed to the merest children. Yes, Father, you have graciously willed it so*” (Lk 10:21).

As already heard in a few simple words, Genesis introduces Abram upon the stage of history, in a place known as Ur, a famous ancient city in South Babylon, west of the River Euphrates.

The Scriptures speak of the “*Ur of the Chaldeans,*” but Rabbi Jacob tells us that this should be seen as an anachronism--a person or a thing that is chronologically out of place--since the Chaldeans did not appear on the stage of history until a thousand years after Abram.

With no reason given, our author informs us that Terah packs up his immediate family, consisting of Abram and Sarai and his grandson Lot, leaves the Ur of Chaldeans to go the land of Canaan. We may presume from subsequent scriptures that Abram's brother Nahor and his family also leave the city of Ur when the family migrates to Haran.

The first stage of the separation of the Chosen People has begun. Genesis gives no reason for Terah's departure from Ur. Saint Stephen gives us his reason in Acts--Abram had received the command to go to Canaan while in Ur (see Acts 7:2-4), however we read in Genesis that the command came while he was in Haran. Rabbi Jacob points out another illustration of the important fact that biblical narratives do not always follow in chronological order, nor are accounts always in agreement.

Terah and his caravan travel north, following the Euphrates River for about two hundred miles. At some point Terah crossed the Euphrates and headed northeast (that negative direction) into Mesopotamia, rather than going west toward Canaan. Terah came to the ancient city of Haran, located between the Rivers Euphrates and the Tigris, and remained there; and there he will die around the age of two-hundred and five.

As already observed, Scriptures supply us with material that is not all in agreement with another source. We have an example of this in the reasons given for the departure of Terah and his family from the Ur of Chaldeans. One reason given is that Terah received a command from the Lord to go to the land of Canaan. Another reason is that their religious beliefs differed from those of the people of the land, and with the encouragement of their neighbors, the family left for Canaan.

Even with the small amount of information we have about religion in this ancient world, the cause of their departure may well have been due to religion. The concept of God took on many different forms and expression within this world, which was without any supernatural revelation concerning the nature of God. Paul spoke of this world in Athens:

*From one stock the God of heaven and earth made every nation of mankind to dwell on the face of the earth. It is he who set boundaries of their regions. They were to seek God, yes to grope for him and perhaps eventually to find him--though he is not really far from any one of us. "In him we move and have our being," as even some of your poets have said. (Acts 17:26-28)*

Some accounts attribute true faith and worship to Terah and his family before their exodus to Canaan. Others record that it was a subsequent revelation from God at Haran, in which God revealed Himself to Abram as *El Shaddai*. However, this gives no reason for their sudden departure from Ur.

In regard to the relationship of God with His creation, the mystic and poet John of the Cross speaks of the Lord as "passing through these groves in haste" and leaving his footprints all over the place. Genesis reveals that the Creator deeply impressed his thumbprint into the human soul.

The external and internal evidence of God infiltrated indelibly into the conscious awareness of humanity. The spiritual touch of God upon the human soul remained beyond human comprehension or expression. This innate and external awareness of the divine among people whose lives intertwined all their life long, developed into a group awareness that gave birth to unified beliefs and worship. There existed no distinction between social and religious life. They recognized celestial beings as the source of these powerful, mysterious forces that affected and effected their lives for both good and ill. They personalized these celestial beings, attributing to them only the attributes they knew--their own--both good and evil.

They built their temples and localized their gods and placed their images there. There they sought, in a sense, to control them through their rituals of worship. They entered their

temples on egg shells, as only a hair's breath separated them from the blessings and the curses of their gods. There they worshipped and offered gifts of gratitude for favors received. Upon entering into war with others, their gods led the way. The gods of their defeated enemies became trophies in their temple, testifying to the greatness of their own god. The gods reflected the desires of the people--their hopes and ambitions were projected onto their gods, whose concrete images they cherished and worshipped.

People of other lands had other gods. Their experiences of the divine were uniquely theirs, and gave concrete expression to their images of the gods and their rituals of worship. The land they occupied was the land of their god, and their god alone must be worshipped there, as gods are jealous. Therefore, to give evidence of worship of a foreign god in the land of another god was a social and religious no-no, and dangerous. (Seemingly, being a nomad was the only safe way of life for those who worshipped the God of Abraham.)

We have the example of King David, confessing to have worshipped the gods of the Philistines because he had been driven out of the land of his own God. We will see later that when Jacob's wife Rachel, a descendant of Abram's brother Nahor, leaves her father's house, she "*appropriated her father's household idols*" (Gen 31:19). Her father later says to Jacob, "*Why did you steal my gods?*" (Gen 31:30).

The apparently abrupt departure of Terah from his own native place with his family and heading out into the unknown, at this very mature point in his life, argues for a very serious reason for the departure. The worship of God seems to play a large part in it. It all raises a question: did Terah leave Ur because of the faith of his son Abram?

Rabbi Jacob opens the scroll upon Chapter Twelve and reads to us, "*The Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from the land of your kinsfolk and from your father's house to a land that I will show you'*" (Gen 12:1).

We may look with others for the reason why God called Abram into a personal relationship with Himself. However, none is needed. God just did! His ways are not ours. He owes no explanation for what he does as the Book of Job makes crystal clear. We could say that "His eye is upon the sparrow" is reason enough. Perhaps the reason does lie in the Lord's words concerning David, "*I have found a man after my own heart!*"

What do the Scriptures tell us about these people the Lord calls into his ministry and into a personal relationship with Himself? Moses, who introduces Abraham into the Scriptures, was a man shepherding his father-in-law's flock out in the Sinai desert; the Jewish prophet Elisha was plowing a field with a yoke of oxen; another Jewish prophet tells us he was a trimmer of trees when called; the great man David was out in the fields fending off the predators that were molesting his father's flocks.

In the New Testament, God sends an angelic emissary to inform Mary of Nazareth of her call to be the Mother of the Messiah. "*She was deeply troubled by his words and wondered what his greeting meant as she was already betrothed to a man named Joseph*" (Lk 1:29). James, John, Simon and Andrew, the future apostles of Jesus of Nazareth, were in boats

fishing. Apparently, the Lord had a preference for workers--people well integrated into the society in which they lived, not those people who hang around temples and public wells.

Scriptures even give us examples of how people should respond to their call. Samuel, a prophet and maker of kings, as a child lived in the House of Ely as an assistant to the priest Ely, in whose house dwelt the Ark of the Covenant where the Jewish people came to worship. One night the boy Samuel was awakened by someone calling, "Samuel!" Thinking it was the old priest Ely, Samuel called out, "Here I am," and went to him. Ely told him to go back to sleep as he had not called him. The same thing happened two more times, and Ely understood that God was calling the boy. Ely tells the boy, "*Go lie down. If you are called again say, 'Speak, Lord, for Your servant is listening.'*" (see 1Sam 3:4-9).

To listen implies to obey; the human will incarnates the Word that is heard through action. Mary of Nazareth replied to the angel, "*I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say*" (Lk 1:38). In the call of James and John we read, "*He called them, and immediately they abandoned their boat and their father to follow him*" (Mt 4:22).

Does Scripture imply God calls those in whom he finds a "likeness" to Himself, men and women after His own heart that possess a willingness to do what God asks of them, hearts open to the extraordinary journey that is the Way of Divine Love? There is openness in such lives, a capacity for love of which they are unaware, yet they have an unquenchable thirst of the heart, which gives them a hint of it, but it is only realized with their willingness to enter upon God's will.

The obedient heart, with its "Yes!" implies openness to the journey of divine love. If seen from the beginning, the obedience that would lead them blindly along the path would have paralyzed them. But, having already taken many steps along the path empowers them now to say again, "yes!" So much more are they willing now, than when their little boat left the protection of the harbor--entering upon an uncharted sea.

As Rabbi Jacob read to us at the beginning from Chapter Twelve, "*The Lord said to Abram, 'Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you,'*" he now reads the rest of the Lord's words to Abram, "*I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and curse him who curses you; and by you, all the families of the earth shall bless themselves*" (Gen 12:1-3).

Rabbi Jacob tells us, "This promise comes like a bolt out of the blue, an act of God's grace alone; no indication has been given as to why or even whether Abram merited them or not. Abram is no way distinguished from his peers. Some do see him as the first monotheist, discovering the one true God before being called." The rabbi says to us as, if he himself is wondering out loud, "Is Abram the symbol of the world soul--a universal image of man on an eternal search of the Unknown, Love seeking its unknown self as it wanders along crooked roads without a 'why' or a 'where' because God wills it so?"

Let us pause to reflect upon this mysterious matter of a divine call coming in the dark of night, or in the light of the midday sun as occurred in the life of Paul of Tarsus. It seems to the conscious mind that the revelations of God come as a lightning strike, but in reality there has been an ongoing preparation for this divine visitation. Slowly and firmly, the Lord builds a preparatory foundation within the human soul before he knocks upon the door. He prepares the recipient for His presence at the door of its life.

Already within the soul is an undetermined and often completely unconscious hunger and thirst for the divine guest. The grace to open the door and enter into divine conversation is present already within the heart of the recipient. The quiet entrance of grace into the soul has been ongoing in “chance” mundane experiences in daily life.

A first encounter may open up a deep-down dread within the human soul as it becomes filled with the sense of its own unworthiness and the impossibility of responding to the request of its Guest. The door remains open, but the spirit has hidden itself within the house, occupying its time, Martha-like, with all the mundane affairs of daily life--ignoring with all the energy possible the Guest that remains patiently waiting in the reception hall.

Finally coming to a face-to-face encounter, the soul asks, “What is it that you want from me? Whatever it is, I already know that I am not the one; such things are impossible for me.” And the guest replies, “I'm not asking you to do it. I am only asking if you would be willing to try to do it.”

When the Lord calls a person into his ministry, He calls him or her wherever they are physically, psychologically, and mentally at that time in their life. All of the above are part of one's own personal baggage—all seem at the time to be indispensable stuff.

Some years ago I accepted the position of being tour guide for certain European tours. My baggage for the tour required two people to carry it. Ninety percent of the stuff was packed because “I might need that.” With travel experience, the 90% got down to 65% and even to 50%. However, I never got down to the “hippie stage” of a backpack on my back.

None of this physical, psychological, and mental baggage has anything to do with the human will. Nevertheless, the soul is burdened with all that stuff as it walks its path. Here is where St. Theresa of Avila comes in with her “self love must be gotten rid of if holy liberty is to be obtained!” The wise view of Theresa was--the soul doesn't fly too high with all that baggage.

When “lightning strikes at the front door,” the soul has been prepared for at least “I'll try.” To say “I will!” is a powerful thing to utter, and too often said in ignorance. There was a lady of my acquaintance with a failed marriage and a determination never again to marry. She said, “I said those two little words ‘I do!’ I never dreamed of all the things I had said ‘I do’ to!” We often hear people say, “If I had known in the beginning what I was getting into, I would never had agreed to it.” I often ask them, “Now that you do know, would you now still say, ‘Yes’?” If they would, I say “That ‘Yes’ is a bit tattered with wear but stronger than ever. It was never withdrawn.”

It is different when the request comes from the Lord. When the soul replies, "I will" or "I will try," the "I" becomes empowered by the presence of God's entrance into the obedient spirit. The Lord makes you worthy of your call; He fills every pure intention and work of faith with His own power, with this end: He is glorified in you, and He glorifies you. When the Lord beholds humility within a human heart, He does amazing things, even mighty things through this worthless vessel of clay. To the humble heart He imparts His likeness.

There is an established spiritual fact: a human person never becomes "burned out" doing the will of God. Yes, the body grows tired and fatigued and weary--seeking a bit of respite from that "I will!" Burned out and empty? Never! With rest, the body is back into the grace of the soul, and the race for the gold goes on.

The Book of Genesis opens with "*God created the heavens and the earth,*" celebrating the Lord of Creation. Chapter Twelve of Genesis opens with the celebration of the love of the heavenly Father for the human person, who is still deep in frail and sinful humanity. In Abram, the heart of the Father reaches out to His child in compassionate love. There is nothing in heaven and earth that can separate a child from the enduring love of God--except the deliberate *non serviam* (I will not obey) of the child itself.

Let us return to the concrete example at hand. When Abram surrendered to the Will of God, he acknowledged the fatherhood of God over him, and his own sonship in relation to God. The Father immediately demands action from His son with the command, "Go forth!" This was an action demanding major separation--cutting all at once the mooring of Abram's little boat of life, and launching out, without compass, wheel, or rudder into the deep unknown. As Genesis records it: "*Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you*" (Gen 12:1). Leave behind all that is known, and venture into the unknown.

According to the account recorded in Genesis, Abram's father has sixty more years of earthly life. It seems, in the mind of some, that such a request would be beyond what God would ask--to abandon one's father in his old age. Therefore, the proper understanding of the text would be that the request came after the death of Terah. Certainly, translations of the Hebrew text--the Samaritan and the Greek--have insisted upon it. As if they were saying to the Lord, "Don't you know you have scandalized the world with that Hebrew text?"

The God of such men and women is not the God of Jesus of Nazareth, who understood well the will of His Father--nor the God that Moses experienced on Sinai. Jesus speaks of the will of God when he says, "*he who loves father or mother more than me, ...is not worthy of Me!*" (Mt 10:37). To the man hesitating before God's invitation with the excuse, "I must first take care of matters at home," the reply is "forget the invitation, you are not worthy of it." He adds to this, "*Let the dead bury its dead!*" (Mt 8:22). As one rabbi put it, "Men steeped in idolatry are already dead."

Regardless of the relationship existing between God and human beings, the First Commandment eternally remains in force, "*You must love the Lord, your God with all your*

*heart and soul!*" (Deut 6:5). The God that would ask a man to sacrifice the life of his beloved son would not hesitate to ask a man to leave his mother and father to follow His will.

It is not uncommon for intimate friends of the Lord to enter into dialogue with the Lord when He makes unique demands in their lives. Moses, in his response to the call of the Lord, leaves his heel prints all over the desert sands. Moses' first response to the Lord goes this way, "*Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and free the Israelites from Egypt?...What name shall I tell them is your name?...What if they do not believe me and do not listen to me?... Please, O Lord, I have never been a man of words, either in times past or now. I am slow of speech and slow of tongue*" (see Ex 3:11-4:10). Moses not only wearies the Lord but angers Him. The Lord tells him, "*Your brother is on the way now to see you, he has never been at a loss for words. He will speak for you. Go!*" (see Ex 4:14).

When the angel from God told Mary of Nazareth she would become the Mother of the Messiah, she told him "hold on there. I want to know how this is going to happen." Only after the angel explained the matter to her did she say, "*I will! Be it done to me according to your word*" (see Lk 1:29-38). The Apostle Peter said on one occasion to Jesus, "*We have given up everything to follow you, what is in it for us?*" The Lord gave him a very complete answer to his question (see Mt 19:27-30).

God does not ask us to suspend our intelligence, but asks that it be the handmaid of our faith; we are to do the work of faith intelligently. It is, of course, always necessary to trust the will of God when what is asked does not contradict reason, but goes beyond it.

Let us image such a conversation between the Lord and Abram, but let us remember that we are dealing with a simple and humble man. It has been said in the Scripture that Moses was the meekest man on the face of the earth. I add to that--after his father Abraham. The Lord will find Abram fully involved in family affairs--the everyday affairs of daily living that filled his life. However they did not fulfill his life; they were not his life. There was that ongoing hunger of the soul for something other.

Who is this terrible Unknown One who makes Himself present to this simple man Abram? The Lord Himself answers this question in Exodus, "*God spoke to Moses and said to him, 'I am the Lord. I appeared to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob as El Shaddai, but I did not make Myself known to them by My name'*" (Ex 6:2). Our Lord confirms this to Abram many years later, "*The Lord appeared to Abraham and said to him 'I am El Shaddai. Walk in my ways and be blameless'*" (Gen 17:1).

*El Shaddai* has been interpreted to mean "The All Sufficient One," "The God of the Mountains," "God Almighty--the Source of all blessings," "The All Powerful One." We find this praise of *El Shaddai* in Psalm 90:2, "*Before the mountains came into being, before You brought forth the earth and the world, from eternity to eternity You are God.*"

We may assume that Abram believed *El Shaddai* to be the Creator of the heavens and earth--God most powerful. However this would have not ruled out Abram's belief in the



existence of lesser gods among the nations. In Abram's belief there would have been no greater God to give one's obedience to than El Shaddai. The revelation in Exodus confirms El Shaddai is Yahweh.

Abram is a simple person, a man born in a family and in a world that is steeped in pantheism. How did such a man come to profess this creed in El Shaddai, the almighty, supreme God, creator of the heavens and the earth? A simple man, with a simple sublime creed, does not come to such a belief in a world of pantheism; it is a belief too abstract and complicated. St. Thomas of Aquinas argues that this belief demands a personal revelation from God to man.

We have such an example in Moses, the author of Genesis, who, in the Book of Exodus, proclaims to the world the Person and name of God—*"I Am Who Am!"* A simple man in a pantheistic world professes a simple, sublime creed.

Moses records this account:

*While he tended the flock of his father-in-law, Jethro, the priest of Midian, he led his flock out near Mt Horeb and he saw a burning bush not being consumed by fire. He said to himself, "I must turn aside to look at this marvelous sight; why doesn't the bush burn up?" As he approaches the burning bush a voice called out, "Moses! Moses!" He spontaneously cried out, "Here I am!" Looking around to see the source of the voice, the voice continues, "Do not come closer. Remove the sandals from your feet, for the place on which you stand is holy ground." And he said, "I am the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob." Moses was afraid and hid his face. (Ex 3:1-6)*

It seems that Moses knew little about the nature of the God that had been worshipped by his ancestors, and neither did his people. When Moses understood the mission God demanded of him, he said to the Lord,

*"When I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is His name,' what shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh." He continued, "Thus shall you say to the Israelites, 'Ehyeh sent me to you.' Thus shall you speak to the Israelites, 'The Lord, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, has sent me to you:' This shall be my name forever, this is my appellation of all eternity." (Ex 3:13-15)*

We have no information as to what form the vision may have taken. However, in Daniel we do find this description: *"On the twenty-fourth day of the first month, I was on the bank of the great river, the Tigris. As I looked up, I saw a man dressed in linen with a belt of fine gold around his waist. His body was like chrysolite, his face shone like lightning, his eyes were like fiery torches, his arms and feet looked like burnished bronze, and his voice sounded like a roar of a multitude."*

Now, that is a vision that catches your attention. Before passing out in fear, Daniel goes on to say, *“I alone, Daniel, saw this vision... I was left alone, seeing this great vision. No strength remained in me. I turned the color of death and was powerless. When I heard the sound of his voice, I fell forward in a faint. But then a hand touched me, raising me to my hands and knees. ‘Daniel, beloved,’ he said to me, ‘understand the words that I am speaking to you; stand up, for my mission now is to you’”* (Dan 10:4-11). That’s a vision you would have trouble saying “No” to, if you could find the voice to say it.

Before turning our full attention upon Abram, let us recall Saint Paul’s teaching about the kind of people the Lord calls into service for Him: *“God chose those whom the world considers absurd to shame the wise; he singled out the weak of this world to shame the strong. He chose the world’s lowborn and despised, those who account for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who were something; so that mankind can do no boasting before God”* (1Cor. 1:27-29).

An empirical experience of God may come as a bolt of lightning, or as a silent growing seed suddenly blossoming forth as an ineffable exotic flower. Whatever! The experience endures, leaving reality forever changed.

To live the whole of one’s life with a subliminal awareness of the presence of God, and even with a deep-down knowing that you are *in* God in some mysterious way, is not ordinary, however it is not an extraordinary experience.

Such a person, living in such an environment, moves on in his or her regular milieu. Life is relatively in hand. In its day-to-day run, nothing is new under the sun. Life unfolds in an orderly manner. God is in heaven and your feet are firmly grounded. Time ticks way on the earthly clock with monotonous regularity. Tomorrow is another day, as familiar as your face in the mirror. One’s general mood may vary between boredom and contentment.

On an ordinary day, as you walk your daily path, you are suddenly snatched and caught up in a whirlwind, leaving you before the personal Presence of God. He calls, and you hear the voice--sharper than a two-edged sword-- penetrating and dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow. Nothing will ever be the same, neither you nor your world. Your body is no longer yours to live in; this sudden, Unknown Guest dominates both spirit and body.

Called by name, your reply can only be, “Here I am!” The Voice commands, “Go! Go, you must, and whatever comes, there is no turning back, for you know there is nothing back there for you.”

The human spirit, like a solitary fish swimming in the sea, has taken a hook. It struggles for hours, fights through the night against the hook that has sunk deep. And with the morning comes surrender--it ends in the fisherman's boat. The human person encounters God, and is eternally wounded. God becomes the primary orientation of their life. They move in an arid air, scarcely breathing, and in a brightness that dims every other light. In this light the soul will walk through darkness. After tasting this sweetness once, nothing ever tastes the same.

Alas! Scripture reveals the infinite perversity of the human spirit: it can reject the Light and say "No!" to God, leaving itself to wander aimlessly thereafter through its own haunted house, hungering for the husk of the swine, which only increases its starvation. Angels stare in horror.

Ending a long series of "no's" to the Lord, Abram hears, "Go forth! Go forth from the old world and embrace the new, unknown world." Abram says "Yes," and takes his first step toward Canaan--one small step toward the restoration of the kingdom of God on earth. It was greater than the step taken by man upon the moon. Does a man or woman have to say a thousand "no's" to self before they find the strength to say one great "Yes!" to God?

What happened in the Genesis narrative now serves as background for the drama yet to unfold. It is a divine drama as God enters intimately into the lives of Abram and Sarai. The complete submission of their lives to the designs of God inaugurates the divine plan for the salvation of mankind.

The story that unfolds is of personal concern for the readers; what occurred has affected our lives, and continues to do so. Through the unconditional acceptance of God, will Abram become the channel through which God reenters human history?

The salutary journey begins in an unknown time in Mesopotamia, and primarily involves three persons--El Shaddai, Abram, and Sarai. Although the drama begins in time, it unfolds on the eternal clock, wherein *"a day is as a thousand years and a thousand years as a day."*

Let us enter, as far as possible, into Abram's and Sarai's journey. The author of Genesis has made this privilege possible. What a grace-filled opportunity to share in the experience of the man who became "the Friend of God," and blessed us as well.

We may quickly learn a profound spiritual truth: faith does not rule out obedience, but demands it. Christians may be familiar with the teaching of Saint James, that faith without practice is no good. *"Faith that does nothing in practice is thoroughly lifeless--faith without works is as dead as a body without breath"* (Jas 2:17,26).

Scriptures seem to suggest Abram had some previous encounter with God before the command to migrate to Canaan. Perhaps, just as the young boy Samuel, Abram too heard God calling in the night, *"Abram! Abram!"* and replied, *"Here I Am!"*

Whether Abram's primary encounter with the Lord came as the flowering of a divine seed within his soul, or as lightening striking at high noon, Abram immediately obeyed the divine call. Obedience does not rule out some hesitation or expression of some personal concerns. Whatever questions Abram may have addressed to the Lord, the answer received was the same for all the questions, *"Trust Me!"* That, Abram did, to the point of heroism.

God's first known words to Abram demand action: *"Go forth!"* The Hebrew words are *lek leka*. Rabbi Friedman observes, "The tests that Abraham undergoes are not necessarily

tests of faith but certainly tests of obedience. At this stage in relation to God and humans, God appears to single out a human being who will do what he is told” (R. E. Friedman).

We read in the Book of Hebrews: *“By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called--he went forth, moreover, not knowing where he was going [in blind faith] into a foreign country, dwelling in tents--becoming a stranger and foreigner on earth” (Heb 11:8).*

Jewish scholars acknowledge a difficulty with the translation of *lek leka* into English. Translations fail to convey the precise meaning of the Hebrew concept. “Go forth” seems to imply physical action; however, the concept also implies something more personal, touching the soul of the person. It calls a person first to go forth from one’s self, leaving the person you are, the one you know so well, and in whose skin you feel comfortable and secure. In a word, leave the person you are and enter into a life that is strange and foreign to you, dwell in its tents until the new image emerges.

God calls Abram to take a journey. The root word for journey in Hebrew expresses the idea of pulling up the stakes of one’s tent and travelling stage by stage. Before Abram pulls up the stakes from out of the earth, he must first pull up the roots of his own soul. His mandate reads--break completely with the life you have lived and the person you are. You are called to new beginning.

Abram's physical journey is an expedition of several hundreds of miles into a strange land. But the quest is spiritual from day one--a journey of epic proportions, in which the human spirit seeks its lost life in God. The journey becomes the central theme of both the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. As the poet put it—it is the Search for the Holy Grail!

God commands Abram, *“Go forth from your native land and from your father's house to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1).* Abram is offered the opportunity to go on a tour with God as Tour Guide. Obviously it will be a day-by-day discovery of new places and strange people, and he will often wonder where the Guide is. All that he will ever know in this life for certain is the effect his life will have on himself, his family and “all the families of the earth.” God gave His Word! *“I will make you a great nation. And I will bless you. I will make your name great, and you shall be a blessing...all the families of the earth shall be blessed through you” (Gen 12:2-3).*

In the Garden, the Tree of Life symbolized the presence of God on earth; in Noah's time, the Ark became the symbol of the saving presence of God; in the final age His presence will be found, not in a tree, nor in a boat, but in a person. God will be present in the seed of Abraham.

In Chapter Ten, representatives of all the families of the earth are numbered and, as we saw, the families went their own rebellious ways. Now, we are told that they are neither forsaken nor forgotten by the Lord; these same families will be blessed in the seed of Abraham. This is a major revelation, and in order to imprint it in memory, it is repeated four times, each within the environment of divine revelation.

This “mysterious seed,” first foretold in the Garden at the judgment of the Serpent, subtly continues to remain a major theme in the unfolding of Genesis. At the closing of the Genesis narrative there will be identification of that blessed seed--from the loins of Judah shall come “*the Lion of Judah,*” and “*the obedience of the nations is his*” (see Gen 49:8,10).

If Abram should ask, “How can this all happen,” the only answer would be “*Trust Me!*” And if he should go on further asking, “How can I know this will be?” (Now this is a dangerous question to put before the Lord as we see from the example of Zechariah in the Gospel of Luke. However, this is a different time and in much different circumstances as the Lord is somewhat a Stranger

on earth.) The Lord's reply would be, “You will know by doing what I tell you to do! This done; you will know that you know that you know.”

And so we are told, “*Abram went forth as the Lord God commanded him*” Gen. 12:4). Abram has this assurance as he goes forth, “*I will bless those who bless you and curse those who curse you*” (Gen. 12:3). He goes forth in God's name, assured of God's presence. He travels under His Protective Hand.

The land of Canaan is bordered by the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea, on its west by the western border of the Jordan River, on the northern border is Lebanon and part of Syria, and on the south is the Gaza Strip and the door into Egypt. Canaan encompassed modern-day Palestine and Israel.

We are informed in Chapter Twelve, verse four, that Abram goes forth at the command of God, and that Lot went with him. It seems to be Lot's idea, not God's, not to be left behind in Haran. With a generous spirit, Abram accepts the boy's presence among them.

This reminds us of a case in the New Testament, in which the Spirit of the Lord instructs the Christian community in Antioch to set aside Barnabas and Saul for a missionary journey. Barnabas and Saul set out in the name of the Lord, and Mark, Barnabas' cousin, decides to tag along. Scriptures seem to suggest that it is not a good idea to include yourself on such a mission if not invited by the Lord. (Fools rush in where angels fear to tread!)

Abram's journey into the Land of Canaan is his first “baby-step” into a transformed life. Abram and his caravan enter the land of Canaan from the north and traverse through the entire land, dividing the journey into three stages. On the first stage they travel to Shechem, located in the middle of Canaan, where they pitch tent in a place known as the “Terebinth of Moreh,” a place sacred among the Canaanite people, where they received oracles from their gods.

At the Terebinth of Moreh, Abram receives his first revelation from the Lord in the land of Canaan. The contents imply it results from Abram's complete trust in the Word of the Lord. “*The Lord appeared to Abram and said, ‘I will assign this land to your offspring’*” (Gen 12:7a).

What follows at this pagan place may actually be an exorcism in the very heart of the land of Canaan: *“He built an altar there to the Lord who appeared to him” (Gen 12:7b)*. Abram’s act consecrates the land to the Lord.

The tent stakes are pulled up for a second time, and Abram and his caravan proceed south. Coming into the hill country east of Bethel, they pitch their tent, with Bethel to their west and Ai to their east. The site is located about ten miles north of the city of Jerusalem, known as *Salem* at that time.

Again, Abram builds an altar to God. Our author, who desires no misunderstanding that it is the God of Abram to whom this altar is erected, plainly states, *“And he built an altar there to Yahweh and [for the first time] he invoked Yahweh by name” (Gen 12:8)*. As a coin of the realm bears the image of the king of the realm, Canaan now bears the stamp of Yahweh.

Once again stakes are pulled up, and Abram and the caravan continue south to Negeb, in the southern part of Palestine. The word *Negeb* means “dry land.” In Negeb, Abram and his caravan encounter a serious problem, one involving survival itself. The situation recalls a rare teaching by the mystic Simone Weil. She writes, “God causes the universe to exist, but He consents not to command it, although He has the power to do so. Instead He leaves two other forces to rule in his place. On the one hand there is the blind necessity attached to matter, including the psychic matter of the soul, and on the other the autonomy essential to the thinking person” (*Weil, Essay: Forms of the Implicit Love of God, pg. 99*).

If, as Miss Weil teaches, God has permitted blind necessities to occur, then “thinking persons” must themselves find their own means of survival in the face of them. We read in Genesis that *“there was a famine in the land. So Abram went down to Egypt to sojourn there for the famine in the land was severe” Gen 12:10*. A caravan of such a size that included 318 men of battle condition, as we later discover, could not enter Egypt without coming under the eye of the Egyptian officials.

Abram would not have been unaware of Egyptian customs and morals. He had good reason to fear for his own life and the safety of the people in his caravan. What occurs has often scandalized many of the readers of Genesis. *“As he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai, ‘I know what a beautiful woman you are. If the Egyptians see you, and think, ‘She is his wife,’ they will kill me and let you live. Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you; and that I may remain alive because of you’” (Gen 12:10-13)*.

There were no children among them to give lie to the deception. As foreigners, they would be subjected to powerful Egyptian men, who would not think twice about killing this foreigner in order to possess his beautiful wife. Powerful men do such things--the later Jewish King David is an outstanding example. He has one of his generals, and a friend, killed in order to possess the man’s wife, the beautiful Bathsheba.

In the case of Abram, it is not only his personal life that is endangered, but his life's divine blessings also. Abram has no heirs, and with his death, dies everything. He reasons prudently that if they think Sarai is his sister and he is her guardian, they would bargain with him for her. He could keep the price high and stall for time, get what was needed and quietly disappear in the dust of evening. In Sarai's hands Abram placed his life, and God's unfulfilled promises to him and to his future generations. Did he give any thought to what the consequences of this would be for Sarai? Nevertheless, what occurred neither would have in their wildest dreams imagined--Pharaoh's courtiers saw her and praised her to Pharaoh.

Pharaohs do not bargain, they take--but they give gifts. And because of Sarai, it went well for Abram beyond his hopes: *"he acquired sheep, oxen, he-asses, male and female slaves, she-asses, and camels"* (Gen 12:16). And as for Sarai? The woman was taken into the palace to become Pharaoh's wife.

As the situation stood, the actions of men placed the promises made by God in jeopardy. The narrative goes on to demonstrate that, in spite of human weakness and failures, God may be silent but not absent. God is free to act in nature in a way that encourages or discourages the free actions of men.

Genesis records that a very serious plague afflicts the palace of the Pharaoh. After prudent investigation Pharaoh determines the cause to be Sarai, who in fact is the wife of Abram, and he discerns the punitive hand of God in the matter. *"So Pharaoh sent for Abram and said, 'What is this you have done to me! Why did you not tell me she was your wife? Why did you say, "she is my sister," so that I took her for my wife? Now, then, here is your wife; take her and be gone!' And Pharaoh put men in charge of him; and they sent him off with his wife and all that he possessed"* (Gen 12: 18-20).

Abram went back to Negeb a lot richer than when he went down to Egypt: God writes straight with crooked lines!

## THE WANDERER

### CHAPTER 12 STUDY QUESTIONS (Please read Chapter 12)

1. How do you understand Abram's role in the Divine Plan for the salvation of the world?
2. What do the words of Professor Birim, "all we know about Abraham is in the Bible. In the ground there's nothing," tell you about the person and mission of Abraham?
3. What do the words of Simon Weil tell us about people's requirement for accepting a person as a channel of God?
4. What do the words in Mark 6:1-3,5 tell you about the rejection of Jesus by his people?
5. What does Psalm 8:4-7,10 teach you about the Image of God in the human person?
6. What do you remember about the meaning of the "likeness" to God versus the "image" of God?
7. In the light of this distinction, what is it that increases the likeness of God in the soul, and what decreases it?
8. What does Luke 10:21-23 teach you about the character of the people chosen by God to do his mission?
9. What do you see as essential for God to be able to express His will in the life of a man or woman?
10. What does Abram's initial response to the command of God teach you about the spirituality of this man?
11. What do you understand from his example about the relationship between faith and action?
12. What does God's gracious response to Abram's obedience teach you about God in his relationship with people?
13. What does God's response to Moses when he says, "If you please, Lord, send someone else!" teach you about God?
14. What do you learn from Abram's and Sarai's experience in Egypt?
15. What do you learn about the person of Abram from this episode?



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### FAMILY PROBLEMS

With a royal escort, Abram and caravan made a speedy and safe exodus from the land of Egypt, much heavier with cattle, silver and gold. Rabbi Jacob remarks at this time, "Abram, by the situation in which he placed himself and Sarai in Egypt, jeopardize the divine promises. Divine promise," he says, "as well as divine threats are always contingent upon continuous goodness or evilness even when they are declared absolutely. Some Rabbis suggest Abram's behavior in Egypt demonstrated a weakening in his faith in the promises. Others suggest that Abram looked upon Lot, whom he may have already adopted, as his heir and recipient of the promises given. However," Rabbi Jacob cautions, "it is not ours to judge the actions of our father Abraham."

Crossing the Egyptian border, Abram and party proceed to the district of Negeb. Stage-by-stage they arrived back in Bethel, where previously he pitched his tent, between Bethel and Ai. It is there he erects the altar to Yahweh and calls upon his name.

At that time a crisis within their interpersonal relations developed. It concerned the presence of Lot in the caravan. From the very beginning it was Lot who attached himself to Abram. As a young orphan he had not developed a life of his own; he developed what is called a symbiotic relationship with Abram and Sarai as his surrogate father and mother. Under the umbrella of their care and concern, the young boy became a young, independent man with considerable wealth of his own. Herein lay the heart of the problem: they were nomads with cattle needing grazing land and watering holes. Fights and disagreements have developed between the herdsmen of Abram and those of Lot. Being foreigners living among Canaanites and Perizzites, such disunity among themselves could invite attacks upon them by their neighbors.

Abram called a meeting with Lot and said to him, "*Let there be no strife between you and me, between my herdsmen and yours, for we are kinsmen. Is not the whole world before you? Let us separate: if you go north, I will go south; if you go south, I will go north*" (Gen 13:8-9). Abram is a man of peace and he offers a peaceful solution.

Rabbi Jacob point out, "From the words of Abram, it appears Abram offers Lot a portion of Canaan; the north of Canaan or the south of Canaan is Lot's choice to make. And it should be noted that as the patriarch of the group, it Abram's privilege to make the choice for Lot but this kind and generous man leaves the choice to the young man."

At that time, they were located in the high hill country around Bethel. "*Lot looked up toward the north and toward the south and then toward the east, and there he beheld land that was well watered and fertile—Jordan's plain, stretching all the way to Zoah, picture perfect as*

*the garden of the Lord, the land of Egypt. (This was before the Lord had destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah.) Lot, therefore, chose for himself the whole Jordan plain, and set out eastward. Abram stayed in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the Plain, pitching his tents near Sodom.” (Gen 13:10-12). Things are not always as seen, and wisdom often comes only with painful experience. Concerning these new neighbors of Lot, our author informs us: “Now the inhabitants of Sodom were very wicked sinners against the Lord” (Gen 13:13).*

A second major separation has occurred in Abram's life: the first from his father, the second from the remaining member of his immediate family, Lot.

*Abram remains in Canaan. “After Lot had left, the Lord said to Abram, ‘Raise your eyes and look out from where you are, to the north, to the south, to the east, to the west, for I give all the land you see to you and your offspring forever. I will make your offspring as the dust of the earth, so that if one can count the dust of the earth, then your offspring can be counted. Look up and walk about the land, through its length and breadth, for I give it to you.’ And Abram moved his tent and came to dwell at the terebinth of Mamre, which are in Hebron; and he built an altar there to the Lord” (Gen 13:14-18).*

Abram pitches his tent in the shade of the terebinth, a small tree of the sumac family that yield chian turpentine, which many have identified as oak trees. Once again, Abram dedicated an altar to Yahweh and sealed the Lord's claim upon the land. Hebron itself is located about twenty miles south of Jerusalem. In a later time, the Arabs called it “El Khail, the town of Abraham, the friend of God.”

The Scriptures earlier related that Lot immediately looked up to see what he could see, saw it, and went for it. Our author makes a point we are not to miss: Abram did not look up until the Lord told him to look up; he saw what the Lord willed him to see.

Do we not have here a classic example in Abram and Lot, a distinction between man of the spirit and man of the flesh? A distinction St. Paul describes in a letter to the Corinthians. He describes two classes of people--the natural man and the spiritual man. The natural man is one who has not received the Spirit of God into his heart; he is not under the direction and power of the Holy Spirit. The spiritual man has received the Spirit of God into his heart, and his life is under the power of the Holy Spirit.

Paul teaches that *“the natural man [as Lot] does not accept what is taught by the spirit of God. For him that is absurdity. He cannot come to know such things as they must be appraised in a spiritual way. The spiritual man [as Abram] however, has received the Spirit of God which aids him to recognize the gifts of the spirit and appraise everything that comes from the Spirit” (1Cor 2:14-15).*

## CHAPTER 14

### SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Chapter Thirteen left us peacefully, with Abram and Sarai under the shade of the terebinth trees in Hebron that belonged to Mamre the Amorite, who has two brothers, Eschalt and Aner. These three men have become friends and allies with Abram. We are suddenly alerted to the fact “the days of Amraphel” (Gen 14:1) are upon us, and shadows of an international war hang over the tent.

Abram will become involved--and we with him--in an international conflict that involves nine kings, four of which are King Amraphel of Shinar, King Arioch of Ellasar, King Chedorlaomer and King Tidal of Goiim. A courier has just arrived at Abram's tent to inform him that these four kings have sacked the city of Sodom, and have carried off his poor unfortunate nephew with all his provisions.

Let us pause to listen to Rabbi Jacob's bit of commentary: “The Lord has allowed an event of international importance to enter the tent of Abram, an event that demonstrates, on an enormous scale, the implications of Abram's faith--a faith that never loses its simple and ‘everyday’ character.”

We have been given these circumstances concerning the war involving Abram: the four kings mentioned are from the East--King Amraphel of Shinar, which is Babylon, leads the list. Although Amraphel is not the leader of the expedition and normally would not lead such a list, our author makes the point that anything coming from the east that involves Babylon bears bad news.

King Chedorlaomer of Elam leads the expedition. Evidence exists of the power of the Elamites in the Mesopotamia area at that time in history. Kings Arioch, Tidal and Amraphel were allies of King Chedorlaomer, who had subjected to his rule for the last twelve years the Kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Bela, which is Zoar. In the thirteenth year, King Bera of Sodom, King Bircha of Gomorrah, King Shinab of Zeboiim and the king of Zoar, and their subjects rebelled against the rule of King Chedorlaomer. One year later King Chedorlaomer began his march with his allies south, to crush the rebellions and regain control of the copper mines south of the Dead Sea.

His army proceeded south-east of Transjordan to the land of Edon, turning west toward the Wilderness of Paran, and then northeast to Qadesh-barnea, and finally to the south of the Dead Sea. In this area are located many bitumen cavities (a brown or black substance containing tar and petroleum that is found in natural beds). To this day, bitumen still oozes out of the bed of the Dead Sea.

In their journey south, King Chedorlaomer and allies defeated the Rephaim, the Zuzim, the Horites in their hill country of Seir as far as El-paran, which is by the wilderness. They subdued all the territories of the Amalekites, and also the Amorites, who dwelt in Hazazon-tanar. They arrived at the Valley of Siddim south of the Dead Sea, where many bitumen cavities were located. The Kings of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Bela came forth to battle King Chedolaomer and his allies, because this was an area familiar to them.

When the battle ended, *“four kings beat five kings.”* In retreat, the Kings of Sodom and Gomorrah threw themselves into the bitumen pits, and their men fled into the hill country to escape capture. And so it is recorded, *“The invaders seized all the wealth of Sodom and Gomorrah and their provisions, and went their way. They also took Lot and his possessions--for he had settled in Sodom--and they departed.”* A fugitive brought the news of Lot’s capture to Abram, the Hebrew, who was camping at the terebinth of Mamre the Amorite (see Gen 14:1-13).

The author would not have us miss the point: Lot brought all this upon himself. What has become of his picture perfect garden and Eden-like Egypt? It was a nightmare that would not have occurred had he chosen to go north or south, remaining in a land blessed by God. He had looked East, and its temptation brought him into the kingdom of Bera, a man whose name implies evil. Had it not been for Uncle Abram, his nightmare would have become a deadly reality.

*When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he mustered three hundred and eighteen of his retainers, born in his house, and went in pursuit as far as Dan. At night, he and his servants deployed against them, defeated them, pursued them as far as Hobah, which is north of Damascus, He brought back his kinsman Lot and his possessions, and the women and the rest of the people”* (Gen 14:14-16).

It had all began on an average day, with Abram walking out of his tent, assuming the ordinary duties of running his extended family. As the sun ascended high in the heavens, all was well under the shades of the oaks of Mambre. Suddenly from the east, an exhausted man had come stumbling into the complex, bearing the evil news of Lot’s capture. As if a satanic whirlwind swirled in from the desert, Abram is caught up in a frightful episode: a war not his own had come to the door of a peaceful man, forcing him to be a man of the sword. (We have here what today is called “a just cause for war.”)

The enemy, having been dispersed and defeated, and Lot, having been rescued, the weary warrior returned home with his exhausted troops, and was met with a dubious welcome. King Bera of Sodom had crawled out of the tar pit, cleaned up his act, and came forth, oozing with enthusiasm for Abram.

But, then, like bright sunlight suddenly breaking through a prolong darkness, King Melchizedek of Salem makes a surprise appearance; he had had no involvement in the conflict. Melchizedek is a priest of the Most High God whom Abram himself worships. He arrives as high priest to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving for Abram and his men. His presence at this moment is God-sent; he blesses and confirms that God has been with

Abram in this enterprise. *“Melchizedek, king of Salem, offers bread and wine in sacrifice, and being a priest of God Most High, he blessed Abram with these words: ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your foes into your hand.’ Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything” (Gen 14:20c).*

As is customary, a banquet followed the sacrifice, and Abram and his men shared in the sacrificial offering of the bread and wine. Saint Paul later teaches that those who share in the sacrificial banquet become one with the god to whom the sacrifice has been offered. All is well that ends well, especially with the blessing of God Most High.

The King of Sodom meets a dead-end road. It has been pointed out that the root of the name *Bera* implies “evil,” and that of his cohort from Gomorrah, *Birsha*, implies “injustice, wickedness.” King Bera meets the conquerors in the Valley of Shaveh with his unacceptable gift. The King said to Abram, *“Give me the persons, and take the possessions for yourself” (Gen 14:22).* Abram does not negotiate with a man of King Bera’s character. Abram said to the King of Sodom, *“I swear to the Lord, God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth, I will not take as much as a thread or a sandal strap of what is yours lest you should say, ‘It is I who made Abram rich.’ For me, nothing but what my servants have used up; as for the share of the men who went with me--Aner, Eshkol, and Mamre--let them take their share” (Gen 14:22-24).*

Our text previously spoke of Abram’s *“retainers, born into his household,”* which distinguishes these people from purchased slaves. As they were raised in the household, they were like family, and often entrusted with important family matters.

We also read that the courier who brought the news to Abram *“brought the news to Abram the Hebrew.”* That phrase set off a long line of commentaries. The author of Genesis would not have made such a reference to Abram as a “Hebrew.” He could have called him a Chaldean, Babylonian, or Armenian, but not “the Hebrew.” At this time in history, the Hebrew People only existed as the future offspring of Abram, descendant of Shem.

This point, along with the general context of this chapter, led scholars to suggest that the entire section is an insert from another ancient manuscript. The so-called Spartole Tablets in Akkadian are suggested. The genuineness and inspiration of the text is not in question, but the authorship of the text is. The implication is that it is non Jewish. If it happens to be that the insert originated such ancient texts, it would be the first source outside of the Bible testifying to the existence of Abraham.

As for the remarkable character Melchizedek, King of Salem, he reappears in the Davidic Psalm 110, where the author applies to the coming Messiah these words: *“Yours is a princely power from the day of your birth. In holy splendor before the day star, like the dew I begot you. ...You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (110:3-4).* Again in first century Judaism, according to the Dead Sea Scrolls the figure of Melchizedek played an important part in the religious beliefs of the Essenes, a Jewish sect.

Among first century Christians, Melchizedek appears as a prefigure of Jesus Christ in the Old Testament. The Book of Hebrews applies both Genesis and Psalm 110 to Jesus, confirming that Jesus is the Messiah, and possesses a priesthood superior to that of the Old Testament.

As for Lot, Abraham may have saved him from slavery but not from himself--only God could do that. Lot moved back into Sodom; seemingly like the moth, he still prefers the dangerous lights of Sodom.

## CHAPTER 15

### THE VISIONARY

When Abram entered the land of Canaan the Lord promised, *“To your descendants I will give this land. All land that you can see I will give to you and to your descendants”* (Gen 13:15). Abram was seventy-five at the time; he is now eighty-five and yet no heir has been born. As we begin our study of chapter fifteen we read, *“Some time later, the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision. He said, ‘Fear not, Abram, I am a shield to you; your reward will be great’”* (Gen 15:1).

We hear for the first time in Genesis *“the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision.”* This expression will be used in the Old Testament when the Lord addresses a prophet. Is the Lord now calling Abram to become a prophet, as the Prophet Balaam later describes *“as one whose eyes see clearly, one who hears the words of God, who sees a vision from the Almighty--whose eyes are opened, who knows the knowledge of God”* (Num 24:4). The following seem to imply it.

For the first time Abram answers back, *“O Lord God, what can you give me, seeing that I shall die childless and the one in charge of my household is Demmesek Eliezer? Since you granted me no offspring, my steward will be my heir”* (Gen 15:2-3).

There can be little doubt about the legal aspect of this statement:

We know from documents going back to the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C. that the Hurrian family law, which the patriarchs followed, distinguished between two types of heir. One was the *aplu*, direct heir, and the other the *ewuru*, indirect heir, whom the law recognized when normal inheritors were lacking. However, such a designated heir lost his right should a son subsequently be born to the adopter.

The Lord replied to Abram: *“‘That one shall not be your heir; none but your very own issue will be your heir,’ He took him outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ And he added, ‘Just so shall your offspring be.’ And because he put his trust in the Lord, He reckoned it to his merit”* or as we read in another translation, *“Abram put his faith in the Lord, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness”* (Gen 15:4-6).

This is a very extraordinary and important statement; we know from Christian sources that it plays an important part in Saint Paul's theology of salvation.

When the text states that Abram “put his faith,” it implies more than the acceptance of the statement as truth; it is a confirmation of it as an absolute fact. The root word for faith is

the same as for our word “Amen!” Abram validates as true what has been said. In return, God validates that Abram is “righteous.” This means that Abram is a man with the right attitude towards God. In other words, Abram is a man very pleasing to God.

Faith here does not mean that a man believes in spite of the evidence to the contrary; it means profound trust in a person. What has been said does not come into question; it is the person who has said it that determines the recipient's response. It is the person of God in this case. You trust the word of a person because you have faith in that person. Rabbi Jacob quotes to us his friend Rabbi Ishmael, “Our father Abraham inherited this world and the world to come only as a reward for the faith he had.”

Because of the importance of faith to us all, I wish to digress for the moment to review our Christian concept of faith. Many of us are accustomed to recite a creed-a credo (I believe) at the beginning of our public worship; we recite a list of religious truths we profess to believe in. Is this in itself faith? Yes, but not a faith that will bring us into the Kingdom of God.

Saint James says to Christians,

*My brothers, what good is it to profess faith without practicing it? Such faith has no power to save one, has it? Do you believe that God is One? You are quite right. The demons believe that and shudder. Be assured, then, that faith without works is as dead as a body without breath. You must perceive that a person is justified by his works and not by his faith alone. Was not our father Abram justified by his works when he offered his son Isaac on the altar? There you see proof that faith was both assisting his works and implemented by his works. You also see how the Scripture was fulfilled which says, “Abraham believed God, and it was credited him as justice, for thus he received the title ‘God's friend’” (Jam 2:14ff).*

We read in the Book of Hebrews this definition of faith,

*Faith is confident assurance concerning what we hope for and conviction about things we do not see. Anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.*

*By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called and went forth to the place he was to receive as a heritage, he went forth, moreover, not knowing where he was going. By faith he sojourned in the promised land, as a foreign country, dwelling in tents... By faith Sarah received power to conceive through she was past the age, for she thought that the One who had made the promise was worthy of trust. As a result of this faith there came forth from one man, who himself as good as dead, descendants as numerous as the stars in the skies and the sands of the seashore. (Heb 11:1-2,8-12)*

We see from these texts that the faith that leads to such righteousness does not come from faith in what has been said, but trust and complete confidence in the One who reveals the truth.



We are left with this wise reminder, “*You need patience to do God's will and receive what he has promised*” (Heb 10:36).

Faith, hope and charity are divine gifts at baptism--the active presence of God in the human soul--but a soul incarnated in a human body with its limitations. Faith calls a person at times to go beyond their human frailty, and often human frailty wins the day. We are too weary—bone-dry weary--to take another step along the path faith calls us to make. It is not a lack of trust in God but a loss of heart--a faltering love.

It is in the life of the great prophet Elijah that perhaps we see an example and a solution. Elijah received word that Queen Jezebel intended to kill him before a new day arrives.

*Frightened, he fled at once for his life. He came to Beer-sheba, which is in Judah, and left his servant there; he himself went a day's journey into the wilderness. He came to a broom bush and sat down under it, and prayed that he might die. “Enough!” he cried, “Now, O Lord, take my life, for I am no better than my fathers” (1Kgs 19:3-4).*

Here is a man who had raised a boy from the dead. It has been said: Fatigue makes cowards of us all!

*Elijah lay down and fell asleep under the broom bush. Suddenly an angel touch him and said to him, “Arise and eat.” He looked about; and there, beside his head, was a cake baked on hot stones and a jar of water! He ate and drank, and lay down again. The angel of the Lord came a second time and touched him and said, “Arise and eat, or the journey will be too much for you.” He arose and ate and drank, and with the strength from the meal he walked forty days and forty nights as far as the mountain of God at Horeb. (1Kgs 19:5-9).*

Let us now return and accompany Abram on his journey in faith with, perhaps, a better understanding of the faith that justifies a man in the eyes of God. We will note a change in Abram's relationship with the Lord. Now the Lord speaks and Abram responds and asks questions, expresses his concerns. Are they friends or are they not friends? Friends communicate with one another, friends tell secrets to one another. This becomes Abram's *modus vivendi* with his Friend, El Shaddai. It was a milieu of friendship with one exception: the will of God left this obedient man speechless!

God is about to enter into a covenant with Abram “that would lie at the base of all God's future dealing with him and his seed. The covenant did not make Abram ‘righteous’; rather it was through his faith that he was reckoned (declared) righteous. Only after he had been counted righteous through his faith could Abram enter into God's covenant. (Sailhamer)

Recalling their first encounter, the Lord says, “*I am the Lord who brought you from the Ur of the Chaldeans to give you this land as a possession*” (Gen 15:7). The Lord may be on heavenly time wherein a thousand years are as a day, but as for Abram, the years have

been slowly ticking away, and weary of waiting, patience grows thin. Abram has a second reason for anxiety: in the Near East it was the duty of the son to ensure a restful afterlife for his father by proper internment and rites. As an ancient text put it, "his son shall lament him and bury him."

Speaking about the human experience of God, our friend Father Bede Griffiths teaches us,

Humanity has always been faced with the divine mystery. From the very beginning human beings have been in the presence of that mystery which is, in fact, nothing but the mystery of existence, and they have been exploring this mystery. This Supreme Reality was always seen as manifesting in the cosmos and in the human soul. As the human soul opens to the divine mystery, so the divine mystery reveals itself to the soul.

It is important to be clear that when we speak of experience of God, what is meant is the subjective aspect of that which objectively we call revelation. Whenever the Supreme Reality reveals himself in Israel it is always in relation to the history of the people. While the revelation is concerned with history, with the growth of a people who are to bring a blessing to humanity, it comes in the form of a personal experience: a revelation to Abraham is very striking in this respect: "*As the sun was going down a deep sleep fell on Abram; a dread and great darkness fell upon him.*" That was clearly a deep mystical experience. Darkness is one of the aspects of mystical experience as one goes beyond the created world and encounters the divine Reality. Here Abram is given an insight into the future of his people, but at the same time he experiences the presence of God in a flame of fire, one of the typical symbols of the sacred mystery. "When the sun had gone down and it was dark, behold a smoking fire and a flaming torch passed between the pieces."

Returning to our text we read: "*Abram asks the Lord: 'O Lord God how am I to know that I possess it?'*" (Gen 15:8). What now follows seemingly doesn't appear to answer the question, but what does happen puts things in their proper perspective, and the question never rises again. However this question does not concern offspring but Land. Abram desires a sign that his descendants will inherit this land.

Once again, the humility of God is about to be manifested: God comes down to meet the human person in his weakness and on his own terms. God, in a sense, becomes weak that Abram may be strong in faith. The Lord will establish a personal covenant with Abram and his descendants concerning the land of Canaan. God swears an oath to the man Abram that He will be true to His word. In ancient times, a copy of the covenant promises would be kept within the temple of the god called upon in the covenant as the divine witness to it. The covenant God now enters into with man remains in heaven.

He directs Abram to make the preparations: "*Bring me a three-year old heifer, a three year old she goat, a three year-old ram, a turtledove and a young bird*" (15:9). Ritual custom specified the animals to be used. It presumed the animals would be without blemish, and being three years old signified their maturity and perfection.

After Abram prepared the sacrificial victims as custom designed, *“Birds of prey swooped down on the carcasses but Abram immediately expelled them (15:11).* Their presence symbolized the frustration of human and satanic attempts to hinder the fulfillment of the divine plan.

The profound mystical experience of which Father Bede spoke of now occurs: *“When the sun was about to set, a deep sleep fell upon Abram, and a great dark dread descended upon him.”* All natural senses are suspended as the soul enters into the deepest communion with God. And the Lord said to Abram, *“Know well your offspring will be strangers in a land not theirs, they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years; but I will execute judgment upon the nation they shall serve, and in the end they shall go free with great wealth. As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace; you shall be buried at a ripe old age. And they shall return here in the fourth generation; for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete” (Gen 15: 12-16).*

Amorites normally specify a people, but in this text it is a collective term for the present population of the land. Saint Paul teaches that the Wrath of God does come upon men who know God but refuse to honor God. Their sin is summed up succinctly by Joshua: *“They have served other gods” (Josh 24:2).*

*“When the sun set and it was very dark, there appeared a smoking oven, and a flaming torch which passed between those pieces” (15:17).* The fire expresses the presence of God, as it will one day in the burning bush in the desert and upon the top of Mt. Sinai.

*On that day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying, “To your offspring I assign this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river Euphrates: the Kenites, Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, the Hittites, the Perizzites, Rephaim, the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites.” (Gen 15:18-21)*

These are the people that one day will come under the dominion of Abram's descendants. Here it is confirmed the nature of the covenant concerning land.

History has indicated that all such promises are conditional, and it was only under the reign of Solomon that Israel reached the River Euphrates. When we speak of the promises being conditional, understand there are also conditions which men must freely enter into for their fulfillment. A covenant is a partnership. God reveals to man what He wills to accomplish, but God's will is conditioned upon the will of the people involved: God willed to become Flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary and did so with the freely willed consent of Mary of Nazareth.

There was a woman in recent memory with a remarkable gift of healing, She once asked the Lord why he gave this gift to her of all people? He responded that He had called a man to the ministry and he refused the call. She recalled a prayer she had once prayed, “Lord, I am nothing but if you can use ‘nothing’ I'm it.”

**In this vision, God left to the descendants of Abram clear evidence that His purpose would not change, guaranteed by an unchangeable oath: those who took refuge in him might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope in a promise that is anchored firmly beyond the veil.**

**When all this came to an end, Abram had had a vision, and he became a prophet, the first in Genesis. A prophet: one whose eyes see clearly, who hears the words of God, who sees a vision from the Almighty, whose eyes are open, who knows the knowledge of God.**

## CHAPTERS 13,14,15

### STUDY QUESTIONS

(Please read Chapters 13,14,15)

1. What does Abram's dealing with Lot teach you about dealing with problems within the family?
2. In what way could it be said that Abram brought this problem upon himself?
3. What do you see as the major difference between a man of the spirit and a man of the flesh?
4. What do we learn in Chapter 14 about the value of good neighbors?
5. What does Abram's response to Lot's problems teach us about our responsibility to family members and others?
6. What does Abram's response teach us about the man?
7. What does Abram's response to King Bela of Sodom teach you?
8. What do you see as the importance of Melchizedek's appearance in this episode, and his belief about God?
9. As a Christian, how do you see Melchizedek as a symbol of Jesus of Nazareth?
10. What does the return of Lot to Sodom teach you about human nature?
11. In Chapter Fifteen what do you understand by Genesis 15:4-6?
12. How would you explain the quality of faith that leads to salvation?
13. What does the Elijah episode teach you about men of faith and their human weakness?
14. What does the Lord's response to "O Lord God how am I to know that I possess it?" teach you about divine humility?
15. What do you understand by the teaching: Divine promises and threats are always contingent upon continuous goodness or evilness of people even when declared absolutely?

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### SARAI AND HAGAR

What now follows in Chapter Sixteen may seem to be a *nonsequitur*, or as they say in Latin, it doesn't follow! It does not seem so, but it does. The matters of both the last chapter the present chapter are related. Abram has just returned from a victorious war with the nations; now he has a war in his own tent. Seemingly he fared better on the foreign field than on his home-field. It is one thing to be in a war with men, and another with women.

It was another Abraham, known as Lincoln, who said of women: "Just when you think you have them in the palm of your hand, they slip through your fingers like quicksilver." I remember an occasion walking through Disney Land with two lady friends, with their husband up ahead of us. One of the men turned and said, "No matter how slow we walk, you never catch up." One of the wives quietly said, "They never learn, do they?" Now, that may be a non sequitur.

There is a Jewish Proverb that may find its roots in the story to follow: "*Under three things the earth trembles, yes, under the four it cannot bear up: Under an odious woman when she is wed, and a maidservant when she displaces her mistress*" (Prov. 30:21,23).

Let us recall at this time that the men called the patriarchs--Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob--were not like free-reign chickens living in a lawless society; they did not live out in the wild-west where the gun is law. They were citizens of their world and obeyed the moral laws of their society. Their lives were directed by the Code of Hammurabi and the Code of Nuzi effective in the 15<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

Concerning marriage, Genesis reveals monogamy as part of the divine plan: man and woman are two parts of one whole person, each part different, equal and complementary; each is the fulfillment of the other, each perfecting the other but imperfect in self, incomplete in their separateness. A man and woman should leave their father and mother and become one with each other, cleave to one another, for this means life for them. Love is the glue of togetherness. Love of the other is proper love of self; a separate self is an incomplete self--it hungers and thirsts for wholeness, to be whole, to be one with the other.

Selfishness dissolves the union of love and counterfeits the glue of love. Love of the other becomes only love of self in the other, leaving the human soul restless, aimless, and hungry and thirsting. The hungry heart is the lonely hunter whose game is the body and soul of another; they often run in packs for mutual support--each reducing the other to a needed object and their own self along with it.

Jesus of Nazareth contributed divorce to the hardness of the human heart--a heart that has lost the ability to love. Abraham was monogamous and remained so all of his life. Seemingly, Pharaohs and kings in Genesis did not take lightly the sin of adultery, as they personally experienced that God did not take lightly the sin.

Sarai, having been much in the background since the Egyptian episode, now moves to center stage with a vengeance. It has been ten years since they came to the land of Canaan and she still remains without child. The Lord keeps speaking to Abram about his descendants, and he still has none. Time is passing, and Sarai has found her solution to the problem and a very legal one at that.

There is case in the Code of Hammurabi (146) which states: "A priestess of the naditum rank who was free to marry but not to bear children, gives her husband a slave girl in order to provide a son. If the concubine then tries to abrogate to herself a position of equality with her mistresses, the wife shall demote her former status of slave, but she is not to sell her to others."

And there is the case from the Code of Nuzi, which records the adoption of a certain Shennima and his marriage to Gilimninu: "If Gilimninu bears children, Shennima shall not take another wife. But if Gilimninu fails to bear children, Gilimninu shall get for Shennima a woman from the Lullu country--a slave girl as concubine. In that case, Gilimninu herself shall have authority over the offspring." In this case, if the wife is unable to have children, it is her duty to provide her husband a concubine, but she would have all legal rights over the child.

In the culture in which Sarah lived, a person only survived physical death through their offspring; through their offspring their lives continued on indefinitely. According to the Scriptures the evil done in their lives affected their children to the third and fourth generation, and the good done--to the thousandth generation. Understandably, to die without descendants was seen as curse of God.

Sarai sees the solution to her and Abram's problem in her personal servant Hagar, an Egyptian girl--probably a gift to Sarai from her brief encounter with the Pharaoh of Egypt. In Chapter Twelve we read that they received both male and female slaves from the Pharaoh.

And so we now read, "*Sarai said to Abram, 'Look, the Lord has kept me from bearing, Consort with my maid; perhaps I shall have a son through her.'* And Abram heeded Sarai's request. So Sarai, Abram's wife, took her maid, Hagar the Egyptian--after Abram had dwelt in the land of Canaan ten years--gave her to her husband as a concubine" (Gen 16:2-3).

Sarai attributes her barrenness to a direct act of God; she will now take things into her own hands and provide Abram with an heir. Reality is rarely what we imagine it will be. Unforeseen circumstances arise for which Sarai is not prepared, and which shatter her peace of mind and the tranquility of her household. It is not wise to take a step ahead of

Divine Providence. A holy man taught, “Do not tread on the heels of Divine Providence, but if God opens the door--Run!” Sarai had grown tired of waiting for the “open door.”

Sarai has underestimated Hagar the Egyptian. Hagar is not a girl to miss a God-given opportunity to better herself, especially when in an intimate relationship with a man as kind and generous as Abram. It wouldn't be a surprise if Abram began to spoil her with a few golden trinkets, a bit of silk. If he had, it would not have gone unnoticed. My mother referred to such a man as a “Sugar Daddy.” However, what brings matters to a head is Hagar's pregnancy. Motherhood elevated a woman's status in such a society. Hagar begins to assume airs, and worse, to disdain Sarai. We read, “*He cohabited with Hagar and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, her mistress was lowered in her esteem*” (Gen 16:4).

Sarai declares war and aims the first missal right at Abram. “*Sarai said to Abram, ‘The wrong done me is your fault! I myself put my maid in your bosom (in your lap), but now that she is pregnant, I am lowered in her esteem. May the Lord decide between you and me!’*” (Gen 16:5).

Rabbi Jacob interjects at this point, “I for one make no judgment concerning Sarai’s behavior. I leave that to my wife to fantasize about.” Others have said, “They all three meant well, they just didn't do well, and things are not well!” All three had something in their favor and something against them.

How did Abram deal with the problem? The quickest and safest way possible: he put it all back in Sarai hands saying, “*Your maid is in your hands. Deal with her as you think right*” (16:6a) and then ducked back into his tent. Probably thinking excuses would only add fuel to the fire.

We are told, “*Then Sarai treated her harshly*” (Gen 16:6b). And from the Hebrew word used for “harshly”—as they would say in the Deep South—“Sarai beat the livin’ hell out of that girl and no telling the amount of verbal abuse that went with it.” Hagar, not being the docile type, thought to herself, the best way is the way of the homing-pigeon, and headed out to Egypt.

We read, “*An angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the road to Shur which is near the border of Egypt*” (16:7). The “angel of the Lord” is later identified as the Lord. The Lord took pity upon the afflicted girl and her unborn child. And as it seems from the Genesis account, the Lord asked questions. “*Hagar, slave of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going? And she said, I am running away from my mistress Sarai*” (16:8). The Lord certainly would know the fate that awaited Hagar and her child if she continued on to Egypt. The Lord asked her to return to her mean-spirited mistress: the tent of Abram was the safest place for Hagar and child. The angel said “*I will make your descendants so numerous that they will be too many to count*” (16:10).

By obeying the Lord, Hagar placed herself under His hand; her obedience merited great blessings. “*The angel of the Lord said to her, ‘Behold you are with child and will bear a son; you shall call him Ishmael, for the Lord has paid heed to your suffering, he shall be a wild ass*



*of a man; his hand against everyone, and everyone's hand against him; He shall dwell alongside of all his kinsmen” (Gen 16:11-12). Men would be against him but the Lord would be with him and make him one tough man.*

Hagar realized the “Angel of the Lord” is the Lord and said, “*You are El-roi [the god of vision],*” by which she meant, “Have I gone on seeing, after He saw me?” (16:13). In other words, I have seen the Lord and I am alive! The well where the vision took place was located between Kadesh and Bered and is called *Beer-lahai-roi*, which means, “Did I really see the Lord and live.”

*“Hagar obeyed the Lord and returned to Sarai. Hagar bore a son to Abram, and Abram gave the son which Hagar bore him the name Ishmael. Abram was eighty-six years old when Hagar bore Ishmael to Abram” (Gen 16:16).*

It has not been lost upon students of Genesis that, as Sarai treated her Egyptian slave girl harshly, a day of Egyptian slavery would come to Sarai’s offspring. They, too, would be dealt with “harshly” as had Hagar. As the old saying goes, “what goes around comes around,” and sometimes in mega amounts.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### WALK IN MY WAY

A story has a lesson to teach, a truth to reveal. We can, and often do get lost in the details of the narration and miss the lesson taught--a truth needed to be known. Genesis is a true story about the relationship between God, man and woman, and the earth

The first sentence revealed the primary truth: God created the heaven and earth and all things. Following upon this God created the human person, male and female he created them, sharing a divine gift with them: God made them in his Image and Likeness. He placed them on earth in a superior relationship to the creatures of the earth. He gave them a co-created role: to preserve, to cultivate and bring creation to its full potential. God gave them the power to procreate their own species--a God-given gift to be expressed through the sexual powers of the male and female.

God's first command to them, *"increase and multiply,"* demonstrates that the exercise of this power expresses the will of God, making it both a natural act and a sacred one. The child, the fruit of sexual union, would be sacred in the eyes of God.

Human powers grow and develop with a person, in keeping with the order and design of the Creator. Sexual powers come into their potential when a man and woman have developed sufficiently to bear responsibility for the life of a child and its growth and development. With the development of the power comes the desire not only to exercise it, but that it be fruitful.

It is natural for a man to desire to be a father, and through the powers of his masculinity provide for the life of the child and offer it protection. It is natural for a woman to desire to conceive and bear and child, and through her gifts of femininity nurture the life of the child, bringing it to its maturity. When human persons are properly oriented to God, their relations with one another and with nature itself is ordered as God designed it to be.

As the story unfolds it darkens: human beings reject the will of God in their lives. This rejection initiated a chain reaction in creation as it destroyed the original order and design of life on earth. Corrupting the essential order in the world produced chaos in human relationships among themselves and with the world they inhabited.

A mad, mad world came into being. God clearly and concisely put his finger on the problem: *"No desire that his [man's] heart conceived was ever anything but evil" (Gen 6:5).* Evil would continue to accelerate on earth unless an external force brought it to a halt. God exercised his divine right: He gave life and He could destroy life, but not without regret.

God the Creator and Ruler of the Universe, as *“his heart was grieved,”* destroyed all life on earth, with one exception.

There was one man called Noah—*“a good man and blameless in that age, for he walked with God”* (Gen 6:9-10). Noah was the one good seed on earth, and God used him to make a new beginning. To him God confided: *“I have decided to put an end to all mortals on earth; the earth is full of lawlessness because of them. So I will destroy them and all life with them”* (Gen 6:13). There is the lesson here that we too often forget—we are all tied here together. But to Noah he said, *“But with you I will establish my covenant; you and your sons, your wife and your sons’ wives”* (Gen. 6:18). God gave Noah detailed instructions for survival, and Noah fulfilled them to the letter.

When Noah came from the ark and first put his foot on dry land, he erected an altar to God to praise God and thank Him for the gift of human life on earth. God confirmed that Noah had conserved the Image of God in man; the human race will continue on the face of the earth.

The Lord promised: *“Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the desires of man’s heart are evil from the start; nor will I ever again strike down all living beings, as I have done. As long as earth lasts, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night shall not cease”*(Gen 8:21-22) How dearly the Lord loves the order and design of His beautiful earth.

God accepts the weakness of the human heart with its tendency to selfishness and self-destruction; He will not again destroy human life on earth. He declares the sacredness of human life.

God established his First Covenant with the human race with Noah and his family as its representatives. God confirms the subjection of the animal world, and grants this permission: *“Every creature that is alive shall be yours to eat; I give them all to you as I did the green plants”* (Gen 9:3).

God proclaims the sacredness of human life on earth with these words: *“For your own life’s blood, too, I will demand an accounting and from man, in regard to his fellow man, I will demand an account for human life; for in the image of God has man been made”* (Gen 9:5-6).

And again the Lord said to the human race, *“Be fertile, then, multiply, abound on earth and subdue it”* (Gen 9:7). As mother and father, God proclaims His supremacy over human life on earth and in so doing exercises the power of His Fatherhood.

We deal in this chapter with the unfinished work of the Covenant God that began with Abram in Chapter Fifteen; there it dealt with the land to be received, and here the subject matter is the people of the Covenant.

Yahweh appears to Abram as God Almighty--*El Shaddai*--and said: *“Walk in my ways and be blameless!”* (Gen 17:1). We heard this once before (Gen 6:9-10) as Noah was identified

as favored by God, and we will not hear it again in Genesis. The first time calls forth the presence of Noah, and reminds us of the first Covenant that remains in force on earth--the sacredness of human life. What follows is an extension and application of that First Covenant.

When the Lord tells Abram, *“Walk in my ways and be blameless,”* God calls Abram to live daily in His Presence, with the will of God as the guiding light for each step he takes. It is precisely because Abram has come to this relationship with God that He says, *“I will establish My Covenant between you and me and I will multiply you exceedingly”* (Gen 17:2). Before the presence of God, Abram falls face down in adoration. The Lord had said to Abram *“I will multiply you exceedingly.”* Who is the “you” of whom God speaks? This one solitary human being? No! This is Abram, husband of Sarai; they are man and wife. From the day of Abram’s call, Sarai was there; it was Abram and Sarai. Now Abram is ninety-nine years old, and it is still Abram and Sarai.

In the light of God's own teaching in Genesis, I will be so presumptuous as to say that when God tells Abram, *“between you and me I make my covenant,”* that Sarai has not been excluded. When the Lord says, *“and I will multiply you exceedingly,”* the “you” is Abram and Sarai.

The Lord says, *“Fear not, Abram! I am your shield!”*(Gen 15:1).

*This is my covenant with you: you shall be the father of a multitude of nations. And you shall no longer be called Abram, but your name shall be Abraham..., for I will make you a multitude of nations, kings shall come forth from you. I will maintain my covenant with you as an everlasting covenant through the ages--to be God to you and your offspring to come. I assign the land you sojourn in to you and your offspring to come, all the land of Canaan, as an everlasting holding; and I will be their God. (Gen 17:4-8)*

*And God said to Abraham, “As for your wife Sarai, you shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah. I will bless her, indeed, I will give you a son by her. I bless her so that she shall give rise to nations, rulers of people shall issue from her. (Gen 17:15-16).*

When Abraham heard this, he completely fell apart with laughter at the divine sense of humor--after all these years, when all natural hope of children has gone and even hoping against hope has faded, and we have settled down with Ishmael as our answer for the future, now I hear *this?* *“He said to himself, ‘Can a child be born to a man a hundred years old, or can Sarah bear a child at ninety?’”* He had not heard those words of the Angel Gabriel: *“Nothing is impossible for God!”* (Lk 1:37).

Laughter can express scorn and ridicule, but it's a sad and pathetic sound when expressing hopelessness. When laughter is the experience of joy and excitement of the human spirit too great to quieted, you hear, as the poet put it, “running laughter”--the true spirit of laughter. But sad laughter is a travesty--it has lost its soul, like salt without savor. When Sarai hears the words, *“this time next year Sarai will have a son”* (18:14), she laughed.

Because she was afraid, Sarai will say, “*I didn’t laugh.*’ *But God said, ‘Yes, you did’*” (18:15). So we must call it a “laugh.” but not much of one.

We will read about what real laughter is: Isaac! A son born to Sarai and Abram, a joy too great to hold in, the full fruit of a very long awaited promise, the impossible becomes God's gift. Even Sarai will confess, “*God has given me cause to laugh, and all who hear of it will laugh with me*” (Gen 20:6). That is because it is “running laughter.” When recovered enough to respond to God’s Covenant, Abraham had suggested to the Lord that Ishmael would be sufficient. Our Lord responded,

*Nevertheless, Sarah your wife shall bear a son, and you shall name him Isaac; and I will maintain my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come. (Gen17:19).*

Isaac will not be one of the anonymous offspring who will receive the benefits of the covenant. He is here brought to the level of a participator in the original covenant.

*As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous. He shall be the father of twelve chieftains. I will make him a great nation. But my covenant I will maintain with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this season next year. (Gen 17:20-21)*

The Lord left no doubt as to who the chosen people will be: they come from Abraham through Sarah! Sarah, in her old age would be the one through whom it would be demonstrated that God alone would fulfill his covenant promise.

When God names a person or changes their name, it implies this person will play a major role in the divine plan. Sarai has been elevated to *Sarah*, meaning “princess.” Kings shall come forth from her. As for Abram, the changing of his name to *Abraham* does not alter the basic meaning, “the father is exalted.” The addition of *ha* to Abram adds the concept of numbers—“father of many nations.”

The Lord informs Abraham that circumcision is the sign of the Covenant for all ages. The ritual of circumcision, cutting off the foreskin of the male penis, has long been a custom among ancient people as a ritual preparation for marriage and as an initiation of a young boy at puberty. The Egyptians, the Edomites, Ammonites, and Moabites practiced it, but it was not customary with the Philistines or generally among the people of Mesopotamia. It was also common among certain Indian tribes in the Americas, the aborigines of Australia, and the Moslem religion. (Moslem ministers are called *mullahs*; the Hebrew word for circumcision is *mullah*.)

The Lord established circumcision as the sign of the Covenant. If I should ask Him why He did so, He could say, “I just did!” It would be the most perfect answer, as it implies there is a divine reason for it, and that is reason enough.

Subjecting one's body to the ritual of circumcision implies obedience to the demands of the Covenant. It implies the male person is under the authority of the God of the Covenant; He

has accepted this authority in his life; it is his intention to live his life within the laws of the Covenant, which implies fulfilling the will of God. As the male organ symbolizes both masculinity and fatherhood, circumcision reminds every male that God is the Supreme Father to whom the obedience of sonship is demanded. Because the mark is permanent, it remains a constant life-long reminder of who is Lord of one's life. Jesus told his disciples, *“Do not call anyone on earth your father. Only one is your father, the One in heaven”* (Mt 23:9).

Returning to our text, we read,

*God further said to Abraham, “Such shall be the covenant between me and you and your offspring to follow, which you shall keep: every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskin, and that shall be the sign between Me and you. And throughout the generations, every male among you shall be circumcised at the age of eight days, including slaves born or brought into the household. Thus shall my covenant be marked in your flesh as an everlasting pact. And if any male who is uncircumcised fails to circumcise the flesh of his foreskin, that person shall be cut off from his kin; he has broken My covenant.”* (Gen 17:9-14)

In a word, he will have rejected his sonship and denied his Father.

*Thus Abraham and his son was circumcised on that very day; and all his household, his household slaves and those who had been brought from outside, were circumcised with him. Ishmael was thirteen years old when he was circumcised.* (Gen 17:23-25)

The chapter began with the Lord's call to Abraham *“walk before me and be blameless.”* Noah had heard the call, and he walked the walk as once did Enoch. Others heard the call but only Noah and Abraham heard the word “blameless” (*tamin*). They walked the Way to righteousness, which throws the light of the fruit of obedience on our “walk.” Often in our lives there is only the dark light of “I did it my way!”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### THE DIVINE VISITATION

God called Abram to be a nomad on earth--a sojourner, always in the process of going to one place and on to the next. Where you are is not where you need to be; someone calls and leads; you do not know to where to go, but go you must. This is not home, only a place to dwell awhile. "I" is sacrificed for the Other.

A perpetual traveler, Abram became the stranger to all he met, and they a stranger to him. In this, he and they were but ships passing in the night--close but not touching. He desired to help those strangers like himself, to aid them along their way as they passed though his space in his time. They had needs and he was in a position to respond to them.

Presently he is comfortably tented and at home all day. As the strangers pass his tent, their nearness and their need transform Abram the stranger into Abram their servant. What a perfect servant! He knows their needs before they are conscious of them. His gift of self must be as light as possible upon them, only to refresh and assist them on their Way. His hospitality is a gift of needed service, and as light as possible upon the recipients. There was no charity with a hook at the tent of Abram. Stopping awhile comes with a free lunch with pure generosity, and he makes it as light and pleasing as possible. The gift is eloquent; given in simplicity, it pleases without embarrassment. Their gift to him? Knowing, as they continue along their way, that they had met a man named Abram, who had been a blessing in their lives.

We open Chapter Eighteen of Genesis and, indeed, it has a story to tell. Its opening scene is reminiscent of a long, hot, Mississippi afternoon in August, when it is too hot for a breeze to breathe, a time of day that demands stillness, rocking in a chair under the shade of the porch, with a glass of iced tea in one hand and a fan in the other. It is day-dreaming time--too hot to think.

Hot August afternoons are not much different, whether in 1936 AD Mississippi or in 1400 BC Jerusalem. As the day grew hot, Abraham was sitting at the entrance of his tent under the terebinth of Mamre, located a little north of Hebron. It was the time of the day when the landscape turns hazy and vision blurs and people often see mirages. But what Abraham sees is not a mirage.

*Abraham looks up and sees three men, total strangers, standing near him. He's startled because he hadn't even seen them coming up. Jumping up, he ran to them, falling at their feet and bowing before them as if they were the Lord Himself. He immediately makes an offer to them that courtesy could not reject, "My lords, if it pleases you, do not go on past your servant. Let a little water be brought, that you may bathe your feet,*

*and then recline under the tree. Let me fetch a morsel of bread that you may refresh yourselves; then afterward you may go on your servants. (Gen 18:2-5)*

I'm reminded when, as a college student, I visited a classmate from the Northeast. Together, we stopped to make a short visit with one of his little Irish lady friends. In those days you would be asked, "Would you like a cup of tea?" How could you refuse? Soon I learned that it was a customary way of asking, "Would you stay for lunch?" Abraham's guest said to him, "*Do as you have said*" (Gen 18:5).

Abraham was off running, getting together a banquet on the way. "*Sarai, quick, three seahs of choice flour! Knead and make cakes.*" He ran to the herd, took a tender and choice calf and gave it to a servant, who hastened to prepare it. Dust was flying around the camp, and by the time it settled, Abraham sat curds and milk and the prepared calf before his guests.

At that time one of his guests asked a question, "*Where is your wife Sarah?*" With that question Abraham's spiritual antenna went up. Things are not what they seem, he thought. He replies with caution, "*There, in the Tent.*" That was an understatement--she was all ears, right on the other side of tent wall. The Guest continued, "*I will return to you next year and your wife will have a son.*" Sarah laughed quietly to herself on hearing this and thought: "*Really now here I am withered and am I to have enjoyment with my husband so old?*"

When Abraham's guest spoke again, Abraham knew he had entertained angels. His speaker said, "*Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I really bear a son, old as I am?'*" (The Lord is a God of peace, he paraphrases Sarah's thoughts so as not to be offensive to Abraham.) The angel continues, "*Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? I will return to you the same time next year, and Sarah shall have a son.*" Now Sarah was frightened. Abraham had not mentioned to her what he had received in a previous vision, and her automatic defense method took over. She lied, calling the Guest a liar, "*I did not laugh!*" He replied, "*You did laugh.*" The subject was closed; the Lord spoke and Sarah got the message (see Gen 18:6-15). Now Abram knew one guest was more than an Angel; he was the Lord Himself!

At this point, Rabbi Jacob breaks in with a wee discourse on angels:

The text indicates that the angels are conceived here as expressions of God's presence. The consistent Biblical expression of God is that God cannot possibly be seen by humans, and cannot be contained in any known place." "*The heavens cannot contain you*" (1Kgs 8:27). God, in this conception, can nonetheless make himself known to humans by a sort of emanation from the Godhead that is visible to the human eye. What the human sees in front of him looks like a man. The word for such a thing is *angel*. An angel can speak God's Word in first person or can speak about God in third person. (R. E. Friedman)

In the New Testament, from the first book to the last, there are more than fifty references to angels. That God created intelligent beings to exist in a spiritual realm, and within a



material realm, is a given fact. We know in the angelic order there are hierarchies of being--Seraphim, Cherubim, archangels, guardian angels--and that they are immortal beings. Jesus of Nazareth teaches that certain human beings after death *"become like angels and are no longer liable to death"* (Lk 20:36). People have guardian angels and *"their angels in heaven constantly behold my heavenly Father's face"* (Mt 18:10). Jesus said that if he needed divine help in this world God would *"provide at a moment's notice more than twelve legions of angels"* (Mt 26:53).

In our western world many minds are imprisoned in scientism and limited truth, to empiricism. To such minds the reality of angelic beings is ridiculous. As the Jewish author of the Song of Bernadette wrote, "To those who believe, no proof is necessary; to those who do not believe, none is possible!"

Because the word "angel" implies a messenger of God, a human person can be an angel in our life--spiritual men and women with ears open to the voice of God. As for angelic beings in human form, there are numerous reports of those sightings. I believe I've had a few in my own life-time. One stands out above all others: I had attended a meeting with charismatic people and leaders. At the meeting a very forceful person spoke on the power and activities of the Holy Spirit. What I heard troubled me concerning its orthodoxy, and it left me incredulous. The scriptures warn, *"Test every spirit!"* As I was a spiritual director myself, I prayed that evening that God would give me understanding concerning this matter so that I could properly direct others.

At that time, I was taking a summer class in statistics at Cal State in Long Beach, California. The day following the meeting, I was coming up a long set of steps that lead from the parking lot to the Cal State Campus. It was about 8:45 A. M., as I had a nine to twelve class. At the top of the stairs stood a lady in her late twenties or early thirties, dressed simply in a cotton dress and stockings, low heel shoes, and her hair pulled back in a bun. The lady smiled pleasantly as she offered me a piece of paper, and said, "Would you like to receive my testimony?" "No thank you!" I said. On the way to a class in statistics at eight in the morning, I was in no mood to hear how some poor soul found Jesus.

That day, the professor scheduled a test for the next class. I decided to study that afternoon. I drove down the beach past Huntington Beach, toward Newport Beach. There was a long stretch of road running along the beach, so I pulled my car over to the side and parked. There was not another car around or anyone on the beach. I went out on the beach near the water, laid out my beach blanket, and sat down to study. Suddenly I looked up toward the road and saw a woman coming toward me.-There was no car in sight but mine. It wasn't long before I realized it was the same woman I had seen early this morning.

She walked straight to me, smiled and said, "Would you like to receive my testimony?" as she extended the paper. I said, "Yes! I would like to receive your testimony." What I read was a testimony concerning the Holy Spirit. "Would you please sit down and talk to me," I asked her. "Yes, I would be glad to do so." She smiled and sat down. We talked about forty-five minutes, and cleared away every doubt and uncertainty in my mind concerning the Holy Spirit. She stood up and said, "Now I must go." She turned toward the water and

walked toward Newport. I watched her until she was out of view. For me, she was indeed an angel.

Let us now return to Abram's angels. The guests, having apparently completed the purpose of their visit to the tent of Abraham, set out on their journey, heading toward Sodom. Abraham, realizing he was in the company of the Lord, was reluctant to say goodbye, so he walked along with them. After all it was the Lord who had said to him, "*Walk in My presence!*" He couldn't do any better than this--the Lord, two Angels, and Abraham.

The Lord breaks the silence, addressing his angelic company:

*Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do, since Abraham is to become a great and populous nation, and all the nations of the earth are to find blessing in him? For I have singled him out that he may instruct his posterity to keep the way of the Lord by what is just and right, so that the Lord may carry into effect for Abraham the promises he made about him. (Gen 18:17-19)*

The text confirms that Abraham is a prophet of the Lord and, best of all, his Friend. Friends tell each other secrets. There is a practical matter of concern: God wants Abraham to be clear about what it means by being "*just and right.*"

The Lord reveals to Abraham: "*The outrage of Sodom and Gomorrah is so great, and their sin so grave, that I will go down to see if they have acted altogether according to the outcry against them that has reached Me. If so, I will take note*" (Gen 18:20-21).

The heart and core of Abraham's relationship with God is obedience. The Lord commands him--he acts, and never questions! The matter now put before us is one of seeking information about what is right and just. At no point is Abraham questioning the justice of God. He seeks information from the Lord, and he has the right and encouragement to do so.

In their journey they have come to a high hill that looks on the plateau below, where sit Sodom and Gomorrah. The angelic companions of the Lord go on their way toward Sodom. Abraham remains standing on the hill with the Lord looking down on the cities. He is certainly aware that his nephew and his family are in Sodom. "*He came forward and said, 'Will your sweep away the innocent along with the guilty?'*"

His question insinuates nothing; he's seeking to clarify what he must teach to others. Abraham goes on,

*"What if there shall be fifty innocent in the city; will you then wipe out the place and not forgive it for the sake of the innocent fifty who are in it? Far be it for you to do such a thing, to bring death upon the innocent and well as the guilty, so the innocent and the guilty fare alike. Far be it from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" And the Lord answered, 'If I find in the city of Sodom fifty innocent ones, I will forgive the whole place for their sake.'* Abraham spoke up, saying, '*Here I venture*

*to speak to my Lord. What if the fifty innocent people lacked five, will you destroy the whole city for the want of the five?' 'I will not destroy the whole city for want of the five.'"*

Abraham goes on pushing the point, "What if forty-five, what if forty, what if thirty-five, what if thirty, what if twenty-five, what if twenty, what if fifteen?" Each time the Lord answered, "*I will not.*" Finally Abraham knowing he has pushed it as about as far as it can go, says, "*Let not my Lord be angry if I speak this last time: What if ten shall be there?' And He answered, 'I will not destroy it for the sake of the ten'"* With this the subject is closed. "*When the Lord finished speaking to Abraham He departed, and Abraham returned to his place" (Gen 18:22-33).*

There is, of course, one other question: Abraham has no need to ask it; he knew the answer. What about the other nine that may be innocent? The Lord will send someone to take them out of town. If they willed not to go after being warned, their life is in their own hands--they will perish with the rest. People do get inspiration that, if followed, would have saved them from an impending evil. Those who "walk with the Lord" are attuned to the whispers of the Spirit, and hear them.

The Christian Scriptures confirm, "*God wants no one to be lost, He desires all to be saved.*" This episode between God and Abraham clearly reveals the intercessory power of a virtuous person to bring blessings upon their society.

Rabbi Jacob tells us, "Hospitality is compassion, openness of heart, and generosity without reservation and calculation, whatever the cost. It means putting oneself in the other's place, caring for the other as for oneself. Hospitality is at the depth of Abram's call to leave his country and kin, and go out to experience the sacredness in others and in himself. We see this in his repeated intercession for others. His path is social as he discovers and loves the divine in others. In such a life there is feasting and laughter" (Christopher Bamford-Parabola-Summer 2008).

Responsibility is an essential element of true love. Jacques Derrida reminds us that it cannot be automatic, but personal. "It is to respond to the other and to answer for oneself before the other."

## **CHAPTERS 16,17 AND 18**

### **STUDY QUESTIONS** (Please read Chapters 16,17, 18)

- 1. How would you describe Sarai physical and spiritual condition at the beginning of Genesis Chapter 16?**
- 2. At this time in her life, what do you see as her motivating behavior?**
- 3. What does her solution to her problem reveal about her relations with the Lord?**
- 4. What does Gen. 16:5 teach you about Sarai and how would you describe her behavior?**
- 5. How do you see the person of Hagar and the presence of God in her life?**
- 6. What does the obedience of Hagar to God's command reveal about obedience to God?**
- 7. How do you understand now the meaning of the Lord's words "walk in my presence"?**
- 8. How would walking in the Lord presence effect the everyday living of your life?**
- 9. What does Gen. 17:5-6 teach you about Sarah and God's presence in her life?**
- 10. How would you describe the personal covenant between God and Abraham?**
- 11. How do you see the importance of the ritual of circumcision in the life of a man?**
- 12. What do you see as the symbolic significance in his life and his relations with God?**
- 13. What do you learn about the character of Abram in Gen. 17:5-6 and the importance of hospitality?**
- 14. How do you understand in the concept of 'angels' and in keeping with this understanding have you entertained any?**
- 15. What does the encounter of Abraham with the Lord over the Sodom episode teach you about human/divine relations?**

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

### JUDGMENT AND JUSTICE

In the life of Noah we possess a sketchy portrait of a man who walks with God along a perfect path. In Abraham we have a painting in process, an intimately personal one, but even in an unfinished state we know that unquestionable obedience to God lies at the heart of this man's soul.

We come to the other end of the spectrum in Chapter Nineteen, with the people and their society who have abandoned God, and their God who is about to ratify the permanence of their separation from Himself.

Our author makes us witness a living scene in which the society as a whole has committed itself to black deeds that indicate a very high level of moral corruption in the society: the gang rape of two men who have come into Sodom as strangers. They are the guests of Lot, a local citizen. This episode indicates the sexual perversion that has infiltrated and corrupted the society of Sodom and Gomorrah, and has come to be the reason for its complete destruction.

The Scriptures are unanimous that Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed because of the ingrained wickedness of these cities. Tradition varies on the nature of their wickedness. According to the prevailing Jewish opinion of today, the sin of Sodom was a sexual perversion now called "sodomy." Others believe that a more general corruption of the society resulted in the destruction, with sexual perversion as a corollary to it.

The Prophet Isaiah suggested that the lack of social justice among the people brought destruction. Isaiah writes, *"Make justice your aim, redress the wrong, hear the orphans' plea, defend the widow, come now set things right: You will become like Sodom and Gomorrah" (Is 1:9b,17-18).*

The Prophet Ezekiel pinpoints disregard of the poor: He levels these accusations at his people: *"As I live, says the Lord God, I swear that your sister Sodom, with her daughters, has not done as you and your daughters have done. And look at the guilt of your sister Sodom: she and her daughters were proud, sated with food, complacent in their prosperity, and they gave no help to the poor and the needy. Rather, they became haughty and committed abominable crimes in my presence; then, as you have seen, I removed them" (Ez 16:48-50)*

The Prophet Jeremiah attributed the destruction of the cities to their general immorality. Speaking of the prophets and their people, Jeremiah puts these words in the mouth of the Lord, *"Among the Jewish prophets I saw deeds still more shocking: adultery, living in lies, siding with the wicked, so that no one turns from evil; to me they are like Sodom, its citizens*

*like Gomorrah...For from Jerusalem's prophets ungodliness has gone forth into the whole land" (Jer 23:14, 15b).*

It is Saint Paul who seeks to put his finger upon the root cause of all evil: "They exchanged the truth of God for a lie and revered and worshipped the creature rather than the creator, who is blessed forever. Amen. Therefore, God handed them over to degrading passions...And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God handed them over to their undiscerning mind to do what is improper" (Rom 1:24-26,28).

Whether Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed for sexual immorality, or social injustice, or disregard for the poor, or general immorality Paul maintains the root cause is ungodliness.

St. Paul maintains that the bad fruit on the tree has a root cause as its origin: the failure to know, love and honor God. If one sincerely desires good fruit on the tree, the rational approach is to be first concerned about the roots. There is a lot of stoning the bad fruit on the tree, but very little is done about the root cause for it. Would it not be more rational and honest to be genuinely concerned first about a person's relationship with God before judging their moral failings? Isn't the Christian approach love and compassion for the sinner, praying for their spiritual needs, and binding up their wounds as far as possible?

If you claim the name "Christian," yet you are picking up stones, recall the words of your Lord, "*Let the one without sin, throw the first stone,*" and "*the measure you measure out to others, you will be measured by.*" Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate. You may not be able to do a lot of good for others but you will certainly do a lot of good for your own soul.

Between Abraham--the man who walked with God, and the lawless people of Sodom, we have Abraham's nephew Lot. You do not pick your relatives, they have been chosen for you. You can pick your friends, you can choose better friends than you have relatives. I know some people who have done so with no regrets. Speaking of Lot, it is now his story.

*"The two angels reached Sodom in the evening, as Lot was sitting at the gate of Sodom. In the custom of his family, Lot approached the two young men with profound humility, bowed his face to the ground, and offered the hospitality of his home. 'Please, my lords, turn aside to your servants' house to spend the night, and bathe your feet, then you may be on your way early'" (Gen 19:2).* Though Lot made the customary offer of hospitality, it could have been charity with a hook. Here stood two strong beautiful men, and Lot had two unmarried daughters in the house.

There was serious business at hand, time was running out, and it is countdown to sunrise. The men replied, "*No, we will spend the night in the square.*" Lot persisted, and they accepted the offer and entered his house. The text kindly says, "*He prepared a feast for them, baking cakes without leaven, and they dined.*" He may be a nephew, but this is no Abraham; we are sure of that.

They were hardly settled in for the night when evil came to the door with a surprising welcome for the strangers. The whole town was at the door as we read, *“All the people in town: the men of Sodom, young and old, gathered around the house (Gen 19:4). ”*

We read earlier, when the Lord was discussing the trip to Sodom, he had said, *“I will go down to see if they have all acted altogether according the outcry that his reached Me; if not, I will take note” (Gen 18:21).* The point has been made: They have all acted altogether and sealed their fate.

A party has been planned that night in Sodom: Lot's guests would be the center of attention. *“The townsmen shouted, ‘Where are the men that came to you tonight. Bring them out to us, that we may be intimate with them.’”* The text leaves no doubt that their intention was to sexually assault these men. Lot goes out to meet them, closing the door behind him. He makes a terrible offer: he will send out his two virgin daughters to do with as they wished, but they cannot touch the two men guests in his home. It is unthinkable effrontery to the sacredness of hospitality, he cannot permit it (see Gen 19:8).

Let us recall that Lot is bargaining with these men, and the custom of the time was first to make an extraordinary offer that both parties realized was a formality and would not be honored; it opened the door for a more realistic offer. We can presume Lot had no intention of sending his daughters out to those people. Their reaction of forceful violence to his offer ended the discussion and initiated angelic intervention.

The citizens of Sodom flatly refused the offer and turned on Lot: *“This fellow came here as an alien, and already he acts the ruler! We will now deal worse with you than them” (Gen 19:9).* They pressed hard against the body of Lot intending to break down the door. The men inside reach out and pull Lot into the house with them and shut the door. Those at the entrance of the door, young and old, were struck with a blinding light that completely immobilized them, as if they had been hit by a powerful ray gun. The Hebrew word *sanwerim* implies a “blinding light,” an emanation of a powerful form of energy. What can we say about angelic powers? These two have already implied they have the power to destroy Sodom. (See Gen 19:9-11).

The time has come to get this stage cleared in preparation for the epic about to unfold. The angelic guest asked Lot, *“Whom else do you have here? Sons-in-law and your daughters, or anyone else you have in the city—take them away from it! For we are about to destroy this city...” (Gen 19:12-14).* We are talking about the less than ten group.

Panic time for Lot. You don't possess anything, it possesses you. Lot is a man with an acquiring will: too many irons in the fire, too many interests with no priorities to direct his distracted mind, too many scattered desires have weakened the will too greatly to make priority decisions. You cannot take it all, and a scattered heart that cannot sacrifice anything, loses everything. Lot is not a man whose word is to be taken seriously, and his son-in-law does not do so. In his mind the old man is a joke. We read in the text, *“So Lot went out and spoke to his sons-in-law, who had contracted marriage with his daughters. He said, ‘Up, get out of this place, for the Lord is about to destroy the city’”(19:14).* Recall

that this is in the middle of the night. With Lot's busting into the house at this hour with news the city is about to be destroyed, the sons-in-law conclude that the old man has had a bad nightmare. They all go back to bed thinking that whatever it is, they will deal with it in the morning.

Dawn is breaking and Lot's weakness, uncertainty, and self-interest is about to do him and the rest of his family in. If Abraham's nephew is to be saved, God must have a direct hand in it. Lot's guest urges him, "*Up, take your wife and your two remaining daughters, lest you be swept away because of the iniquity of the city.*" Still he delayed."

As the sun is about to rise, the only thing the men can do is seize his hand and the hands of his wife and two daughters and drag them out of town with their heel marks all long the street. Once outside of the city, they were told, "*Flee for your life! Do not look behind you, nor stop anywhere in the Plain. Flee to the hills, lest you be swept away.*" This man, Lot, tries the patience of angels with his self concerns. "*Oh no, my Lord!*" replied Lot. "*You have been so gracious to your servant, and have already shown me so much kindness in order to save my life, but I cannot flee to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me and I die. Look, that town there is near enough to flee to; it such a little place! Let me flee there--it is such a little place--and let my life be saved.*"

Lot is a man that is said to have never played with a full deck in his life. His one concern is self-survival on his own terms, not God's. I'm reminded of a Mother Superior who wanted what she wanted, and God let her have it. Years later in bitter remorse she moaned, "I wanted it so, and I have it so!"

Where did the men direct Lot to go? To the hills in the direction of Canaan, a two-day walk would take them back with Abraham. That was not the direction Lot's life had taken, and it was not a direction he would take now. He had chosen Sodom. He had to be dragged out of it, but he left his heart behind. And how does it all end for Lot and family? Interestingly!

Lot's wife didn't make it off the plains; she became a permanent monument there. She had been commanded not to look back at the destruction of the city, but Lot's wife had always been a woman who rushes in where angels fear to tread. "One more time won't hurt," she thought. Lot's wife stops, turns, and takes it all in and is, indeed, taken up with it all. Talk about curiosity killing the cat! (See Gen 19:15-26.)

The destruction of Sodom was catastrophic on the level of the volcanic destruction of Pompeii. Seemingly, it had its center in a vast earthquake in an area of numerous bitumen caverns that emitted poisonous gases. The enkindling of sulfurous fires triggered continuous explosions, emitting dark clouds filled with toxic materials that quickly embraced the entire plains, resulting in the annihilating the cities, their inhabitants and all surrounding vegetation. We read, "*God was mindful of Abraham and moved Lot from the midst of the upheaval*" (Gen 19:29).

*"Early the next morning Abraham hurried to the place where he had stood before the Lord. Looking down toward Sodom and Gomorrah and all the land of the Plain, he saw the smoke*



*rising like the smoke of a kiln.*” What he could not see was that same smoke, encasing the body of Lot's wife in a saline material, which, when hardened, left her a statue of salt.

When Lot and his daughter arrived in Zoar, he was afraid to settle there, and went up into the hills where he did want to go in the first place, and there he found a cave wherein the three could now live.

Living alone with their father up in their cave, the daughters of Lot knew their little world had come to an end; they were not certain that the world itself had not ended. The older daughter concluded that since all prospects of marriage were now denied them, the only way the two were ever to have children was going to be through their old father. The moral principle that the end does not justify the means never entered their minds.

The older girl explained it to her sister this way, *“Our father is old, and there is not a man on earth to unite with us in the way of all the world. Come, let us make our father drink wine, and let us lie with him, that we may maintain life through him. That night they made their father drink wine, and the older one went in and lay with her father; he did not know when she lay down and when she got up”* (Gen 19:31-33). The following night they did the same and the younger one went into her father.

*“Thus the two daughters of Lot came to be with child. The older one bore a son and named him Moab... He is the father of the Moabites today. And the younger sister bore a son, and she called him Ben-ammi... He is the father of the Ammonites of today”* (Gen 19:36-38).

In this extraordinary episode, our author has given us the origin of two nations--Moabites and Ammonites--related through mutual ancestors to the Hebrews, but a people often opposed to the welfare of the Hebrew People. The Hebrews had the habit of attributing to such people a disgraceful origin, which explains their inferiority when compared to a people of such pure and noble origin as the Hebrews. In this case we see its indication in the very names given to them: the name Moab in Hebrew *Meagbi* means “from my father,” and the Hebrew name *Ben-ammi* translated as “Ammonites” means “son of my kin.”

Our lives are affected by the willful decisions we make. Our bad choices cause unpleasant situations in our lives, creating consequences we have to live with. If we return to the root of our problem, we can find the bad choice we made. Bad choices are another story in themselves.

Here and now, we have to live with them. An essential corollary of our choices is that they are effecting the person we are; we become the product of the willful choices we made, they become threads woven into self tapestry we daily weave. We can come to an unhappy point in life, and we may say, “How did this happen to me? How could God let this happen? Where is God in all this? Why doesn't God do something? What am I to do now in this mess?” All great questions-- can we answer them?

When we said goodbye to Lot at the end of Chapter 19, where did we leave him? Living in a hill cave overlooking the Dead Sea. He lives with his two daughters pregnant with his

children, his wife is dead, all his worldly possessions lost. There we left him. What is his future? He becomes, through his daughters and the sons they bear, the father of two groups of people his own family despises.

Since Chapter Eleven we have become standbys, watching his life unfold. Or perhaps we can see ourselves sitting in an audience, watching his life unfold on stage before our very eyes.

In the opening scene, Lot is an orphan, but not a lonely one. He lives within the heart of his grandfather Terah's Clan with his two sisters, his two uncles Abram and Nabor, who has married his sister, and his Aunt Sarai, married to Uncle Abram.

When Abram receives the command from God to leave his father's house and go to Canaan with Sarai, Lot goes with them. We could imagine Lot going into a strange world, holding the hands of both Abram and Sarai, knowing they would love and care for him as their very own. In reality, he is a young man excitedly entering into a new adventure of life, with lots of protection on both sides. Lot possesses considerable wealth of his own as his inheritance from his father and grandfather. At this point he is part of their family by his choice.

As the story unfolds, Abram builds altars in the land of Canaan and offers sacrifice to the Lord. God blesses Canaan and confirms that this land He will give to Abram. He encourages Abram to walk all around it as his future inheritance. The family makes a necessary excursion into Egypt, and Lot with them--a wide eyed young man who cannot believe what he sees.

After a very eventful business trip to Egypt, their clan returns to Canaan and a family problem arises. Wealth at that time was largely in livestock, and the livestock of Abram and Lot had increased, so much so that the land could no longer support the entire herd. This made it necessary for Lot and Abram to separate their animals and find new places to settle. Abram's desire for Lot was to remain in Canaan; Lot could choose to go north or south in Canaan and Abram would go in the opposite direction.

Lot makes the decision to make a complete break: he looks to the East, and it looks like Egypt to him. He leaves the rural environment of Canaan for the Jordan Plains, and the more glamorous life offered there. *"Abram stayed in the land of Canaan, while Lot settled among the cities of the Plain"* (Gen13:12).

The next scene finds Lot tented out near Sodom, a city of questionable character. He has a wife and family. Did his wife come from Sodom? Perhaps.

Sodom and the neighboring city of Gomorrah became engaged in a war with rival kings from the northeast, with disastrous results for Sodom. The city is completely sacked, and Lot and family are carried off into captivity, and perhaps slavery.

Uncle Abram hears the bad news concerning Lot and his family. He immediately amasses a small army and, with the grace of God, successfully rescues Lot and family. Abram restores Lot's life and puts it back into his hands. He is free to return to Canaan, but his choice is to go back to Sodom, which is morally a very destructive and corruptive environment. Sodom becomes his home, and two of his daughters marry local men. Life for Abram and life for Lot is as far apart as it gets. We know God is in Abram's life. Where is God in Lot's life?

Through Abraham's intercession with God, Lot and his family are rescued from the destruction of Sodom. Addicted to their lives there, they leave reluctantly, dragged out by the hands of angels. They are advised by the angels to go in the direction of Canaan, a two day march to the tent of

Abraham. Lot's choice is to remain as close as possible to his old life. It is an impossible choice. It's ended, it's over and dead.

If we will ourselves to be part of an evil environment, we must know it will affect us badly, and we have willed its effects. What will be the effects of living in an environment under a curse of God? Who is responsible for the evil that may fall upon us?

Some years ago while working in Puerto Rico, I was swimming in the early evening on the western side of the Island, around Hato Rey, in what was recognized shark infested waters. Knowing this was around the sharks' feeding time, I became a bit nervous. I prayed, "Lord you made the shark and you made me, you are not going to feed me to him, are You?" A little voice whispered in my ear, "I did not put you on his menu. You did!" It was a soft message, but I heard it loud and clear.

Did God will the situation of Lot and his daughters in their cave? No! Lot willed it. Where is God? If God is to be with Lot, he will have to be in the situation Lot willed and created-- Lot's little world.

Abraham never abandoned his nephew any more than God has. They have concern and compassion for him, but their love can only do what the loved one wills. Where is God, where are his angels, where is Abraham?

We are at the closing scene of the drama. In the wings stand God, his angels, and Abraham before the closed door of the cave. Will they enter the cave? On stage sits Lot and his two pregnant daughters. The key to the door of the cave is in his hand. The curtain comes down.

His future is in a cave with his two remaining daughters. He willed it every step of the way. And he has had it so--his way.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### DREAMING--A DIVINE DOOR

In the Introduction to Genesis, we pointed out that the text we have of Genesis is a compilation of the existing manuscripts. Close study of the material indicates the work of different scribes. Apparently, the same subject matter appeared but in different format and word usage. Rather than discriminate against the differences, they were accepted into the text as authentic. These differences, rather than subtracting from other material, often provide a different and deeper insight to the passages concerned.

There appears a primary example of this in Chapter 12 and Chapter 20. The two texts deal with the same subject matter, even particular details, but in different settings.

In both chapters the story begins in same way: Abram is traveling with his wife in southern Canaan in the desert region of Negeb. In Chapter 12, Abram turns southwest and enters into Egypt; in Chapter 20, he turns southeast and enters into Philistine territory, where Abimelech is King of Gerar. Both in Egypt and Gerar, Abram fears for his life because he travels with his beautiful wife. In Chapter 12, Abram says to Sarai, *"If the Egyptians see how beautiful you are, they'll kill me on account of my wife;"* in Chapter 20, he says, *"There just isn't the fear of God in the place and they will kill me on account of my wife."* In 12, he tells Sarai, *"Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you;"* in 20, Abraham says to Sarah, *"This will be your kindness that you'll do for me, say about me, 'He's my brother.'"* In Egypt Pharaoh's officers saw her, praised her beauty to Pharaoh, and she was taken into his harem; in Gerar we hear that when King Abimelech hears Abraham say, *"She is my sister,"* he sent and took Sarah. Both in Egypt and Gerar, Sarah's presence in the harem brings a curse upon the whole place. A big plague came upon the houses of both Pharaoh and Gerar. *"God had tightly closed every womb in Abimelech's household on account of Abraham's wife, Sarah."* We read that Abimelech has a dream in which God said to him, *"you are about to die because of the woman you have taken, for she has a husband."* Abimelech summoned Abraham and said, *"How could you do this to us?"*

In Egypt we don't know by what means Pharaoh came to the truth of the matter, but upon doing so he called Abram and said, *"What is this you have done to me? Why didn't you tell me that she is your wife? Why did you say, 'she is my sister?'"*

Here Abram says nothing in his defense. However, in Gerar he defends himself with *"she in truth is my sister, but only my father's daughter, not my mother's, so she became my wife. I asked her: 'In whatever place we come to, say that I am your brother.'"* In Gerar, the King had been warned, *"If you do not return her, you can be sure that you and all that is yours will certainly die."*

Pharaoh in Egypt needed no warning; he had enough already. He said to Abram, *“Here is your wife. Take her and go!”* Abram left Egypt *“with flocks and herds, male and female slaves, male and female asses, and camels as gifts from the Pharaoh.”* In Gerar, King Abimelech *“took flocks and herds, and male and female slaves, and gave them Abraham; he said to Sarah, ‘See I have given you brother a thousand shekels of silver. Let that serve as a vindication before all who are with you; your honor has been preserved with everyone.’”*

As we see, there are many similarities between the material in Chapter 12 and Chapter 20. Any substantial difference comes in the narrative within Chapter 20.

In Chapter 20, Sarah’s abduction and its consequences is at the heart of the problem, but it is kept a to minimum in this narration. Abraham, King Abimelech, and the Philistinian People, his subjects, move to center stage. The back-drop for the scene has been well put in place: Abraham sees himself as a man whom God has uprooted from his family and sent him forth into a strange and dangerous world with his beautiful wife Sarah. Abraham makes a secret pact for their own personal safety, *“Let this be the kindness you shall do me: whatever place we come to, say there of me, ‘He is my brother.’”*

Abraham and his beautiful wife arrive in Gerar, and Abraham puts the word around, *“She is my sister.”* Upon hearing this news, King Abimelech has Sarah brought to him. It was the way of kings then; they didn't ask, they took, and sometime later they expressed their thanks for “your gift” to them.

The scene opens in the bedroom of the king who is sound asleep. A dream begins. It is a dream as never before: he is in court, and he is the accused and God is the Judge. God says to the king, *“you are going to die.”* It seems like the Court of the Queen of Hearts in Alice In Wonderland, who began her court with “sentence first, then evidence!” The Lord continues, *“You have brought another man's wife into your house.”* The words fill his soul with dread; he feels suddenly like a man led into a trap that has now been sprung--making him a helpless victim. He calls out in anguish, *“Lord I'm innocent! He himself said to me, ‘She is my sister!’ And she also said, ‘He's my brother.’ Lord, I am blameless in this matter. What I did, I did with a good conscience. And Lord, I haven't laid a hand on her. Do you slay people even though they are innocent?”*

What is being focused on here is the crime committed, not the reason for the crime. An evil act has occurred, and the prospect of a greater one has been made possible. An evil act done has a life of its own, regardless of the reason behind it. If I put arsenic in the coffee of a person, thinking it's sugar, my action caused a great evil--the death of the person who drinks the coffee. To say, “I didn't mean to do it” doesn't change the evil outcome. I am not a murderer, but I am a killer. In the modern courts it is called “involuntary manslaughter.” Accidents cause serious and deadly injuries--damage is done, and justice demands restitution, regardless of the intention of the perpetrator of the deed.

In the Covenant God made with Noah we heard, *“Whosoever sheds the blood of man, by men shall his blood be shed” (Gen 9:6).* In many ancient tribes, if a member of one family is killed by a member of another family, one of the members of that family must be killed in

reparation. The reason why it was done does not change the fact it was done. "I'm sorry!" doesn't go too far in such cases.

The dream continues: the Lord responds to the king's defense. He acknowledges the king's moral innocence in the matter, but insists upon restitution and punishment. *"I knew you did this with a blameless heart."* No accused could hear anything better from the Lord. The Lord distinguished between the act done and the motive. They are related, yet distinct, as are reparation and forgiveness.

We see from what follows that a person's good intention does leave the situation open to God's presence. God intervened in this situation, and kept the king from a more serious crime. The Lord adds, *"And so I kept you from sinning against Me."* If the king had had sexual relations with Sarah, as a married woman, he would have committed an act of adultery. God forbids this as evil, and when the perpetrator of the act rejects the will of God, the text implies that it personally offends God. The text certainly strengthens Jesus' teaching on divorce and remarriage as adultery.

As the dream continues, the Lord says, *"Therefore, restore the man's wife--since he is a prophet, he will intercede for you, to save your life. If you fail to restore her, know that the sentence against you will be executed: you shall die, you and all that are yours."* With this the dream ends (once again we have a text confirming that sins of an individual often affect negatively their environment).

The depth of King Abimelech's spirituality is evident. Awakened, he knows with certitude the truth revealed in his dream. He calls the men in his household and reveals the entire matter to them, *"He told them all that had happen and the men were greatly frightened."*

Now the king calls his court into session and the accused is brought before him. The king says to Abraham, *"What have you done to us? What wrong have I done to you that you should bring so great a guilt (sin of adultery) upon me and my kingdom? You have done to me what ought not to be done."* The king decries the injustice done to him and his people by Abraham's deed.

The king puts the question directly to Abraham, enabling him to defend himself: *"What then was your purpose of doing this thing?"* Abraham responded, *"I felt sure that there was no fear of God in this place and they will kill me because of my wife. Besides, she is in truth my sister, but only my father's daughter, not that of my mother's; and so she became my wife."*

King Abimelech accepts Abraham's exclamation and seeks on his part to make restitution to him and Sarah. *"The king took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abram...And to Sarah he said, 'I herewith give your brother a thousand pieces of silver; this will see you as vindication before all who are with you, and you are cleared before everyone'"* (See Gen 1-16)

In the Egyptian scene, Pharaoh commanded Abraham and his wife to leave Egypt. The generosity of King Abimelech stands in opposition to the Egyptian Pharaoh. The king says to Abraham, *“Here is my land before you; settle wherever you please”* (Gen 20:15).

In this particular case, Abimelech has a blessing--the *“offended”* man is a prophet, a friend of God, and he possesses a God-given power of prayer to remove mountains. Abraham will intercede for Abimelech and he will live. The curse that has affected the women of his court will be abrogated and all its victims will be healed. *“Abraham then prayed to God, and God healed Abimelech and his wife and his slave girls, so that they bore children; for the Lord had closed fast every womb of the household of Abimelech because of Sarah, the wife of Abraham”* (Gen 20:18).

Abraham becomes the first person in the Hebrew Scriptures to be called a prophet. God describes him a man with the power to intercede on behalf of other people. The first work of a prophet is to pray to God for others and, God confirms, the power of the prophet's prayer can bring life and healing into the life of sinners and the afflicted. A prophet is a man who walks in the Presence of God and is God's ready instrument to express the compassion of God in the lives of His people. Recall, it is God who establishes these human instruments as his channel; we are wise not to ignore such godly instruments. In addition, *“God resists the prayers of the proud!”*

Let us now share a few thoughts on the subject of dreams. God desired to communicate with King Abimelech, and does so through a dream. Scriptures see this as a general way God communicates with a human person. However, God did not do so with Abraham. On one occasion he communicated with him in a vision, but that occasion was one of deep mystical experience.

Not many of us live in the presence of God or, as the Scriptures say, *“walk in his presence”* as did Noah and Abraham. Abraham was open to the presence of God, and God spoke to him in various ways, as we do ourselves with people we live in close connection with.

Generally speaking, we are so open and present to the environment around us--the constant stimuli of our day-to-day world--our conscious mind is constantly being activated. Mind and thought have been compared to the beach and its ocean waves. The mind is the beach, the waves are our thoughts; when one wave breaks upon the shore, another wave is in the making and quickly follows. The shore is never completely at rest. That is the way of the mind and thought. We need to create some empty space so that higher thoughts can find an entrance.

It is not that God is too busy to communicate with us, it we who are so busy interacting with the world around us that we never leave a channel open for God's communication.

The dream is about the only means open to God to communicate some important matter to us. In sleep the senses are generally shut down and mental activity is at a minimum. Dreams enter at this time; it the normal time for the other dimensions to communicate with us. It is a natural means open to God, and God uses it. God prefers natural means and only

resorts to extraordinary means out of necessity. Extraordinary means seem to cause unnecessary problems for the visionary. We have all heard of false visions proceeding from a heat oppressed brain.

For the most part, dreams of the night, like morning mist on a lake, quickly dissipate with the light of the sun. And so the dreams remaining in an awakened mind quickly fade from conscious awareness. This is not the way of what I would call a “God-dream,” in which the Lord communicates an important message in a dream. The “God-dream” leaves no ambiguity as to its meaning. That doesn't seem to be so in cases of divine locution, such as “Rebuild my Church!” as St. Francis heard. Those seem to come with many levels of understanding, which unfold with the passing of time.

As an example I will share with you a “God-dream” of my own, which occurred many years ago. These dreams do not dissipate in time, but engrave themselves in the memory of the mind.

The dream occurred at a time when I was Guidance Director for a large high school and, simultaneously, counselor for the county juvenile hall. It was the time of the beginning of the Charismatic Renewal movement on the west coast. That evening the discussion centered on the Second Coming of Jesus Christ and, in particular, on a quotation from the Gospel of Matthew that says,

*When that day comes many will plead with me “Lord! Lord! Have we not prophesied in your name, have we not exorcised demons by its power. Did we not do many miracles in your name?” Then I will declare to them solemnly, “I never knew you. Out of my sight your evil doers” (Mt 7:22).*

In the dream, I was in a dimly lit room with two ladies. One of the ladies said to her friend, pointing to slab-like table over against the wall upon which a body was lying, “That is Jesus Christ and he going to rise from the dead.” I looked over at body and it was obviously a dead man lying there. Suddenly I saw the eyelid of the man begin to move, and so did his hand. I said to myself, “He is coming alive.” The man arose from the table and stood in front of it. He looked about fifty-four years of age, very much like a man I had known some years before in Puerto Rico, named Osorio.

Osorio was part Indian, Spanish, and negro, a beautiful combination, but in Osorio it had not blended well. He was not a good looking man. To myself I said, “This cannot be Jesus Christ. Jesus is beautiful.” Then I looked at his hands and feet to see if there were any scars. I saw scars like I had seen on other human bodies. I knew it was the Lord, and it didn't matter at all that He looked like Osorio. I was delighted to be in His presence. He then turned to the one woman and said to her, “Your friend here is a very good friend of mine. If you become like her, you too will become a good friend of mine.” I was thinking then, “What is He going to say to me? I've been working for Him all these years,” He looked right at me and He did not see me. I knew I did not even exist for Him, and I experienced that I was damned.



The horror of it woke me up completely. Then I heard these words, “You have seen me in the young and beautiful of this world, but you have ignored me in the lowest common denominator of mankind.” Then I knew the meaning of “I don't know you!” He never had the opportunity to do so because I had ignored His presence.

That dream, as I said, was many years ago; it is like it was yesterday. I've always realized it was one of the greatest spiritual experiences of my life, and one of the most painful. But only too true!

## DREAMING—A DIVINE DOOR

### CHAPTERS 19, 20

#### STUDY QUESTIONS (Please read Chapters 19-20)

1. What does the example of Sodom and Gomorrah tell us about the effects of living in a society ingrained in wickedness?
2. Through the eyes of the Jewish Prophets, what do you see to be the root cause of their wickedness?
3. What do you understand by the saying “To get rid of evil fruit on the trees you must deal with the root of the tree”?
4. How would you apply this to your own life and to the society in which you presently live?
5. How do you understand Jesus' teaching: “Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate”?
6. What does this chapter teach us about the word of angelic beings in this present world?
7. What do you learn about human nature in general from the example of Lot?
8. How do you understand, “Willed decisions form the person you are?”
9. The lives of Abraham and Lot have ran parallel in Genesis. What does it teach you about living your life?
10. What does Abraham’s dealing with Lot teach you about dealing with people in your life (especially relatives)?
11. What does the teaching of Jesus about throwing the first stone teach you about dealing with the weaknesses in others?
12. Why would you say that God uses dreams in the lives of people?
13. What do these episodes in Genesis reveal about God's attitude toward adultery?
14. What do you see as the effects of Abraham's moral irresponsibility in relation to Pharaoh and Abimeleck?
15. Who do you see has the responsibility to exercise judgment of others in our society?
16. What does Ps. 78:3-7 teach you about the importance of witnessing to the Scriptures to others in you life?
17. As Christians, why do we accept Moses as the original author of Genesis?
18. Do you see a relationship between Genesis and the Hebrew Scriptures, especially in Exodus?
20. What do you see as the importance of the Sacred Scriptures in our world today?
21. What do you understand by these three different means of interpreting the Scripture: the literal, the moral, and the allegorical methods?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### GOD'S LAUGHTER—ISSAC

There is a saying in the Scriptures, *“There is a time to laugh and a time to cry!”* Chapter Twenty-One in Genesis gives the opportunity to do both. When Abraham heard when he was ninety-nine years old that his old wife would bear him a son, he laughed at the ridiculousness of the whole idea. When Sarah heard that in another year, she would become the mother of Abraham's son, she had laughed at the thought of having a son by that old man. Well now, the year has come and gone, and the laugh is on them. God has the last laugh and it's a good one, called “Isaac.”

Laughter can express scorn and ridicule, but it is a sad and hopeless sound—it has no soul. When laughter expresses the joy and excitement of the human heart, becoming “running laughter” as the poet put it, you hear the soul of laughter—expressing joy too great to be quiet. The true essence of laughter is joy. Sick laughter is sad laughter, and it is a travesty—it is salt without its savor. The name “Isaac” comes from the Hebrew, *yishaq'el*, meaning, “May God laugh in delight!” It can be watered down to a smile—“May God smile upon you.” What do you think it would mean if it meant, “God winked at you?” I think it would mean that we have a good secret between the two of us.

The son of Sarah and Abraham is called “Isaac;” he is joy too great to hold in. He is the fall fruit of that promise *“This time next year Sarah will have a son.”* Of course, that is when she first laughed--the time she said, *“I didn't laugh!”* but the Lord said, *“You did laugh!”* So we will have to call it a laugh, not much of a laugh at that—a sad laugh, not worth naming.

Now let us read about real laughter. The long awaited moment has come: Abraham and Sarah have their son, but the birth of the child is not the highlight of the chapter. The focus of Chapter 21 is the faithfulness of God. The first sentence proclaims, *“The Lord took note of Sarah as he had promised, and the Lord did for Sarah as He had spoken” (Gen 21:1).* The Hebrew word *paquad* can be translated “visited,” “took notice,” or “is gracious;” it expresses the attentive care and concern of God—even down to the small details. The opening sentence calls our attention to God's faithfulness to his word and his attentiveness to its details.

The text continues,

*Sarah conceived and bore a son to Abraham in his old age, at the set time God had spoken. Abraham gave his newborn son, whom Sarah had bore him, the name of Isaac. [In the culture of the time, the father naming the child was confirmation of his fatherhood of the child.] And when the child was eight days old, Abraham circumcised him, as God had commanded. Now, Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac*

*was born to him. Sarah said, "God has brought me laughter; everyone who hears will laugh with me." And she added [almost as refrain to a song], "Who would have said to Abraham that Sarah would suckle children! Yet I have borne a son in his old age." The child grew up and was weaned, and Abraham held a great feast on the day that Isaac was weaned. (Gen 21:2-8)*

Three years have passed since the great day of joy, and the three years proclaim--Isaac has survived the threats of infant mortality and is now on his way to manhood.

A dark cloud comes over the feast day. It began with a small occurrence that could happen at any family celebration—an older brother teases a younger brother. A small spark ignites a smoldering fire, a fury that has been banked too long. *"Sarah saw the son whom Hagar the Egyptian had borne to Abraham, fooling around with her son Isaac"[as the Greek text reads] Gen. 21:9.* The word "fooling around" could connote either playing with Isaac or mocking him. The Hebrew word is a pun on the name Isaac. Whatever the boy did was not the cause of the firestorm it ignited. As it is said, "it opened a can of worms." Concerning the festive joy of the party—as one lady said, "The monkey is dead and the show is over." Sarah kills the monkey.

The episode brought to a boil the anxiety in Sarah's heart concerning her future and that of her son. It brought back all that past mess with Hagar and Abraham, and the fruit of it—Ishmael, who now stands there as first son of Abraham. He poses a real threat to her son's inheritance of the divine promises. Come hell or high water those two must go!

Sarah turns to Abraham, unable even to mention the name Hagar or Ishmael. She says, *"Cast out that slave-woman and her son, for no son of that slave-woman will share in the inheritance with my son Isaac."* It comes as a command and an ultimatum; she has probably already read Abraham's mind on this matter. What follows confirms she has read it right. *"The matter stressed Abraham greatly, as it concerned a son of his. "*

This time, it seems that Abraham takes the matter to prayer before he acts. Amidst all this fire and fury lies the will of God; Sarah turns out to be a prophetess. The Lord says to Abraham, *"Do not be stressed over your boy and your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued through you. As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a great nation of him, too, for he is your seed"* (Gen 21:12-13).

Victory does not soften the heart of Sarah: She wanted the two of them gone permanently. The Lord instructed Abraham to do what she says. It is with a very heavy heart that we now read, *"Early the next morning Abraham took some bread and a skin of water, and gave them to Hagar. He placed them over her shoulders, together with the child, and sent her away"* (Gen 21:14). The boy may have been sixteen, but in the eyes of his father, he is still his child.

And what is the "away" to which Abraham directs Hagar? Into the desert! How long does a little bread and one skin of water last two people in a waterless desert? A few days, more or less. Hagar and son head into a dark horizon.

Hagar and Ishmael have been sent out into the desert, through the courtesy of Sarah, with meager subsistence for survival. Hagar's son is no child; he is a sixteen-year-old boy, relatively physically tough, but he has lived as a little prince in his father's house. He is not psychologically prepared for his father's rejection and the environment he has suddenly been thrust into. Some psychological regression could be expected. Hagar, on the other hand, has had a tough life and she is a strong-willed woman. Their survival will depend largely on her, and divine assistance. They go forth with Abraham's prayers, which ensure blessings upon them.

We read, *“And she wandered about in the wilderness of Beersheba. [You wander about when there is no place to go and no direction to follow] When the water was gone from the skin, she left the child under a bush, and went and sat down at a distance of about a bowshot away; for she thought, ‘Let me not look on as the child dies.’”* Water meant life in the desert; there is no more water, and she had nothing more to give. *“As she sat opposite him he began to cry. God heard the cry of the boy, and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven: ‘What troubles you, Hagar? [You want a list?] Fear not, for God has heeded the cry of the boy in this plight of his. [The boy is well named—Ishmael means “God hears”] Come, lift up the boy and hold him by the hand, for I will make a great nation of him.’”* Hagar found strength in the angel's word—enough to begin again. Her vision cleared and she saw a well of water—a well of hope for both. *“She went and filled the skin with water, and let the boy drink.”*

Hagar, with her wild colt of a son, was filled with a renewed spirit for life, and with the grace not just to survive, but to flourish. We are left with the scene of a strong mother and young son, crossing the desert sand hand-in-hand. She is the mother of her son, he is the son of his mother, and she is the water of his life. When he is grown, she finds him an Egyptian wife, the symbol of his future life: together they go forth to fulfill their dreams.

Looking back at the root of this whole episode, we have human beings taking God's plan in their own hands and messing it up. Then what! The best thing to do is put the mess back in His hands. The Lord does write straight with crooked lines. He can even bring good out of the evil we have willed. The impossible, as someone said, is the possible with God.

In this life, peace is like a fragile plant blooming in the home or the office; Abraham's tranquility is confronted on both the home front and in his work in the world as well.

Abraham, being a man of both means and power, it is to the advantage of King Abimelech to be at peace with him as long as Abraham dwells on his land. Abimelech decides to enter into a mini-covenant with Abraham. *“About that time, Abimelech and Phicol, chief of his troops, said to Abraham, ‘God is with you in everything you do. Therefore swear to me here by God that you will not deal falsely with me or with my kith and kin, but will deal with me and the land in which you sojourned as loyally as I have dwelt with you.’ And Abraham said, ‘I swear it’”* (Gen 21:22-24).

The appearance of Abimelech with Phicol, chief of the troops, appears as if a bit of pressure is being put on Abraham. However, we discover that Abraham had dug a well of water, and the well had been seized by servants of Abimelech and was no longer available to Abraham's

family and flocks. Messing with a man's water in a desert region is like playing with cobras—somebody is going to get bitten. Some rattling of the swords in Abraham's tent may have had echoes in

the king's palace, which would explain his interest in making peace with Abraham.

As soon as the handshakes ended, Abraham brought up the subject of the well, Abimelech maintained he knew nothing about any well, and to his knowledge he didn't know Abraham had dug a well. It was put this way, *“I do not know who did this; you did not tell me, nor have I heard of it until to day” (Gen 21:26).*

On hearing this, Abraham took sheep and oxen and gave them to Abimelech to atone for not seeking the king's permission to build a well in his land; the king accepted the gift and the two of them made a pact. The business is not yet completed, however. Abraham took seven ewes from his flock and brought them before the king. At this Abimelech says, *“What means these seven ewes you have set apart?” He replied, ‘You are to accept these seven ewes from me as proof that I dug this well.’ The place came to be called Beer-sheba as the place they both swore an oath.”* And this was how business was done in Abraham's day. *“And Abraham resided in the land of the Philistines a long time” (Gen 21:34).*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

### THE SUPREME SACRIFICE

God created man in his Image and Likeness, and He subjected creation to man's dominion. He commanded man's subjection to the Divine Will, for upon this rested the proper order of creation. Man refused the subjection of his body and soul, his life, to the will of God. Chaos in creation resulted, with the loss of order, design, and beauty.

Restoration to order from chaos begins by man's acceptance of the Divine Will as the supreme will of his life. This acceptance permits the Will of God to be present through man's activities; it begins the restoration of order, design, and beauty through God's action on earth.

What God demands of man is faith and trust in the Word of God. God stands behind His Word. God does not demand the impossible from man, but He does ask him to accept His Will, even when it extends beyond his understanding. Who has known the mind of God, or who has been his counselor?

God's Word to Abraham, *"In your offspring you will possess this land and all peoples will be blessed through your descendants."* Isaac is the offspring; He is the fruit of God's Word, His promise, the delight in the heart of his father. Isaac is God's greatest expression of love to Abraham, since Isaac is the gift of Abraham's own life. Abraham is Isaac and Isaac is Abraham. In this Seed lies the fulfillment of the Word.

Abraham is over a hundred. His days are few, most now are spent, and what is left is not what it was at twenty years of age when life was filled with potential. Before him stands Isaac, his son, his life--In my son, my life begins again in all its power and beauty--my son and I are one, and in him I live forever.

Where does Abraham's life stand in relation to the Word of God? Is his life sufficient unto itself or is it a life under the will of God?

Chapter 22 opens like awakening from a restful night. You open your eyes upon a bright new day but, upon hearing your name called, suddenly you have been thrust into a living nightmare. On the episode unfolding in this chapter, an author observed, "This is perhaps the profoundest personal experience in all the recorded history of the patriarchs; and the telling of it soars to incomparable literary heights. The nightmare to follow embodies a boundless spiritual ordeal." (E. L. Speiser).

God called *"Abraham,"* and he answered, *"Here I am."* *"Take your son, your beloved one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of*

*the heights that I will point out to you” (Gen 22:1-3). The shocking words spoken vibrated through every pore of Abraham’s body. Nothing ever in his entire life prepared him to execute such a command.*

Moriah, as identified in 2Chron 3:1, is a mountain in Jerusalem upon which Solomon built the temple. From Beersheba it is in a forty-five mile straight line to Jerusalem—a three day journey.

A deep profound silence follows upon the divine requests; the only response is action. *“Early the next morning Abraham splits the wood for the burnt offering. He saddled his ass, and taking two servants and his son, he set out for the place where God had told him. On the third day Abraham looked up and saw the place from afar.”* No words have been spoken; there are no words to speak. It is beyond speech. Never has he been so totally alone. No one has ever walked in those sandals; no human person could sound the sorrow in his soul. “I am sorry,” is the most anyone could say.

Silence is broken. *“Abraham says to the servants, ‘You stay here with the ass. The boy and I will go up there; we will worship and we will return to you.’ Abraham took the wood for the offering and put it on his son Isaac. He himself took the firestone to enkindle the fire, and the knife for the sacrifice.”*

The three day journey to Moriah were dead days in a walking tomb; it bore the seal of death upon their lives. And the two of them walk on together up the long path to the mountain head. Abraham is all but a dead man. The boy breaks the silence: *“‘Father!’ And he answered, ‘Yes, my son.’ Isaac said, ‘Here are the firestones and the wood; but where is the sheep for the burnt offering?’ And Abraham said, ‘God himself will provide the sheep for the offering, my son.’ And the two of them walked on together.”* The boy had his answer and understood it. He, too, was dead.

They arrived at the place of which God had told him. Abraham moves slow and deliberately as in a dream: he builds an altar, prepares the wood, bound his son Isaac and he lays him on the altar on top of the wood. All that remained is the offering of the gift. The knife is raised and heaven stands breathless as the knife descends. The angel of the Lord shatters the stony silence, *“Abraham! Abraham! Do not raise your hand against the boy, or do anything to him.”* The full free will for the act is all that was required; Abraham had willed the death of his son, and his beloved son had been returned. Abraham had been tested by God. Now for the test results: *“NOW I KNOW YOU FEAR GOD, SINCE YOU DID NOT WITHHOLD YOUR SON, YOUR FAVORED ONE, FROM ME!”*

One total, absolute act of human love inaugurates the redemption of life on earth: One giant step back to Eden. Man's journey back home begins with Abraham—Friend of God—Our Man!

*“When Abraham looked up, his eyes fell upon a ram caught in the thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering in place of his son.”*

Abraham named the site *Adonai-yireh*—“On the mount of the Lord there is vision.” And following upon the sacrifice the Lord spoke, *“By Myself I swear, because you have done this*



*and have not withheld your son, your beloved one, I will bestow my blessing upon you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars of heaven and the sands of the seashore, and your descendants shall seize the gates of their foes. All the ends of the earth will bless themselves by your descendants, BECAUSE YOU HAVE OBEYED MY COMMAND!” (Gen 22:16-18).*

Abraham and Isaac returned to the servants and they all go home together with light and joyous hearts. The night has passed; a bright new day begins, unfolding before Isaac a blessed future.

What follows appears to be a non sequitur, but it is not. Rather, it is related to the future of this beloved son. Many years have passed since leaving Haran. News comes to Abraham that Nahor and Milcah have had children: Uz, Buz, Kemuel, Chesed, Hazo, Pildash, Jidlaph, and Bethuel; Bethuel has a daughter named Rebekah, and Kemuel a son named Aram; Nahor and Reumah, his concubine, also have four children: Tebah, Gaham, Tahash, and Maacah. Abraham has twelve living nephews in Haran. Among all those boys, Abraham muses, there must be a good wife for Isaac.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### THE LADY SARAH

Some time ago, a lady friend attended a politically prestigious cocktail party, when a southern gentleman from one of the aristocratic families of the county, having had one-too-many martinis, approached her. It has been long held in the Deep South that the best way to ensure your son will be an alcoholic is to name him after a Confederate General--we may have a case in hand. The gentleman addressed my friend with, "And, who are you?" She replied by identifying herself through her husband. He replied, "I know that, but who are *you*?" Without awaiting an answer, he wandered off in his alcoholic haze.

The truth being, her indentifying herself with her husband tells us nothing about her person: Who is she? We met Sarai the same way. Our author introduces Sarai to us as the wife of Abram. We heard nothing about her background; the one personal bit of information given to us is that Sarai is a barren woman. Motherhood, in that ancient world, raised a woman to her highest status; a barren woman was held to be out of favor with God.

From Abram, her husband, we first come to know something about this barren lady as they began their visit to Egypt. Abram says to her, "*I know what a beautiful woman you are. Please say that you are my sister, that it may go well with me because of you, and that I may remain alive thanks to you*" (Gen 20:13).

Abram later explained the situation to King Abimelek: "*When God made me a wanderer from my father's house, I said to her, 'Let this be the kindness you will be for me. In whatever place we come to say that I'm your brother'*" (Gen 20:13).

We came to know her as a beautiful woman with a character sufficiently strong to deal prudently with the men in her life: Abram, Pharaoh of Egypt, and King Abimelek. She possessed a well-ingrained beauty that led Pharaoh and kings to desire to adorn their harems with her. But she was a woman providentially protected and preserved from the adulterous desires of men by divine intervention. These blessings did not stop her from proclaiming, "*the Lord has kept me from bearing.*" Sarai is special. What greater compliment could a man give to his wife than to say he owes his very life to her?

It is in Abram's defense to King Abimelek that we learn of Sarai's family background. Abram says to the king, "*She is in truth my sister, my father's daughter, though not my mother's, and she became my wife*" (Gen 20:12). Perhaps it is best we did not hear this bit of news with our first introduction of Sarai—the following story could have got lost in that detail.

When it came to protecting the rights of her son and her future heritage, we see that Sarai has the strength of a tigress, with cold and ruthless determination. To Abram she demands, *“Cast out that slave woman and her son, for the son of that slave shall not share in the inheritance with my son. I will not have it so!”* (Gen 21:10). The Lord supports her decision, but not her harsh methods; he softens considerably her effects.

Perhaps it is the Lord who writes Sarai’s final epitaph, *“You shall not call her Sarai, but her name shall be Sarah. I will bless her, and I will give you a son by her...He shall give rise to nations, rulers of people shall issue from him”* (Gen 17:15-16). In the Lord's eyes, Sarah is a Princess.

Heaven does not measure us by the short defects of our character but by the long effects our lives have on others. And Princess Sarah would say to us, *“God brought me laughter and everyone should laugh with me”* (Gen 21:6).

We have been with Sarah on her desert sojourn since she and Abram left Haran with their nephew Lot. Much sand has blown across the desert since then; it has been sixty-two years of wandering in and out of deserts. Sarah reached the age of 127 years of age. Chapter Twenty-three opens with loud lamentations pouring forth from Abraham's heart, for today is the day of Princess Sarah's death and burial.

Sarah dies in the land of Canaan, in Kariath-arba, about 27 miles southwest of Jerusalem, a place known today as Hebron. It became the first seat of David's kingdom—a noble descendant of Sarah. For sixty-two years, Abraham and Sarah have lived in and wandered through Canaan. On the day of her death, Abram has no place in which to lay her head. It is not considered a blessing to die in an alien land, among those who have neither a tear nor a sigh at your departure from earthly life.

With heavy heart, Abram must turn immediately to the matter of his wife’s burial. At such a time, in that climate, the funeral followed on the day of death. For all their years in Canaan, for all the heavenly promises of their ownership of the land, they do not own one acre of land.

What if your wife or husband suddenly died in a strange land and immediate burial was demanded? You cannot image the heavy burden that would fall upon your shoulders--the people to be involved, the red tape to be dealt with, not to mention the money that would pass through hands. God deliver us from such an experience!

Not so many years ago there was a case involving an American couple and their aunt. While on vacation at a beach resort south of Tijuana, Mexico, their aunt suddenly became ill and died.

Panic time! What are they going to do? How can they deal with the Mexican authorities? It will be impossible! What if they are accused of a crime? Do not even think about it: it would be a horror story.

The border between Mexico and Southern California was only about thirty miles north. In the evening, they would attempt to cross the border with the body. They placed their aunt in

the back seat, piling blankets and linens over her as if they were returning from their vacation. They waited until early evening when the return traffic was heaviest, and they joined the slow process of crossing the border back into California. Finally, they successfully crossed the border with a great sigh of relief and gratitude to God.

As they had several hours ahead of them and had not eaten since the death of their aunt, they decided to stop at the Denny's restaurant. They pull in there to relax and eat. Upon returning to their car it was gone. It had been stolen and taken back into Mexico. Neither the car nor the body of their aunt was ever seen again.

As someone observed, their aunt was no doubt buried in Mexico without a lot of red tape

Getting back to our text: Abraham knew of a field with trees and a cave--an ideal place in which to bury Sarah. Ephron, son of Zoah, owned the property. Abraham is, as he referred to himself, a "resident alien," one not just passing through, but a resident who had lived in the area a considerable time and was known to the local people.

The people in the Near East at this time generally followed the Code of Hammurabi concerning economic and social concerns. The law prohibited aliens from buying property unless the "city council" approved the sale. The council was made up of men "who go out the gate," those men who went out the gate of the city to defend it in times of attack.

Fortunately, Abraham had a good reputation among the people. He was known among them as a *nasi*—translated as "an elect of God," "Prince of God" or "Mighty Prince." This was an honorary title given by the citizens to persons highly respected by them.

Abraham first addresses the leading Hittites, citizens who had come to share in his grief over the loss of his wife. We are told he arose from beside her body and addressed them, "*I am a resident alien among you, sell me a burial site among you, that I may remove my dead for burial.*" And the Hittites replied to Abraham, saying to him, "*Hear us my lord, you are an elect of God among us. Bury your dead in the choicest of our burial places. None of us would withhold our burial places from you for burying your dead.*" (Gen 23:5-3).

Abraham did not want a gift, he wanted to purchase land in his own right, and he responded to their kind offer. "*Bowing low before the people of the land, the Hittites, he appealed to them, 'If it is your wish that I remove my dead for burial, you must agree to intercede for me with Ephron, son of Zoah. Let him sell to me the cave of Machpelah that he owns, which is at the edge of his land. Let him sell it to me at its full price, for a burial site in your midst'*" (Gen. 23:7-9).

Ephron was present among the Hittite mourners, and he responded immediately. What follows is the unfolding of the extraordinary custom in which business deals unfolded. It begins with a most gracious and generous offer, which no one took, seriously; it establishes a friendly atmosphere among the parties concerned.

*“Ephron responds, in the hearing of the Hittites, all who enter the gate of his town, saying, ‘No, my lord, hear me: I give you the field and I give you the cave that is in it. I give it to you in the presence of my people. Bury your dead.’ Abraham bows low before the people of the land and spoke to Ephron in the hearing of the people of the land and said, ‘If only you would hear me out, let me pay the price for the land, accept it from me, that I might bury my dead there.’ Ephron replied to Abraham saying to him, ‘My lord, hear me out! A piece of land worth 400 shekels of silver—what is that between you and me, as long as you can bury your dead.’ [In other words, how could we let a little thing like a few shekels stand in the way of two friends such as ourselves?] Abraham accepted Ephron’s terms in the hearing of the Hittites—400 shekels of silver at the going merchants’ rate” (Gen 23:10-16).*

Seemingly, Ephron, with all his generous words and offerings, took advantage of Abraham’s present situation. It is considered an exorbitant price for the land at the time.

With the sale of the land successfully concluded to the satisfaction of all concerned we read,

*“So Ephron’s land in Machpelah, near Mamre—the field with its cave and all the trees anywhere within the confines of the field—passed to Abraham as his possession in the presence of the Hittites who sat on Ephron’s town council. And then Abraham buried his wife Sarah in the cave of the field of Machpelah, facing Mamre—now Hebron—in the land of Canaan. Thus the field with its cave passed from the Hittites to Abraham, as a burial site” (Gen 23:17-20).*

It is all technical language, but it makes a valid and permanent deal. Here, too, Abraham will be buried, in addition to Isaac and his wife, and Jacob and Leah. Centuries later, Abraham’s ancestors, the Hebrews, will claim the land of Canaan in his name and on the strength of the pact made with Ephron, son of Zoah, in the hearing of the Hittite peoples, and from the fact their ancestors are buried there.

## CHAPTERS 21-23

### THE LADY SARAH

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

(Please read Chapters 21, 22, 23)

1. What do you learn from Sarai's reaction to Hagar and Ishmael?
2. What do you learn from the behavior of Abraham and Sarah to Hagar and Ishmael?
3. How would you describe the character of Hagar?
4. What does the Lord's dealing with Hagar teach you about God's dealing with the sinful conditions in this world?
5. If you step out of the will of God and cause a mess in your life, what is the wisest course of action?
6. What do you understand as the means for bringing peace and order into your life?
7. What do you see as the importance of Isaac in the life of Abraham?
8. What do you learn about God in Gen. 22:1-3?
9. How do you understand this episode of the sacrifice of Isaac?
10. How would you estimate the spiritual effects of this episode in the lives of Abraham and Isaac?
11. How would you describe the person of Sarah as she appears in Genesis?
12. What do you see as the strengths and weaknesses in her life?
13. What do the words in Gen. 17:15-16 teach you about the Lord's attitude toward Sarah?
14. What does the example of Abraham, a man of God, dealing with the Canaanites for a burial site reveal about his character? What does this teach us in dealing with secular matters?
15. What symbolic importance does Abraham's purchase of a bit of land in Canaan for a burial plot have for his descendants?

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

### MARRIAGE OF ISAAC AND REBEKAH

Rabbi Jacob gives us a bit of a summary and brings us up to date:

The story of Abraham and Sarah is drawing to a close. Sarah has died, the promise of offspring has been fulfilled with the birth of Isaac. The purchase of the land at the site of Machpelah is seen as a pledge for the future of all of Canaan. What now remains is to be sure that Isaac does what is necessary to ensure the fulfillment of the promises. A wife must be provided for him, but not from Canaan for in the eyes of the author, the people of Canaan are under a curse because of their idolatry.

As we begin our study of Chapter 24, which is unique in several aspects, Rabbi Jacob reads to us the views of other commentators on the contents of this chapter: “This sophisticated and beautifully wrought narrative constitutes the longest chapter in Genesis. In certain important ways, it functions as Abraham's deathbed scene, recapitulating the promise that impelled him on his course.”

Another observes, “The present narrative provides a restful interlude between the story of Abraham's life, which is just coming to a close, and the history of Jacob that will unfold. Isaac, who can scarcely be described as a memorable personality in his own right, is important chiefly as a link in the patriarchal chain. Continuity is essential, but the vitality of the line will now depend on the woman who is to become Jacob's mother.”

At the death of Sarah, Abraham would have been around 137 years of age. However, we see in Chapter 25 that he was not yet ready for his entrance into the Cave of Machpelah. He had a life filled with blessings from the Lord; the Lord does not abandon those whose hearts remain faithful to Him.

Abraham's life is centered now on Isaac and his future. The time has now come “to obtain” a suitable wife for Isaac. The arrangement of such matters was in the hands of the father. Abraham is determined his son will marry within his family; taking a wife from among the Canaanites was unthinkable, for it would weaken the claims of his descendants to the land.

Abraham's decision involved returning to the land he left behind. His age at the time would make the journey difficult, but the real reason went deeper--he could not return to the land God had commanded him to leave. Nor would he permit Isaac to leave Canaan. Isaac must remain on the land. Abraham decided to send the head steward of his entire household and property as his ambassador, with full authority to act in his name. As his

name is not mentioned, the presumption is that the ambassador was other than Damask Eliezer.

Looking at the material ahead of us, I think it would be wise for us to go sit again in the audience and view the three-act play that follows. We will invite Rabbi Jacob to accompany us to share any commentary he may have concerning the material in the play.

When you go to a play of such length, and one particular person is on stage for the entire play, you may presume his importance in the play, even though he may not be the star. In this case, it is Abraham's head steward, and we need to see things as they unfold in his mind, because that will bring us into the heart of the drama. We entitle the drama "The Marriage of Isaac and Rebekah."

The first act opens in the household of Abraham in Kariath-arba (Hebron). Abraham is reclining on his couch, and he has called his steward and asked him to place his hand under Abraham's thigh in preparation for swearing an oath. Rabbi mentions that this is what he would call the Oath of Seed; it involves placing one's hand upon the genitals of the other, and swearing a promise to him that, if not kept, a curse of sterility would fall upon him and his descendents.

The opening words are Abraham's:

*Put your hand under my thigh and I will make you swear by the Lord, the God of heaven and the God of the earth, that you will not take a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites among whom I dwell, but that you will go to my own land and to my kindred to get a wife for my son Isaac. (Gen 24:2-4)*

Rabbi Jacob whispers. "This oath involves serious matters and this wise steward wants more details before he consents to it."

*The servant said to him, "What if the woman does not consent to follow me to this land, shall I then take your son back to the land from which you came?" "On no account must you take my son back there! The Lord, the God of heaven, who took me from my father's house and from my native land, who promised me on oath, saying, 'I will assign this land to your offspring'—He will send his angel before you, and you will get a wife for my son there. And if the woman does not consent to follow you, you shall then be cleared of the oath to me. But do not take my son back there!" Gen 24:5-9.*

We watch as the servant places his hand under the thigh of Abraham and swears the oath to him. End of Act One.

## ACT TWO

*The steward loads up ten of his master's camels with the bounty of his master, and the servants needed, and made his way to Aram-Naharaim the city of Nahor—in central Mesopotamia, the area within the great bend of the Euphrates. "The steward makes all the*



*camels kneel down by the well outside the city. It is evening time, the time the women come to draw water. He begins to pray, "O Lord, God of my master Abraham, let it turn out favorably for me today and show kindness [hesed] to my master Abraham. Here I stand by the spring, as daughters of townsmen come out to draw water; if I say to a maid 'Please lower your jar that I may drink,' and she replies, 'Drink, and I will also water your camels,' let her be the one whom you have decreed for your servant Isaac. Therefore shall I know that you have dealt graciously with my master."*

Rabbi Jacob tells us, "The Hebrew includes the article *an*, conveying that this is a polite request. Even as a request, though, it is remarkable: the servant himself asks for a miraculous sign from God, names what the sign should be. No human thus far, including Abraham himself, has gone this far. Abraham had told this servant that his God "will send His angel ahead of you" and this is presumably what gives the servant the confidence to do this. Still, it is noteworthy as one of a chain of steps that the human person has taken in relation to God." (Friedman)

Those who move under the grace of the divine blessing, seeking to do the work God requires, can expect the gracious Lord to bend to the weakness of his servant and give a divine touch where needed.

(We read in the Cast of Characters: Girl at Well--A beautiful maiden no man has known.)

The prayer was hardly finished upon his lips when a lovely girl comes through the gate with the gentleness of an evening breeze. She walks with child-like lack of self-concern.

*Going to the well she filled her pitcher. As she turns to leave, the servant ran up to her and said, "Please, let me sip a little water from your jar." "Drink, my lord," she said, lowering the jar from her head. As he drank his fill, she looked over at his thirsty camels. "I will also draw for your camels, until they finish drinking." As soon as he quenched his thirst, she poured the remaining water in the trough for the camels, and continued to draw water until the camels quench their thirst.*

*The steward watched her silently saying to himself, has the Lord made my errand successful or not? "Pray tell me, whose daughter are you?" "I am the daughter of Behuel, the son of Milcah, whom she bore to Nahor." "Is there room in your father's house for us to spend the night?" "There is plenty of straw and feed at home, and also room to spend the night." The Steward took a gold nose-ring, put it on the girl, and placed two gold bands on her arms saying, "Blessed be the Lord, the God of my master Abraham, who has not withheld his steadfast faithfulness from my master. For I have been guided on my errand by the Lord; to the house of my master's kinsmen." (Gen 24:16-27)*

The Steward remains alone at the well while the girl runs home and tells all this to her mother's household. Her brother Laban was there with her mother, listening to her story. He saw the gold nose ring and thought it must be worth a half-shekel and those two gold armbands must be ten shekels in weight.

Laban appears on stage, going immediately up to the steward, "*O bless the Lord! Why do you remain outside, when I have made ready the house and a place for the camels.*" The steward leaves with Laban. End of Act Two

### ACT THREE-SCENE ONE

Act Three begins in the house: the camels have been unloaded and given straw, feed and water; water has been provided for the steward and the men with him. Scene 1 opens at the family table, with food already on the table. The steward speaks to them, "*I will not eat until I have told my tale.*"

It may be sixty-three years since the family has had any direct news about Abraham and Sarah. He continues,

*"I am Abraham's servant. The Lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become rich. He has given him sheep and cattle, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and asses. And Sarah, my master's wife, bore my master a son in her old age, and he has assigned to him everything he owns. Now my master put me under oath, saying, 'You shall not get a wife for my son from the daughters of the Canaanites, in whose land I dwell; but you shall go to my father's house, to my kindred, and get a wife for my son.' And I said to my master, 'What if the woman does not follow me?' He replied to me, 'The Lord, whose way I have followed, will send His angel with you and make your errand successful; and you will get a wife for my son from my kindred, from my father's house. And then shall you be freed from my adjuration. If, when you come to my kindred, they refuse you—then, too, shall you be freed from my adjuration.'" [Here, the Steward repeats what occurred at the well.] 'If you mean to treat my master with true kindness, tell me; and if not tell me also, that I may turn right or left'" (Gen 24:34-41, 49).*

By this time, we realize that Abraham's brother, Nahor, is not alive and Milcah and Lot are his heirs. Rabbi Jacob explains to us the legal matters now involved. According to the marriage laws in the Code of Hammurabi, enforced in the Haran region, when the father of a girl to be married is dead and she comes under the authority of her brother, the doctrine of *Tuppi Ahatuta*--the "Sistership documents"--comes into force, protecting the rights of the daughter. It covers five aspects of the marriage agreement: First, the principles in the case, which are the steward representing the groom, Lot the brother representing his sister, and the future bride Rebekah. The Second principle concerns the details of the transaction: Rebekah will go with the steward to the Land of Canaan and there marry Isaac. The Third principle concerns payment to the family of the bride: the payment meets with mutual agreement.

*Laban, acting in the name of his father, speaks, "The matter was decreed by the Lord; we cannot speak to you either for or against it. Here is Rebekah before you; take the girl and go, and let her be a wife to your master's son, as the Lord has spoken." When Abraham's servant heard these words, he bows to the ground before the Lord. Then he brought out objects of silver and gold, and garments, and gave them to Rebekah; and*

*he gave costly presents to her mother and brother. After he ate and the men with him ate and drank, they spent the night there. (Gen 24:50-54)*

Scene ends.

## SCENE TWO

The following morning. The steward is preparing for his return trip and says to his host,

*“Give me leave to go to my master.” Both mother and son reply, “Let the maiden remain with us some ten days; then you may go.” But he said, “Do not delay me now that the Lord has made my errand successful. Give me leave that I may go to my master.” They answered, “Let us call for the girl and ask for her reply” Rebekah comes in and they ask her, “Will you go with this man?” “I will!” (Gen 24:54-58)*

The departure scene:

*“Rebekah leaves with her nurse along with Abraham’s servant and men. Lot blesses his sister, ‘O sister! May you grow into thousands of myriads. And may your offspring seize the gates of their foes.’ Rebekah and her maid arose, mounted the camels and followed the man.” The scene closes with the caravan heading west to the Euphrates, crossing the river and going south to Canaan.*

Final scene: It is now over a month of slow travelling. Evening is falling as they approach Negeb, where Isaac now lives. Isaac has gone out to take an evening walk through the fields. Looking up, he saw the approaching camels. Rebekah raised her eyes and saw Isaac. Halting the camel she got off the camel and looking out toward the man coming towards them, she asked the steward, *“Who is that man walking in the fields toward us?”* The steward replied, *“That is my master.”* [Someone once remarked: When a man sees a woman for the first time, she has already seen him three times.] She took her veil and covered herself. It is the custom: a man looks upon the face of his wife only after the marriage. The steward gave a full report to Isaac (see Gen 24:62-66a).

The Closing scene: As the sun is setting, Isaac brought Rebekah into the tent of his mother Sarah; then he married her, and she became his wife. Isaac loved her, and thus found comfort after his mother's death (see Gen 24:66).

Of Rebekah, it can be said that she is the granddaughter of Abraham; she received a portion of his spirit. As for her brother Laban, that one was not too far removed from his Cousin Lot.

Do we dare say it? Why not! And they lived happy ever after!

## ABRAHAM, FRIEND OF GOD

After the death of Sarah, Abraham began a new life—a very active domestic but peaceful one. He married Keturah, and together they had six sons.

Abraham always recognized the importance of Isaac in the family line, and his providential destiny. Abraham protected and insured this by making him his sole heir, “*Abraham deeded to Isaac everything he owned*” (Gen 25:5).

He did not deal with his sons by Keturah in the same manner he was forced to do with Ishmael. To each of them he made grants, probably with the stipulation that they leave the land of Canaan and settle “to the country of the East.” This would leave them with no claims on Isaac.

Abraham lived a happy life, full of years; he was 175 years old “*when he was gathered to his kin.*” His sons Ishmael and Isaac buried him in the cave of Machpelah, which faced Mamre, alongside his wife Sarah—together again in death.

Abraham was survived by his eight sons: Ishmael, Isaac, Zimran, Jokshan, Medan, Midian, Ishbak, and Shuah. And he was also survived by sixteen grandsons: Jacob, Esau, Sheba, Dedan and the twelve sons of Ishmael: Nebaioth, Kedar, Adbeil, Mibsam, Mishna, Dumah, Hadad, Teman, Jetur, Naphisn and Kedmah.

Of the twelve sons of Ishmael it is recorded, “*These are the sons of Ishmael, and these are their names by their dwelling places and encampments; 12 chieftains of as many tribal groups. The Ishmaelites dwelt from Havilah-by-Shur, which is close to Egypt, all the way to Asshur. They camped alongside all their kinsmen [and bugged them their whole life-long]* (Gen 25:12,18).

A modern writer spoke well of Abraham. “Abraham unveiled hospitality which is compassion, openness of heart and generosity. It means always welcoming the stranger, the known and the unknown, others in any form, alien or intimate, without reserve or calculation, whatever the cost. He experienced the sacredness within the others and the holiness in himself.” (Christopher Bramford)

As God's Wanderer, Abraham discovered that a journey is not a place or an end; it is a continuous going-on all the while, into being itself. You give your all, and in the end you find yourself an old man, and it has all been about becoming. And do you know who you have become? Yes! He and the Other are so much closer; he is more than he could ever have been. He dies without ever knowing who this old man really is: Abraham, the Friend of God.

The author of Hebrews wrote, “*Abraham died in faith; he did not obtain what had been promised but saw and saluted it from afar. By acknowledging himself to be a stranger and foreigner on the earth, he showed that he was seeking a homeland, searching for a better, a heavenly home: a city with foundations, whose designer shall be blessed in you. Thus it is that all who believe are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.*”

Paul teaches, *“But the law does not depend on faith. Its terms are: Whoever does these things shall live by them.”* Paul tells Christians that through our relationship with Jesus Christ, the blessing bestowed on Abraham might descend on the Gentiles in Christ Jesus, therefore making it possible for us to receive the promised Spirit through faith (see Gal 3:7-14).

Moses later says to his people, *“I have today set before you life and prosperity, death and doom. If you obey the commandments of the Lord, your God, which I enjoin on you today, loving him, and walking in his ways, and keeping his commandments, statutes and decrees, you will live and grow numerous, and the Lord, your God, will bless you. . . Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live, by loving the Lord, your God, heeding his voice and holding fast to him. For that will mean life for you (Deut 30:15-17, 19b-20).*

Jesus teaches his disciples the criterion to be his Friend: *“The command I give you is this: Love one another as I have loved you! You are my Friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:12,14).*

As the Father stood before Abraham, Abraham trusted the Father. *“Abram put his faith in the Lord, who credited it to him as an act of righteousness” (Gen 15:6).* The Father stands before Christians in Jesus Christ, and we put our faith in Jesus Christ; the Father “credits it to us as an act of righteousness.”

*“Furthermore,”* Paul says, *“If you belong to Christ you are the descendent of Abraham, which means you inherit all that was promised” (Gal 3:29).*

## CHAPTERS 24- 25:1-18

### MARRIAGE OF ISAAC AND REBEKAH

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

(Please read Genesis 24 and 25:1-18)

1. What do you see as the importance to our author that Isaac not marry a Canaanite woman, and that he remain always in Canaan?
2. What do you see to be the unique element in the steward's prayer at the well in Nahor?
3. What do you think asking for signs from God in prayer says about the petitioner?
4. From Rebekah's appearance in Chapter 24, what is your impression of her Character?
5. What is Laban's role in the marriage arrangements, and what is your impression of him?
6. How would you describe Abraham's life after the death of Sarah, and in what way does it reflect God's general will?
7. What do you see as the importance of Abraham's prudent behavior in Genesis 25:5?
8. After your journey through Genesis, how would you describe the person of Abraham?
9. Does Abraham's relationship with God teach you anything about your own relationship with God?
10. What do you discern to be the very root of Abraham's holiness?
11. From your study of Genesis, what do you see as the essential element for being a "Friend of God"?
12. What would you say you need to do in order to be a friend of God?
13. What do you learn from John 15:12-17 about being a Friend of Jesus?
14. How would you see yourself becoming a friend of God through your becoming a friend of Jesus?
15. What you understand by St. Paul's teaching in Galatians 3:9?

## CHAPTERS 25-26

### ISAAC—GIFT OF GOD PART 1

Genesis presents the Person of God as Creator and Father, revealing the loving will of God as it unfolds in the creation of the heavens and the earth—in particular with the creation of the human person *“a little lower than the angels.”* “Human beings are God's greatest creation: at the heart of the marvel of creation are you and I, the human family—crowned with glory and honor” (Pope Benedict XVI).

The first eleven chapters of Genesis deal with God's relationship with creation and with human beings in general. With the introduction of Abraham in Chapter 12, we enter into a new dimension of God's relationship with the human being: it becomes personal. In a mini biography of Abram, son of Terah, Genesis reveals the interpersonal relationship between God and Abram.

God wills through the man, Abram, to begin the divine process of bringing salvation to mankind, and ultimately to creation, through the medium of the human person. Abram, with his human strengths and weaknesses, becomes the prototype of his descendants, known as the Chosen People, who become the instrument through which God re-enters personally into human history as Savior.

The human person—an agent with freedom of will—will be both the instruments of God's active grace in the world as well as its impediment. The relationship between God and man becomes stormy as man rejects the will of God.

As Genesis unfolds, man by his impatience and lack of humility often seeks the will of God in his own time and in his own way, impeding the plan of God though his sinfulness. Sinful it is.

Man slows, man impedes, but man cannot stop what God has willed. What impedes the will of God is evil. The power of God is stronger than the power of evil: God enters into manmade evil and brings forth good.

Pope Benedict said the following at World Youth Day in Sydney, 2008:

God willed not to exercise His authority in the face of the free exercise of the human will. God respects this exercise of freedom even when it impedes the divine plan. God works within the evil done to accomplish the divine will, and at the same time respects the freedom of the human will. God does not impede our will to sin nor does he impede its evil effects. Sin has its day.

Our society today, side-by-side with material prosperity creates a spiritual desert in which interior emptiness spreads: unnamed fears disquieting the heart, a quiet sense of despair permeates the soul. Experience demonstrates: turning our back on the Creator's plan provokes a disorder which has inevitable repercussions on the created order.

As our natural environment can be destroyed by selfish exploration, so too can human life be destroyed by not recognizing human dignity and the plan of God for each person's life. Our choices of sinful activities may seem at times to offer a way out of difficult situations, but instead of bringing life, they bring death.

"Our human hearts and minds yearn for a vision of life where love endures, where gifts are shared, where unity is built, where freedom finds meaning in truth and where unity is found in respectful communion (Pope Benedict—World Youth Day in Sydney—2008).

The turnover to the life of Isaac and his future descendants rings out in Chapter twenty-six in these words: "*Abraham heeded my call and kept my mandate, my commandments, my laws, and my teachings*" (Gen 26:5). Abraham did so assiduously and with exactitude. Commandments, laws, and teaching spell out the content of the divine mandate. As the theme of obedience unfolds in the life of Abraham, it brings a homeland to his descendants, and through them, blessings to all people on earth. Obedient sojourns through a transitory and unpredictable world open the path to the sunrise beyond darkness and death.

Isaac's obedience opens his life to share in Abraham's blessing. Abraham merited the blessing through obedience. When Isaac did as Abraham had done, it opened his life to share in the fruits of Abraham's obedient love of Yahweh. As the Lord is the fountain of these blessings, obedience to Him opens an infinite storehouse of divine compassion.

When Christians obey the mandates of Jesus Christ, they tap into the graces His life and death merited. St. Thomas Aquinas goes so far as to say, "It is as if we merited these graces ourselves." St. Paul went on to demonstrate to Christians that through their trust in Jesus Christ, they too share in the blessings promised through Abraham.

Before Isaac drew a breath of life, he is special: a child of divine promise. The Lord said of him to Abraham, "*Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall name him Isaac and I will maintain my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring to come*" (Gen 17:19). "*...it is through Isaac that descendants shall bear your name*" (Gen 21:12).

Abraham, Sarah and Jacob have their names changed to indicate their new roles in life. Isaac's name is never changed: Isaac is who he is and needs to be no more than who he is. The promised blessing to Abraham will come through Isaac. Some may doubt that they are loved by their parents, but never Isaac. He heard from heaven: "*You have not held from me you son, your favored one.*"



Isaac, a divine promise, was the desire of Sarah's and Abraham's heart. His very presence filled them with "running laughter"—the spirit of joy. When Isaac was embedded deeply within his parents hearts, when he was the love of their lives, when he was their life, God said to Abraham, *"Take your son, your favored one, Isaac, whom you love, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the heights that I will point out to you"* (Gen 22:2).

God desired the sacrifice of Abraham's heart, not the life of his child. When Abraham sacrificed his heart--giving both heart and son to God--he gave life to his son, again. Isaac was free to be a gift in the heart of Abraham, for Abraham's heart belonged to God.

In liturgical worship, the altar represented the presence of God. Everything placed upon the altar became dedicated to God; whatever is offered upon the altar becomes sanctified and sacred. God required the offering of Isaac to Him. As the offering of sacrifice upon the altar, Isaac's life became forever sacred. Isaac is the sacred source from which will come the Chosen People, and be the channel of divine blessing of all nations.

Isaac is a Gift—personal gift. A gift has only to be itself--he is the given. He can be no more than he is; a gift is perfectly itself when it gives itself. As Isaac's name implies, he is a Joy. He needed to be no more than what he is: a blessing who blesses those who touch his life. We have on the best of authority that all humankind will be blessed through him.

Isaac, as a living gift, possesses the life-giving potential of self-enrichment. He exercises his nature as a giver; he is never depleted. The "well" never runs dry; it refills itself. He enriches the lives that receive him. Rebekah becomes much more than the beautiful girl at the well; she becomes wife and mother, and from her kings descend.

Isaac lives his entire life in a land blessed and consecrated to God. In an environment of unconditional love created by Sarah and Abraham, he grew to manhood. When he is forty years of age, Rebekah enters his life, shattering three years of gloom resulting from the death of his mother.

The life of Isaac is seemingly scattered indiscriminately throughout Genesis, from Chapters 26-37. I am taking the liberty of gathering the pieces of the puzzle in order to present an orderly portrait of Isaac's life from the information provided by the Scriptures.

The character of Isaac, situated between the figure of Abraham and Jacob, is like the moon between two suns. Isaac appears serene and peaceful between the dynamic images of Abraham and Jacob. The gentle soul of Isaac, in its on-going relationship with God, is reflective of the more contemplative life in "the Garden," when all went well between Adam and Eve, and God. It indeed serves as a contrast to the lives of Abraham and Jacob. The three offer us different visions of the divine-human relationship.

Genesis presents this introduction of Isaac: *“This is the story of Isaac, son of Abraham; Abraham had begotten Isaac. Isaac was forty years old when he took to wife, Rebekah, daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram and the sister of Laban the Aramean”* (Gen 25:19-20).

When the caravan bringing Rebekah arrived in Negeb, Isaac had just returned from the spring, Beer lahai-roi, where Hagar had encountered “the angel” on her flight from Sarah. Isaac had settled in the region of Negeb, a desert-like area southwest of the Dead Sea. Our opening scene of Isaac, the man, is one of a lonely man walking meditatively through the fields. A gift was needed. As answer to his heart's prayer, Isaac looks up to see Rebekah coming to him across the field. Here, Isaac and Rebekah tented for many years.

Famines would be frequent in a semi desert area of the Negeb. Genesis says, *“There was a famine in the land (aside from the previous famine that had occurred in the days of Abraham)”* (Gen 26:1). Famines are all much the same. When our author calls our attention that this famine is not as the one that occurred in the time of Abraham and Sarah, he may be implying that the present situation, although much the same as occurred in Genesis 12:10, is not the same.

Chapter Twenty-Six indicates that Isaac's life echoes the life of his father, in which the faithfulness of God that was present in the past is present in the future. It serves as a reminder to future generations that what has occurred in the past can be in the future. There are grounds for hope that what has been done for the father will also be done for the sons.

If Isaac and Rebekah had decided to go to Egypt to escape the famine, as did Abraham and Sarah, an appearance of the Lord altered their decision. The Lord tells them, *“Do not go down to Egypt; stay in the land which I point out to you. Reside in this land, and I will be with you and bless you”* (Gen 26:2-3).

Once again, we see the correlation between obeying the Word of God and divine blessings following upon obedience. What follows confirms this correlation, and makes Isaac its recipient: *“I will assign all these lands to you and to your heirs, fulfilling the oath that I swore to your father Abraham. I will make your heirs as numerous as the stars of heaven, and assign to your heirs all these lands, so that all the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by your heirs”* (Gen 26:3-4). The Lord reaffirms that these blessings will come through Isaac and his descendants. God confirms that Abraham merited the blessings by his obedience: *“this because Abraham obeyed Me and kept my charge (My commandments, My laws, and My teachings)”* (Gen 26:5).

Rabbi Jacob tells us, this statement is a source of much discussion among the Rabbis. He sums up the leading arguments with quotes from two rabbis--a grandfather and grandson. The grandfather, Rabbi Rashi, teaches, “Abraham observed all categories of Jewish law, even the Oral Torah.” His grandson Rabbi Rashbam insists, “Abraham observed only those commandments that had been communicated to him in Genesis or that human reason intuitively without revelation.”

*“All these lands,”* mentioned above, imply all the places in which Abraham and Isaac lived; it is consistent with the description in Genesis 15:18-19, where the borders of Canaan are *“the river of Egypt [not the Nile] and the Euphrates.”*

Isaac and Rebekah remained in the area of Gerar. When the men of the area noted the beauty of Rebekah, their question to Isaac concerning his relationship with Rebekah, reveals their desires for her. He responded with, *“She is my sister,”* for he was afraid to say “my wife” thinking, *“the men of this place might kill me on account of Rebekah, for she is beautiful”* (Gen 26:6-7).

Isaac and his wife had moved into the territory of King Abimelech. If he was not the same King Abimelech that Abraham had encountered, he is King Abimelech the Second whose father had informed him well concerning this group of resident aliens.

As the couple had been there for some time, the King would have been aware of them, and the story about Rebekah would have been circulated. One day the king happened to be looking out his window and he beheld Isaac fondling Rebekah. He at once understood the situation: like father, like son—fruit does not fall too far from the tree.

*Abimelech then sent for Isaac and said, “She must certainly be your wife! Why then did you say, ‘She is my sister?’ Isaac said to him, “Because I thought I might lose my life on account of her.” Abimelech said, “What have you done to us! One of the people might have lain with your wife and brought guilt upon us.” Abimelech then charged all his men, saying, “Anyone who molests this man or his wife shall be put to death.”* (Gen 26:9-11)

Abimelech appears to be a righteous man who is concerned with the welfare of his people—he did what was right. On the other hand, Isaac is far from righteous, and with those words, *“I might lose my life on account of her,”* he reveals both his selfishness and his cowardice. We have seen the presentation of the Nations on earth as wicked and deserving punishment, and now we have the presentation of a righteous people with clay feet, who enter into a covenant relationship with the Chosen People.

With the ultimatum by the King, the lives of Isaac and Rebekah were safe in the land, and they settled down there and prospered greatly. We read, *“Isaac sowed in that land and reaped a hundredfold the same year. The Lord blessed him, and the man grew richer and richer until he was very wealthy. He acquired flocks and herds, and a large household. As a result of God's blessing, this abundance came to Isaac and his family”* (Gen 26:12-13).

It is never easy being a resident alien, and when your prosperity in this foreign land exceeds that of the natives, it can be dangerous. Many years ago, many exiles came from Cuba to Puerto Rico and purchased businesses from the local people; in short time they achieved financial success. It resulted in anger among the natives.

This anger we recognize as envy—an ugly passion, which is a sickness of soul that often brings suffering to people whose only fault, has been their success. It covets the riches, success

or good fortune of another. Often such blessings have come as a result of hard work, as in the case of Cubans in Puerto Rico, who were willing to work fourteen hours a day rather than seven. Envy manifests itself as a painful and resentful awareness of an advantage enjoyed by another, joined with a desire to possess the same advantage. A person may take the success of another personally as a negative reflection upon one's own life, often accompanied by the malicious desire to see their victims fail. Envy leads sometimes to destructive action; it is often the inside enemy that does more damage to a family or a community than external enemies could ever do. It is hard to hear, "Your greatest enemies are in your own family." A truth that Esau would one day fully understand.

Concerning Isaac's relations with the native people, we read, "*The Philistines envied him. . . They had stopped up all the wells which his father's servants had dug in the days of his father Abraham, filling them with earth*" (Gen 26:14b-15). Wells are the source of life-giving water in desert areas, and digging a well is a work of arduous labor and love, as it is work to sustain life itself. Even the human body has a high percentage of water; it needs water for survival.

The Philistines, with the filling of the wells, invited Isaac and Rebekah to leave the area: We have cut off the water! Abimelech read the signs of the time and the King arrived at their tent with the command, "*Go away from us, for you have become far too numerous for us.*" As put, it makes a negative order seem complimentary.

Rabbi Jacob encouraged us at this time to note the use of "Philistines" as an anachronistic symbol, since the presence of the Philistines in Canaan begins only around 1200 BC. Isaac and his wife settled in the area around 1850 BC!

"*So Isaac and his people went away from there to the Wadi Gerar, where he settled.*" Apparently, it was not far enough away. Since a *wadi* is dry creek or riverbed, digging a well would be the order of the day. "*Isaac dug anew the wells which had been dug in the days of his father Abraham and which the Philistines had stopped up after Abraham's death; he gave them the same names that his father had given them.*" That may have been a statement concerning their previous ownership. Once again, his good fortune did him in; they found there a well of spring water, a most desirable source of good water. So we read, "*the herdsmen of Gerar quarreled with Isaac's servants, saying, 'This water is ours.'* He named that well *Esek, because they challenged him there. And when they dug another well, they disputed over that one also; so he named it Sitnah [harassment].*" He was no Abraham; he moved away rather than resist them. He at least named the wells, which expressed his ownership over them.

It is a stark reality, even for the blessed, that in this world, blessings go hand-in-hand with conflict. Life in this world always has thorns and thistles. The fullness of blessings cannot be enjoyed in this world. The blessed trust the Lord will bless them in the midst of their afflictions. Recall the words of the Blessed Virgin Mary to Bernardette. "I cannot promise you happiness in this world-- only in the next."

Apparently, this time Isaac moved far enough away that the herdsmen left them in peace. He dug another well and there was no quarrel with it; they had the water they needed and

then some. Isaac named this well *Rehoboth*, saying, “Wow at last the Lord has granted us ample space to increase in the land” (see Gen 26:22). The word *rehoboth* carries the meaning of wide, open space.

Moving on, they went from there up to Beer-sheba. *That night the Lord appeared to him and said, “I am the God of your father Abraham. Fear not, for I am with you, and I will bless you and increase you offspring for the sake of My servant Abraham.”*

The visitation strengthens and confirms Isaac’s faith: “*So, Isaac built an altar there and invoked the Lord by name,*” claiming the land in the Lord’s name. Here Isaac pitched his tent and his servants set about digging the well.

None of this went unnoticed by Abimelech, who remained silent. His law only covered the persons of Isaac and Rebekah, not their possessions. He noted the patience of Isaac dealing with the situation; patience is not mindless, patience is not without reason. Knowing these acts might stimulate retaliation at a later time, Abimelech acted.

Abimelech made a state visit to Isaac to sue for peace. “*Abimelech came to him from Gerar, with Ahuzzath his councilor, and Phicol chief of his troops. Isaac questioned the meaning of this visit, saying, ‘Why have you come to me, seeing you have been hostile to me and have driven me away from you?’ The royal party responded, ‘We now see plainly that the Lord has been with you, so we propose that there be a sworn treaty between our two parties, between you and us. Let us make a pact with you that you will not us harm, just as we have not molested you, but have always dealt kindly with you and have let you depart in peace. From now on, be you blessed of the Lord’*”(Gen 26:26-31).

It was a covenant of Shalom, peace, and Isaac sealed it with a feast; they ate and drank. Early the next morning they exchanged oaths. Bidding them farewell, the king departed from him in peace. “*That same day Isaac’s servants came and told him about the well they had dug, and said to him, ‘We have found water!’ He called it Shibah [meaning ‘Oath,’ or ‘The place of the Oath’]; hence the name of the city is Beer-Sheba to this day*” (Gen 26:32-33). Peace with one’s neighbors does not ensure peace on the home front.

In Biblical time, twenty years have come and gone since Rebekah entered the tent of Isaac. No offspring have yet been born. Rebekah, like Sarah who was both her mother-in-law and great aunt, bears the burden of sterility in a world in which motherhood elevated the status of woman and sterility was viewed as an affliction from God.

Rabbi Jacob teaches us, “It is through the sterility of these women that the writer reiterates the point that the promised blessing through the chosen seed of Abraham is not the sole result of human effort. The fulfillment of promise is only possible at each crucial moment in history because of a specific act of God.”

The Christian Scriptures record an episode in which an angel of the Lord appears to the priest Zechariah, while he was ministering in the sanctuary of the temple. The angel informed him that his wife Elizabeth would conceive a child in her old age.

The Angel Gabriel reveals to Mary of Nazareth, *“Know that Elizabeth your kinswoman has conceived a son in her old age, she who was thought to be sterile is now in her sixth months, for nothing is impossible with God” (Lk 1:36).*

Elizabeth expressed her blessing in these words, *“In these days the Lord is acting on my behalf; he has seen fit to remove my reproach among men” (Lk 1:24).*

Genesis records, *“Isaac pleaded with the Lord on behalf of his wife, because she was barren; and the Lord responded to his plea, and his wife Rebekah conceived (Gen 25:21).*

Rebekah's pregnancy brought a joyful fruitfulness into the lives of both Isaac and Rebekah. The sentiments expressed by Elizabeth would now be appropriate in the mouth of Rebekah, *“The Lord is acting on my behalf; he has seen fit to remove my reproach among men.”*

As the inspired story of Genesis unfolds, we enter into the period in which God enters personally into the lives of men and women living the normal experiences of daily life—within which unfolds the Divine Plan.

I am unable to resist the idea of being present at the performance of a series of new plays on the old stage, telling different stories, yet each preserving the major themes of Genesis. Although some old props from the previous performance are still around, it was necessary to remove them, making room for the new play. No offense is meant to the “old props.” As is said in the theater, “The show must go on!”

A case in point is Abraham—he was laid to rest in Chapter 20 with the words, *“The whole span of his life was one hundred and seventy-five years.”* The information given to us is that Abraham was one hundred years of age at the birth of Isaac, and one hundred and sixty years at the birth of his grandsons Esau and Jacob. The twins would have been fifteen-year-old boys at the time of Abraham's death. As the story unfolds, Abraham has been peacefully laid to rest some years ago.

Our role as audience is active. We are to see, to hear, and to take to heart what we experience: there is light therein for our own “walk” in His Presence. The narratives involve deep interpersonal relationships that are lived out with all their human frailties and weaknesses, and the will of God unfolds within them. The stories reinforce the teaching that God's ways are not our ways; God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Scriptures encourage us to be patient with the “way” of the Lord. As Saint Vincent put it, “Don't tread on the heels of Divine Providence; but if God opens the door—Run!”

Rabbi Jacob points out, “One of the great qualities of the Torah is that precisely none of its heroes is perfect. It reveals that the people are not only not perfect but also their acts of betrayal can fester in families, having on-going destructive consequences” (R. E. Friedman).

Our author waits until the end of Genesis to throw light on the mystery of God's reversal of evil in the world. He puts these words in the mouth of Joseph, addressed to his brothers, *“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good” (Gen 50:4).* Rabbi Jacob explains, “Out of each of the struggles, God's will was accomplished. The point is not so much that

the struggles were necessary for the accomplishment of God, but rather God's will was accomplished in spite of the conflict" (J. H. Sailhammer).

We entitle the present performance, "The Right of the First Born." The curtain opens: Rebekah is alone on stage, in her last months of her pregnancy. The extraordinary turmoil in her womb has resulted in fatigue and anxiety. She sums up her sentiments with "*If it is like this, why do I exist?*" (Gen 25:22). The desire for a child now lies submerged under the present powerful stimuli—the law of nature—and the strongest stimulus stimulates. Rebekah prays to the Lord for the strength to live and to understand. He tells her, "*Two nations are in your womb. Two separate peoples shall issue from your body. One people shall be mightier than the other, and the older shall serve the younger*" (Gen 25:23).

Rebekah understands that the twins struggle within her womb for power at this moment, one over the other, in order to possess the privileges of first-born, privileges that entitle the first-born son to a position of honor in the family and to a double share in the possessions inherited from the father. The title of First-born Son carries with it both social and material blessings.

The laws of Mesopotamia that were enforced at that time speak of the elder son as *maru rabu*, and the second son as *maru sehru*. The law states that the *maru rabu* was entitled to an inheritance share which was double that of the *maru sehru*. However, according to the Harrian law, the testator could designate an heir *maru rabu*, regardless of the order of birth.

Rabbi Jacob offers us this bit of information concerning Hebrew grammar, "In biblical Hebrew, the subject may either precede or follow the verb, and also the object can precede or follow the verb. It is hardly possible at times to tell which word in the biblical verse is the subject and which is the object, especially if the verse is in poetry, as is this one.

"We also know that with the Delphic oracles in Greece, the predictions contain two opposite meanings and thus, the receiver of the oracle can hear, consciously or unconsciously, what the hearer desires" (R. E. Freedman and David Noel).

We know from the testimony of mystics that one can grow in understanding from a revelation received, but with time and experience, come to understand an entirely different meaning. A classic example is in the life of St. Francis of Assisi, who heard the message, "Rebuild my church!" His first understanding of the command was simple and easy: to rebuild this fallen down chapel in which he now stood. Much later, it was reinterpreted to mean: Reform the spirituality of the entire Christian Church! Now there is a task bordering on the impossible, which demands leaning on One to whom nothing is impossible.

Returning to Rebekah's revelation: the last phrase of the message can mean, "the elder will serve the younger," but it can equally mean, "the elder, the younger will serve."

If Rebekah had any doubt concerning the meaning of the oracle, the birth of the twins and what follows left no doubt in her mind which one was to be designated *Maru Rabu*.

All reports from the birth scene indicate the birth of the twins was a shocker. The first son is met with, *“He is Red; he is hairy!”* As one observes, “reddish as the sandstones hills of Seir—over in the “red country” of Edon. It could be expected to call Esau “Edon,” but it appears that the hair won out. A Hebrew word for “hairy” is *eshau*.

If baby Esau could speak, he could well have said, “I’m red because of the intense struggle I’ve been put through just to be born—look what’s back there hanging on my heel.” If Esau had spoken, the only response he would have heard would be, “O what a beautiful baby boy! He looks just like his mother!”

From his first breath, Jacob is what is called “a star-face,” and he gets top billing. His fans maintain that the actual form of the name “Jacob” is *y qb*, which means, “May God Protect.” Later the envious translated *y qb* to mean heel-gripper.

Obviously, the naming of the twins favors Jacob and negates Esau; however, the characterization of Jacob as “heel-gripper,” the supplanter, will gain moment as his life unfolds.

Rabbi Jacob tells us “numerous attempts have been made to denigrate Esau in midrash, and even in current biblical interpretation, but it is not justified according to the text. Even small children express surprise at what Jacob does to his brother and father.”

Some have seen in the comparison between Jacob and Esau the hint of a reference to the myth of Gilgamesh, who as king dwelt in the tent as did Jacob, and Esau reflecting the more primitive Enikidu—*“shaggy with hair was his whole body,”* and lived his whole life under the sky.

The text reads, *“When the time to give birth was at hand, there were twins in her womb. The first one emerged reddish, and his body was like a hairy mantle; so they named him Esau. Then his brother emerged, holding on the heel of Esau; so they named him Jacob. Isaac was sixty years old when they were born”* (Gen 25:24-26).

The story now fast-forwards. The scene presents to us Esau and Jacob as young men, with the introduction: *“When the boys grew up, Esau became a skillful hunter, a man of the outdoors; but Jacob was a mild man who stayed in camp”* (Gen 25:27).

What a comparison we have here—one son you cannot get out of the house and the other you cannot keep on a leash. Esau embraced life with a restless energy, and enters into it on the run: chasing the birds and rabbits, and running back to camp with exciting tales about finding caves and seeing wild creatures. Life outdoors for a hunter was not a choice but a compulsion. It is no surprise to hear that Esau is Isaac’s favorite; Esau is the boy he would liked to be, and the man he would never be allowed to be. Being a precious gift of God, Abraham and Sarah kept Isaac close,



very close. The text negates much of the above supposition with its own observation, *“Isaac favored Esau because he had a taste for game!”*

From the account of the birth of the twins, we know Jacob is his mother's favorite—like a chick under it's mother's wings, his own wings too weak for flight. If the reality of the situation was as presented in Genesis, we should not be surprised with the man Esau. Who was there to guide and educate him? Who cared enough to do so? A mother who could not see him for Jacob, and a father who praised him for putting good and tasty meat on the table?

Rebekah would have been well informed of the laws and customs of her time, the rules men governed and lived by. She knew from personal experience the position of the “first-born;” both she and her mother, at the death of her father, had come under the dominion of her brother Laban, as the “first born.” The message of the oracle never left her mind; she read more into it than the vision allowed. *“One shall surpass the other, the older shall serve the younger.”* There was no reference to the right of first-born. How this would actually come to be was in the hands of Divine Providence.

Whoever in this family inherited the blessings of the first-born could have a major effect upon Rebekah's life if she outlived Isaac. Her own personal involvement clouded her judgment. According to the vision, Jacob must have the title of “First-born,” and it is her responsibility to see that this will come to be. After all, it is the will of God.

Jacob was well trained in the school of Rebekah; her dream for him became his ambition. Getting the title of first-born became an obsession. As for Esau-- who was it that trained him concerning the legalities of life and how to drink tea from a china cup? Left to gazing at his own navel, he became the bear in the china closet; it is the nature of the bear to break china.

The scene opens upon Jacob, sitting around a fire cooking up a nice “red” stew. Suddenly Esau bursts upon the scene totally famished, not knowing he has become the fly in the spider's web. *“Give me some of that red stuff to gulp down, for I am famished’ [the text adds here, “which is why he is named Edon.” Talk about a non sequitur!].* Jacob says, *‘I will trade you your birth right for the stew.’* And Esau says, *‘I am at the point of dying, so of what use is my birthright to me.’* Jacob says, *‘Swear to me first.’* So he swore to him, and traded his birthright to Jacob.” The spider catches his fly. *“Jacob then gave Esau bread and lentil stew; he ate and drank, and he rose and went away.”* The recording secretary sitting by makes a note, *“Thus did Esau spurn the birthright” (Gen 25:29).*

Esau underestimated the importance of his birthright, but he did know and value the importance of “the blessing;” he had not connected them together.

What we are now told of Esau will neither improve his image around the camp nor elevate him in his mother's eyes. *“When Esau was forty years old, he took to wife Judith, daughter of Beeri the Hittite, and Basemath, daughter of Elon the Hivite.”* Judith and Basemath may have been two bundles of joy in Esau's eyes, but Isaac and Rebekah saw them as two wild grapes. *“They were a source of bitterness to Isaac and Rebekah” (Gen 26:34-35.* Later Rebekah strongly verbalized her feelings, *“I am disgusted with life because of the Hittite*

women” (*Gen 27:46*). Rebekah was the first mother-in-law to express such an opinion of her daughters-in-law, but would not be the last. I knew a mother-in-law that always introduced her daughter-in-law, “This is my son's first wife.”

If Jacob and Esau were two candidates running for the office of *Maru Rabu* (First Born), my advice to Esau would be, first get yourself a new Public Relations' person.

## CHAPTER 25, 26

### ISAAC GIFT OF GOD—PART 1

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

(Please read Chapters 25:19-34 through Chapter 26)

1. How do you understand the mystery of God using human beings as instruments to achieve his will on earth?
2. How do we human beings impede the divine will on earth?
3. What does it mean to you that Isaac was a “Gift”?
4. How does his offering upon the altar cause the gift?
5. What does it mean for a person to be a gift from God?
6. What do you see as the ultimate effect of Gen. 26:5 upon our life on our life upon earth?
7. The changing of a person’s name by God implies a change in their lives; why do you think Isaac’s name remains the same?
8. What does Gen. 26:2-4 tell you about Isaac’s role in the plan of salvation?
9. What did the behavior of Isaac before King Abimelech tell you about the person of Isaac?
10. How do you understand the teaching, “an envious member of the family causes more harm to the family than an enemy outside the family”?
11. What does the teaching, “the lives of the blessed on earth are filled with thorns and thistles” mean to you?
12. How would you describe the difference of character between Esau and Jacob?
13. Which would you prefer as a friend?
14. What do you understand by the words *bekora* and *beraka* as used in this text, and Esau’s attitude toward his *bekora*?
15. How would you describe Rebekah's relationship with her sons? How would you see this affecting their family?

## CHAPTERS 27-28

### ISAAC—GIFT OF GOD PART 2

The following scene in our drama occurs some years later with a more aged Isaac. The text reads, *“Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see.”* The scene opens with Isaac sitting alone in his tent, having just called for his son Esau. The request for Esau alerted Rebekah; she placed herself in a position to listen to their conversation.

*As Esau enters the tent, his father calls out, “My son.” Esau, as an obedient son, replies, “Here I am.” His father says, “My son, I am old now and I do not know how soon I will die. Take your quiver and bow, and go out into the open and hunt me some game. Then prepare a dish for me such as I like, and bring it to me to eat, so that I may give you my innermost blessing before I die” (Gen 27:1-4).*

Rebekah's heart sank when she heard, *“my innermost blessings,”* and she panics.

We are in a world far removed from our world today: the more we leave our world and enter into theirs, the better we will understand the message from the long ago. We live in a different time but in the same human nature—inherited from them.

The source of moral light came from God's revelation of the First Covenant with humankind: human life is sacred. *“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for in His image did God make man” (Gen 9:6).* The same divine presence emits light into human awareness concerning good and evil. Acting positively to the light leaves a sense of tranquility of soul; acting negatively to the light leaves an undetermined sense of loss.

Our moral conscience today has developed under the light of the revelations to Moses on Mount Sinai. The essence of the moral revelation of Sinai found expression in the Ten Commandments. We find in these commandments our foundational guide in our relationship with God and other human beings.

We who are professed Christians look to the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth as our guiding light in interpreting these commandments. He teaches:

*You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and the most important of the commandments. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments the whole law is based, and the prophets as well. (Mt 22:37)*

This was Jesus' general teaching to humanity: to those he called "friend," he said, "*This is my commandment to you: You must love one another as I have loved you.*" Jesus makes the love that they have received from Him the measure of their love for others.

In Genesis, we are dealing with the laws, customs, and circumstances of life in the Near East around 1400 B.C. People judged others by the deeds done by them. Good deeds proceeded from good people; harmful and destructive deeds proceeded from evil people. The question is asked, "What have you done?" The question, "why did you do it" did not enter largely into the picture. You were responsible for the deed done, and held accountable. In a word: if you took the life of another, your life would be required.

We need also to bear in mind the importance of the spoken word; it was primarily a verbal time. A word spoken was a deed done. Once spoken, it had a life of its own to do good or evil. When a person called upon the name of the Lord in making an oath or imparting a blessing, it brought God Himself into it, and from the human point of view, it became irrevocable.

As an example, let us take the case of giving two gifts to two different people. One gift is very rare and the other rather common; both are wrapped for their presentation as gifts. You say to one friend, "Here is your gift," and to the other, "Here is your gift." Later you discover you gave the wrong gift to the wrong person. Since you had said to the receiver, "This is your gift," and they received it, it is no longer your gift; you have no jurisdiction over it. You live with your mistake.

Rabbi Jacob reminds us that that all the members of this family had their roots through Terah in the land of Haran, a territory governed by the Code of Hammurabi: the social and legal lives of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob unfold under the Hammurabi Code. According the Code, the legal title of *Maru Rabu* was more a matter of the father's discretion than chronological priority. A paternal declaration that began with the formula, "I have now grown old," which leads up to an oral allocation of the testator's property or a deathbed blessing carried the greatest weight.

"Business transactions in the Near East," Rabbi Jacob goes on to say, "are always subjected to a strict legal code, but they are also looked upon as a game—one in which contestants match with one another" (E. A. Speiser).

Rebekah had been born and reared in the land that was under the Hammurabi Code, which had established her brother Laban, on the death of their father, as her legal guardian and the head of their household in Haran. She knew the law. Hearing the words of Isaac to Jacob, she understood what it implied, and what it could mean in her own life.

If the blessing intended by Isaac for Jacob was bestowed on him, it negated any of the negotiations between Esau and Jacob concerning the right of *Maru Rabu*. Rebekah understood the difference between the *bekora*--birthright and the *beraka*--the blessing, and their relationship to one another. A deathbed *beraka* could confirm or negate a *bekora*. Jacob now possessed the *bekora* through his trade with Esau; he must now receive the *beraka* or lose it all.

Rebekah's love for her son Jacob motivated her subsequent behavior, but her own future wellbeing was also a strong motivating influence. If Jacob got the blessing, her future is secure under him. However, if Esau receives the blessing, and she outlives her husband, she will be under the authority of Esau, implying that she would also be under those two little princesses, Basemath and Judith, who were waiting in the wings to assume all household authority. Rebekah said, "No way!" I do not believe she would have been so bold as to say, "No way Yahweh," but she meant it.

The scene opens with Rebekah gathering the paraphernalia needed for Jacob to play the role of the first great Impersonator in the scriptures. It is a cold, heartless scenario planned by Rebekah that breaks the hearts of two people, who in their own way loved her very much. Somewhere it is written, "Ingratitude is the scorpion's sting." When she see the figure of Esau fading into the hills, she turns to Jacob who has come on the scene and tells him, "*I overheard your father speaking to your brother Esau, saying, 'Bring me some game and prepare a dish for me to eat, that I may bless you with the Lord's approval, before I die.'*" To her husband's words she had added, "*with the Lord's approval,*" to impress upon Jacob the seriousness of this matter. She now says, "*Now, my son, listen carefully as I instruct you. Go to the flock and fetch me two choice kids, and I will make a dish for your father, such as he likes. Then take it to your father to eat, in order that he may bless you before he dies.*"

Upon hearing his mother's words, Jacob becomes very anxious and responds, "*But my brother Esau is hairy man and I am smooth skinned...If my father touches me, I shall appear to him as a trickster and bring upon myself a curse and not a blessing.*" Without hesitation Rebekah responds, "*Your curse, my son, be upon me! Just do as I say and go fetch them for me.*" If anyone is going to be cursed, she will take it upon herself.

When Rebekah finished preparing the meal, she took the best clothes of her older son Esau and had Jacob put them on; she covered the hairless part of his neck and hands with the skins from the lambs and giving him the dish and the bread, she sent him into his father. Jacob was of one heart with his mother in this; he had only one fear—will it work?

The scene opens with Jacob's entering into his father's presence with the prepared dinner. Going to his father, he said,

*"Father." "Yes, which of my sons are you?" replied Isaac. Jacob answered, "I am Esau, your first born; and I have done as you told me. Pray sit up and eat of my game, that you may give me your innermost blessing." But Isaac asked, "How did you succeed so quickly, my son?" He answered, "Because the Lord your God granted me good fortune." Isaac then said to Jacob, "Come closer, that I may feel you, my son—whether you are really my son Esau or not."*

*Jacob drew close to his father and as he reaches up to touch him, Isaac said, "his voice sounds like Jacob, yet his hands are those of Esau." He asked again, "Are you really my son Esau?" "I am!" he replied. "Then serve me, let me eat of my son's game that I may*

*give you my innermost blessing.” Jacob served his father and brought him wine: Isaac ate and drank.*

*When his meal was finished Isaac said, “Come close and kiss me, my son.” As Jacob bent down and kissed him, Isaac smelled the coat of his son Esau. With that, he blessed him, saying, “Ah, the smell of my son is like the smell of the fields that the Lord has blessed! May God give you of the dew of heaven and the fat of the earth, abundance of new grain and wine. Let peoples serve you and nations bow to you; Be master of your brothers, and let your mother's sons bow to you. Cursed be they who curse you, blessed be those who bless you.”*

Having achieved his aim, Isaac silently withdrew from his father's presence. No sooner done when Esau returned from the hunt and prepared his dinner for his father. He takes it into his father saying, *“Let my father sit up and eat of his son's game, so that you may give me your innermost blessing.”* Isaac is confused by what he hears and says, *“Who are you?”* Esau replies, *“I am your son Esau, your first born.”* As Esau speaks, Isaac was seized with a violent trembling. Fearing the worst he asks, *“Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate of it before you came and blessed him; now he must remain blessed! Your brother came with guile and took away your blessing.”*

Esau broke down with wild and bitter sobbing, *“Was he then named Jacob that he might supplant me these two times? First he took my birthright, and now he has taken away my blessing! Have you not reserved a blessing for me?”* Isaac replied, *“I have already made him master over you; I have given all his brothers for servants, and sustained him with bread and wine. What then can I still do for you, my son?”* As Esau loudly wept, his father prayed a blessing, *“Ah, far from the fertile earth shall be you your abode, far from the dew of the heavens above. By your sword you shall live, and you shall serve your brother; but when you grow restive, you shall break his yoke from your neck.”* Even the blessing confirmed Jacob's blessing. (See Gen 27:1-40)

The curtain closes upon a sad and sinful scene.

When the next scene opens, some time has passed, but not sufficient to heal the hurt in the heart of Esau. He broods, and it brews a poisonous spirit. Esau never curbed his feelings but gave vent to them; he would bide his time until his father's death and then he would kill Jacob. When news of his intention reached his mother, she sent for Jacob and told him, *“Your brother Esau is consoling himself by planning to kill you. Now, listen to me. Flee at once to Haran, to my brother Laban. Stay with him a while, until your brother's fury subsides and he forgets what you have done to him. Then I will fetch you from there. Let me not lose you both in one day!”* Rebekah has already lost Esau to some degree, but the implication here seems to be that the moment he kills Jacob, he would have to flee the area.

Rebekah desires to cover all her bases—for both Jacob and herself. She goes to Isaac complaining, *“I am disgusted with life because of the Hittite women. If Jacob marries a Hittite woman, a native of the land, like these women, what good would life be to me?”*

After listening to his wife, Isaac sent for Jacob and blesses him. He instructed him, saying, *“You shall not take a wife from among the Canaanite women. Go now to Paddan-aram, to the house of*

*Bethuel, your mother's father, and take a wife from among the daughters of Laban, your mother's brother.*” Isaac, always the gift, gives Jacob this blessing, *“May El Shaddai bless you, make your fertile and numerous, so that you become an assembly of peoples. May He grant the blessing of Abraham to you and your offspring, that you may possess the land where you are sojourning, which He assigned to Abraham.”*

This is the third confirmation of the blessing of Abraham to the three patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In keeping with the custom of the time, an oath verbalized three times becomes irrevocable.

Seemingly, Isaac has accepted the role Jacob will play in the future destiny of his people, and recognizes him as the channel through which the blessing of Abraham will be passed down through Jacob and his descendants.

As for Esau, he is a bitter son, seeking to spite his parents through deliberate disobedience. His father had blessed Jacob with the command, *“You shall not marry a Canaanite woman,”* sent him off to Paddan-aram to take a wife from there, and Jacob had obeyed his father and mother and gone. Obviously, Esau had no knowledge that his mother instigated the whole affair to move Jacob, his brother, away from him.

Esau realized that his mother and father did not look upon his wives as a blessing in the household. Esau went to Ishmael and took to wife, in addition to the wives he had, Mahalath, the daughter of Abraham’s son Ishmael and sister of Nebaioth. He put one more little thorn into his mother's side. The two families of two older sons—Ishmael and Esau—are united in marriage, but neither become channels of Abraham’s blessing; it is the younger in both families that do so. Another reminder that it is the will of God, not of man, that determines the channels of Abraham's blessing. *“To those who did accept Him he gave power to become children of God, ...to those who are begotten, not by blood, nor by carnal desire, nor by man willing it, but by God” (Jn 1:12-13).*

In Rebekah’s parting words to Jacob, she promised to send for him when it was safe to return home. Was her message to return sent and re-sent, and did his circumstances make it impossible for him to return? We can picture Rebekah standing at the door of her tent, looking expectantly towards the north. Months rolled by and years came and went, fading one into the other. So, too, did Rebekah’s hopes, and so, too, did Rebekah.

Perhaps the quality of those years may be summed up in her last recorded words to her husband, *“I am disgusted with life because of the Hittite women.”* Twenty years passed before the image of her prodigal son appears on the horizon, with none to greet his return but Esau. There is an ancient saying, *“The mills of the gods grind slowly but finely.”*

There is no mention of Rebekah’s death in Genesis. However, we do find a strange insertion in Chapter 35:8: *“Deborah, Rebekah's nurse, died, and was buried under the oak below Bethel; so it was named Allon-bacuth—‘the oak of the weeping’”(Gen 35:8).* We find mention of a nurse at the time of Rebekah’s departure to marry Isaac, *“Then Rebekah and her nurse arose,*



*mounted the camels and followed the man. So the servant took Rebekah and went on his way” (Gen 24:61).* Perhaps in some mysterious way it is farewell to Rebekah.

Following this notice of Deborah's death in verse eight of chapter thirty-five, we read in verses 27-29 the account of Isaac's death, *“And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, at Kiriath-arab--now Hebron--where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. Isaac was a hundred and eighty years old when he breathed his last and died. He was gathered to his kin in ripe old age; and he was buried by his sons Esau and Jacob” (Gen 35:17-29).* We read in Chapter 49 that both Isaac and Rebekah were buried next to Abraham and Sarah in the cave at Machpelah.

Jacob will now move to center stage. Before this play unfolds Rabbi Jacob shares these personal reflections with us, *“The fate of individuals caught up in the mainstream of history will often seem incomprehensible; for history is the gradual unfolding of the divine master plan, many details of which must remain a mystery to mortals. It so happened that Abraham's family was singled out to serve God's ultimate purpose; that is all we know.”* (E.A. Speiser). The heart of the matter is that the biblical process in which all humankind will be blessed continues.

Previously Jacob lived as a tent dweller, keeping close to camp and under the protective eye of Rebekah. Their cooperative evil deed brings an end to their close-knit relationship. The unprepared Jacob quickly finds himself a sojourner in strange environments, suddenly forcing manhood upon him. From the evidence on hand it appears that Jacob is a man alone on his own.

Scholars question the chronological order of the following narration. This episode appears to be an insertion, compact and complete in itself, as if the narrator realized an important matter needed to be dealt with before proceeding with the narrative.

As we proceed, we will not come across men like Noah and Abraham, who walked in the presence of God and were righteous, and whose lives dramatically affected the history of mankind. Jacob is no Abraham.

We can see a good practical reason for the author to place this episode here before entering more deeply into Jacob's personal life. It is certain that what occurred in the episode of Jacob's tricking Isaac into giving him the blessing meant for Esau leaves the readers questioning the suitability of such a character as Jacob being a divine channel of blessings to the world.

It is only too common for us to project our thoughts upon God and hold Him to our measure of right and wrong, then be scandalized when He apparently rejects our way in preference to His own. Obviously, there is no limit to human pride as it elevates itself to be Counselor to the Divine. Fortunately for us, God in his compassion does not treat us like annoying fleas, but as ignorant children playing gods.

The following narrative confirms that God comes down to earth to humankind in his weakness and sinfulness, and enters into our lives and invites us to share in His divine plan. Clearly, God communicates with human beings, and His reasons for doing so are His own. Any blessing we receive, we have not merited.

In the case of Abraham, God willed that the deeds flowing from the faith and love of Abraham are righteous in the sight of God, and are meritorious for future generations. It does not depend upon the holiness, or lack of it, in those who are its future channels. As previously mentioned, free will is need if that person is to be a participant in God's divine plan for the salvation of humankind. The divine plan unfolds with or without our cooperation. It makes a big difference in our own lives whether we are with God or against Him. God does not make demons and devils, they are self-made.

Perhaps when we see questionable moral characters, and God's personal encounters with them, it may easier understand if we keep in mind that it is through the merits of Abraham that they play the part they do. (This same lesson is applicable to the Christian Community that exists through the merits of Jesus Christ.)

In our Christian Scriptures we find this teaching:

*God chose those whom the world considers absurd to shame the wise, he singled out the weak of this world to shame the strong. He chose the world's lowborn and despised, those who count for nothing, to reduce to nothing those who were something; so mankind can do no boasting before God. (1Cor 1:27-29)*

*For God who said, "let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts that we in turn might make known the glory of God shining on the face of Christ. This treasure we possess in earthen vessels to make clear that the surpassing power comes from God, and not from us. (2Cor 4:6-7) God made Jesus Christ our wisdom, our justice, our sanctification and redemption. (1Cor 1:30)*

Let us now return to our text, "*Jacob left Beer-sheba, and set out for Haran. He came upon a certain place and stopped there for the night, for the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of that place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. He had a dream; a stairway was set on the ground and its tops reached to the sky, and angels of God were going up and down on it.*"

The place Jacob came to is Luz—perhaps named for the almond trees growing in the area; for a long time it had been a sacred site for the Canaanite people. That night Jacob would come to know it was a sacred place. He placed a rock in front of his head for protection, not as a pillow, as suggested by the English text. As he slept he had a wonderful dream: there was a stairway grounded in the earth and winding all the way up into the heavens.

The image parallels that of the *Ziggurat*—an Akkadian word meaning "pinnacle," a tower attached to the temple with an outside stairway that wound high up to a platform, with a shrine at its top. It was viewed as the "gate of heaven," because the gods communicated with

people in the shrine in the sky. In Jacob's vision, the stairway, firmly planted in the earth, extended to the heavens above. Angels—Sons of God, members of the heavenly court—are messengers (*mal'ak*) of God, carrying his messages to men, and messages from them to God.

In Jacob's dream we read, *"And the Lord was standing beside him and he said: 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your forefather, and the God of Isaac; the ground upon which you are lying I will assign to you and to your offspring. Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth of the earth [What happened to those "stars" in the heavens?]; you shall spread out from the west to the east, to the north and to the south. All the families of the earth shall find blessing in you and your descendants'" (Gen 28:13-14).*

With this confirmation that the mantel of Abraham rests upon the shoulders of Jacob, our author can now proceed with Jacob's story.

Remember, Jacob is fleeing for his life. The very first night of his flight he hears words that comfort his heart and strengthen his will to go forward with confidence into the unknown: *"Remember I am with you: I will protect you wherever you go and will bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you."* What a great gift from God to a man traveling alone into an uncertain future. His descendants, in their long exile in Egypt, would remember these words, giving them both comfort and hope.

*"Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is present in this place, and I did not know it!'"* The very thought of it fills him with a sense of holy fear. *"Shaken, he said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the abode of God. And that is the gate of heaven!'"* *"Early in the morning, Jacob took the stone and sat it upon a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He named that site Bethel, but previously the name of the city had been Luz."*

Stone worship was a widespread phenomenon in the ancient world; people believed that supernatural powers dwelt in certain stones. Pouring oil over the stone consecrated it to God and made it sacred. Standing before the stone, perhaps with his hand upon the stone, Jacob took an oath, *"If God remains with me, if He protects me on this journey that I am making, and give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, and if I return safe to my father's house—the Lord shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set up as a pillar, shall be God's abode; and of all that you give me, I will set aside a tithe for You"* (Gen 28:20-22). Mentioning a gift of "tithes" to the place indicates that a future shrine will be erected there. "This stone" implies a sanctuary shall arise from that stone.

Israel will have an ambivalent relationship with sacred stone pillars. They were called "standing stones." Exodus 23:24 ordered the destruction all those in Judah. Moses erected twelve pillars at the foot of Mt. Sinai; Joshua erected one in the temple. Rabbi Jacob insists that sacred pillars were condemned only if they had been erected to honor foreign gods.

Let us fast-forward for a minute. Twenty years have passed, and Jacob is on the road back home to Beer-sheba. He stops again in Luz. We read, *"Thus Jacob came to Luz (that is Bethel) in the land of Canaan, he and all the people who were with him. There he built an altar and named the site Bethel for it was there that God had revealed Himself to him when he was*

*fleeing his brother” (Gen. 35:6).* He erected here a pillar, as before. God was with Jacob all along the way; God was faithful to his promise. Bethel was a sacred place to the Hebrew people; it became the principle sanctuary for the northern kingdom when King Jeroboam established a temple there to rival the one in Jerusalem. The Jews of Judah saw Bethel as place of idolatry and condemned it.

But, back to the story as it unfolds. Jacob enters into a new life in the land of Haran. What he and his mother reckoned in months becomes years. In Haran Jacob is an alien and sojourner. Canaan is his home by divine decree, but he must make it his own. Now Haran becomes his School of Maturity. As Jacob’s life unfolds in the house of Laban, amidst the trials and disappointments that always accompany interpersonal relationships, we must bear in mind one essential element in Jacob’s life: God’s personal message to Jacob and its effect on his life. *“I am with you. I will protect you wherever you go.”*

With the words, *“I am with you,”* God confirms his presence in the life of Jacob. When he tells him, *“I will protect you,”* it speaks of God’s active presence in the on-going circumstances of Jacob’s life. The Lord promises to be both his strength and his shield. The strength of God and His protection would be experienced in His actions within the ordinary circumstances of Jacob’s life.

Christian Theology teaches us to distinguish between the presence of God in our life and the actions of God within our works. It speaks of *sanctifying* grace as the abiding presence of God in our soul, making us holy; it speaks of *actual* grace when the grace of God motivates our deeds.

We read in Exodus that Yahweh told Moses, *“Moses! Come no nearer! Remove your sandals, the place you stand is holy ground” (Ex 3:4).* I asked myself, “how can dirt be holy?” And the answer was, “God was present there in the dirt and sand.” I realized if dirt and sand could be holy, so could I if God dwelt within my soul.

Seemingly, actual grace is often limited in our lives to unfruitful inspiration: God empowers us to act with actual grace but unless we act upon it, it bears no fruit in our lives. We often act, unconscious of the grace motivating us. We surprise ourselves and say to ourselves, “Where did that come from?”

The people in Jesus’ own hometown invited him to speak in their synagogue, and the congregation reacted with, *“Where did he get all this?” “Isn’t this the Carpenter, the son of Mary?”* They had heard the answer to their questions in his opening words, *“the Spirit of the Lord is upon me!”* With such a source even a carpenter can do such marvelous deeds.

With this we conclude our study of Chapter 28, and we must bid farewell to Isaac—a Gift of God and a gift to all humankind. We now turn our attention to his son Jacob, as the saga of his life unfolds on stage in the Theater of Genesis, in a play entitled “The Brides of Jacob.”

## ISAAC GIFT OF GOD—PART 2

### STUDY QUESTIONS (Please read Chapters 27-28)

1. What do the words of Isaac, “my innermost being,” tell you about his relationship with his son Esau?
2. What was the power of the spoken word in that ancient time, and what does it teach you about your own word?
3. What does Rebekah’s plot with Jacob to steal Esau’s blessing tell you about her?
4. What do you see as her personal reasons for her behavior?
5. How would you describe the nature of Isaac’s blessing to Jacob?
6. What blessings did this bring into his life?
7. How do you see the deceitful deeds of Rebekah and Jacob affecting the life of their family?  
What does this teach you?
8. How do you understand the teaching that an evil deed has a life of its own?
9. When an evil deed continues to cause evil beyond the desire of the perpetrator, who is to be held responsible for the evil done and how could one atone for them?
10. What effect did all this have in life of Jacob?
11. How does Isaac’s last blessing to his son reveal that he is truly a gift?
12. What is the significance of Jacob’s dream at Bethel?
13. What is the significance of angels’ ascending and descending the stairs?
14. How do you understand the words of the Lord to Jacob in Genesis 28:5?
15. If you could apply these words of the Lord to yourself and believe in them, how would it affect you future life?

## CHAPTERS 29, 30, 31

### BRIDES OF JACOB

#### PRELUDE TO ACT ONE

Over a month has passed since Jacob left Beer-sheba for the “Land of the Easterners:” those nomadic tribes of the Syro-Arabian desert, located in Central Mesopotamia within the great bend of the Euphrates River. It was a land and people governed by the ancient Hammurabi Legal Code: the law to which the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob submitted themselves.

We read in Genesis, “*Jacob resumed his journey and came to the land of the Easterners*” (Gen 29:1). Jacob had not entered into the ancestral land of his family. Soon he would learn there are no free lunches in Uncle Laban’s Inn. Uncle Laban takes after Jacob’s mother’s side the clan. Laban is like his Uncle Lot, and quite unlike Great Uncle Abraham and Great Aunt Sarah.

#### SCENE ONE—ACT ONE

Having recently crossed over to the eastern side of the Euphrates River, our weary fugitive looks up and sees well out in the field before him. A sign of hope as people gather at the wells. As he draws near to it, he knows he is not alone: lying around the well are three droves of sheep with their shepherds seated near by. As he walks up to the well, he notices a large stone covering the well. As he was not able to ask for a drink of water, he said to them, “*My friends where are you from!*” Not too eager for conversation with the stranger, one of the men replied, “*We are from Haran.*” Enough said! It fills Jacob with joy and gratitude to God for bringing him safely to his destination. He could not wait to ask them. “*Do you know Laban son, of Nahor [actually, grandson]?*” “*We know him,*” he replied. “*Is he well,*” Jacob asked? “*He is,*” they replied.”

This news only added to Jacob’s enthusiasm. Desiring to keep the conversation alive, he says to them, “*It is still daylight, hardly the time to round up animals. Why don't you water them and go grazing?*” “*We cannot*” they replied, and added, “*until all the shepherds are gathered together to roll the stone from the mouth of the well, so we can water the droves.*” As he was speaking, one of shepherds looked up and saw a shepherdess coming with her drove to the well. He says to Jacob, “*There is Laban's daughter Rachel arriving with the flock*” (Gen 29:4-9).

Jacob is too startled to speak! He knew God's hand was in all this. He stood looking at her: Rachel, the daughter of his mother's brother Laban (and his first cousin). Suddenly—without a word—he goes straight over to the well and moves the stone aside, and watered the sheep of

his mother's brother. Having watered the sheep, he went over kissed the startled Rachel and he burst into tears (see Gen 29:10-11).

Tears gave release to a heart too long burdened with dark emotions and fears. He could breathe again; he is alive again. A new life awaits him; Rachel opens the door and opens his heart. *"I am your father's relative,"* he says. Rachel breaks away like a startled fawn and races homeward across the field with news too good to hold within.

Rabbi Jacob breaks in at this point, fearing we might be scandalized by Jacob's bold and imprudent behavior. He tells us, "Under their code of law women had much greater freedom than they would have later. There are those," he says, "who seek to control abuses of freedom by destroying freedom; they themselves are becoming the greatest abusers of freedom and women as well."

Laban received with genuine joy Rachel's report that his sister's son has arrived in Haran, and is now down at the well guarding his flock. More than forty years have passed since he blessed Rebekah and sent her on to Canaan as Isaac's bride-to-be. Hearing the news, Laban rushed down to the well and immediately embraced and kissed Jacob, and brought him into his home.

Jacob shared with Laban all the news about Rebekah, and that she had sent Jacob to her family in Haran to find there a suitable wife among her own people. Jacob makes no mention of his brother Esau and the primary reason why he now stands at Laban's door. Laban needs to hear no more and says, *"You are indeed my flesh and blood"* (Gen 29-14).

## ACT ONE—SCENE 2

For over a month, Jacob lived in the home of Laban and shared in the family burden of making a living; seemingly, their wealth resided in their livestock. Nothing has gone unnoticed by Laban. The unexpected presence of his nephew offered him a golden opportunity for unburdening him of two weighty obligations, and enriching himself at the same time.

Our text informs us, *"Now Laban had two daughters: the name of the older one was Leah, and the name of the younger one was Rachel. Leah had soft dreamy eyes; Rachel was shapely and beautiful"* (Gen 29:16-17).

Feigning a fatherly concern for Jacob, Laban craftily says, *"Just because you are a kinsman, should you serve me for nothing? Tell me, what shall your wages be?" ...Jacob loved the younger daughter Rachel and so he answered: "I will serve you seven years for your younger daughter Rachel." Laban said, 'Better that I give her to you than that I should give her to an outsider. Stay with me'* (Gen 29:15,18-19). "Stay with me" implies being under the authority of Laban.

Genesis early mentioned that Isaac loved Rebekah, but now it brings us personally into the love story of Jacob and Rachel. Genesis speaks to us of *eros*—love of man for woman; it is a rare moment in the Scriptures. It seems to have an encore in the Song of Songs.

### AN INTERMISSION

We speak of the love of man for woman as a power that draws man and woman into an inseparable union—a union carrying the promise of the fulfillment of happiness.

Pope Benedict teaches in *God Is Love*, “The love between man and woman, which is neither planned nor willed, but somehow imposes itself upon human beings, was called *eros* by the ancient Greeks.”

In the minds of the ancient Greeks, Eros caused intoxication—a divine madness, that overcomes human reason and produces a state of supreme happiness. In the light of experiencing Eros, other good in life falls into a secondary place. The Greek philosophers such as Plato saw Eros as a divine power, the experience of which brought the person into communion with the divine.

The Greeks personally deified Eros. They built temples to Eros and created rituals of worship—sexual rituals created to induce a “state of madness” called Ecstasy. Women who were called “goddesses” were exploited in these rituals to produce this “divine madness.” This behavior resulted not in the ascension of the human spirit, but in the desecration of the image of man and woman, made in the Image of God.

Because of the idolatrous association of word *eros*, it rarely appeared in the Old Testament, and not at all in the New Testament. Pope Benedict teaches that the Old Testament did not reject the human love that *eros* represented, rather, it declared war on a worship of love that was corrupting true worship of God, and dehumanizing human beings.

Pope Benedict points out two different words used for love in the Song of Songs. The first word is *dodim*; in the plural *dodim* suggests “a love that is still insecure, indeterminate and searching.” Perhaps we could say *dodim* is the dart of love, but the full force of it remains yet to be expressed. The second word, *ahabia*, expresses its full flowering. In contrast to *dodim*'s indeterminate searching love, *ahabia* expresses the maturing experience of love involving the discovery of the “other,” moving beyond the selfish character that prevailed earlier. Love now becomes concerned and caring for the other. No longer is it self-seeking, a sinking into the intoxication of happiness, instead, it seeks for the good of the beloved. It becomes renunciation, and the lover is ready and willing for sacrifice.

In the Greek translation, the concept of *ahabia* is translated as “agape,” which expresses the true biblical concept of love.



When the human body with its sexuality is seen purely as a material part of oneself, which can be used and exploited at will, we are dealing with the debasement of the human body. *Eros* that is reduced to pure sex becomes a commodity to be advertised, bought and sold--reducing the human person to an "object." St Paul speaks of it as reducing our human bodies to an instrument of evil.

Saint Augustine reminds us "an abuse of a good thing does not destroy the use of a good thing nor its goodness, even when desecrated."

In his encyclical on love, our Pope Benedict frees the concept of *Eros* from its ancient corruption: *eros* and *agape* are not traveling on two tracks going in different directions. *Eros* and *Agape* run on the same track, and can never be completely separated; rather, they seek unity in the one reality of love.

Our Holy Father goes on to teach us:

Yet it is neither the spirit alone nor the body alone that loves: it is man, the person, a unified creature composed of body and soul, who loves. Only when both dimensions are truly united, does man attain his full stature. Only thus is *eros* able to mature and attain its authentic grandeur.

Love is indeed 'ecstasy,' not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self [a navel gazing self] toward its liberation through self-giving: thus toward authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God.

The early Fathers of the Church spoke of *eros* as seeking God and *agape* as expressing the passing on of God' love that resides within the human heart. Perhaps we find in this teaching the understanding of the paradox proposed by Jesus: "*Whoever seeks to gain life will lose it but whoever loses his life will preserve it*" (Lk 17:33).

We return to our biblical story of the love of a man for a woman, with the hope our little digression deepens our understanding of the story to unfold.

Rabbi Jacob informs us, "Laban's elaborate pretense of politeness and family solidarity is a facade lasting about a month, at which time he immediately thereafter puts into operation a scheme of singular cunning and duplicity" (Speiser). Unwittingly, the schemer becomes a tool of destiny.

Jacob fails to see what readers must not fail to see--the entire irony of what now follows. In Jacob's case, the younger brother replaced his older brother through deception. Laban reverses the trick and exchanges the older sister for the younger. Jacob gained his brother's birthright with a bowl of lentil soup but after seven years of arduous work, he will be unable gain his heart's desire—Rachel. Perhaps the story that unfolds may be seen as the Lord's writing straight with crooked lines.

Rabbi Jacob makes it clear: Jacob's deceptive scheme for obtaining the blessing did not meet with divine approval, although through Jacob's action, God's will is accomplished. The scheme and the tricks are not of God's doing, but that of impatient people seeking to accomplish God's will—their own way.

We are left with no misunderstanding concerning the depths of Jacob's love for Rachel when we are told that the seven years of hard labor for Rachel's hand seemed to him but a "few days," because of his love for her (see Gen 29:20). Now, that is love of the "other," especially when we hear his account of his labors. "*Often, scorching heat ravaged me by day and frost at night and sleep drifted from my eyes*" (Gen 31:40). In his servitude, Laban got every ounce of time and labor possible from Jacob. He made him a herdsman for his livestock and made him accountable for every one missing. Whether lost, killed or stolen, Jacob had to pay for the loss. At harvest time Laban made him a field hand.

Those "few days" Jacob speaks of recalls the "few days" Rebekah anticipated before her reunion with Jacob. From the works of their own hands comes the restitution for their sin; God did not will the evil that befell them, but permitted it for their own good. There is a story from the life of Teresa of Avila that, when she complained about her sufferings, the Lord told her, "I arrange these things according to what I know is your will, not in order to comply with your weak, sensuous nature."

The previous situation between Rebecca and her brother Laban are not the same as with Laban and his two daughters. As Rebecca's guardian, her brother could not marry her off without her consent. However, sons and daughters are under the complete control of their father; they were his property and their lives were in his hands. Both Leah and Rachel testify regarding their status under Laban, "*Surely he regards us as outsiders, now that he has sold us and has used up our purchase price*" (Gen 31:15). Neither girl had any say in this matter of their marriage to Jacob; they were no more than a business deal.

We must not let our fantasies take hold and imagine it was love at first sight for both of them. Yes! It was love at first sight for Jacob, but as for Rachel, we know nothing. The Jewish Talmud relates a story of Rachel's deep concern for her sister Leah. As the story goes, Jacob, suspicious of Laban's sincerity, gave Rachel a gift of certain ornaments with the instruction to wear them on the day of the wedding so he would know it was Rachel. Rachel, on her part, could not bear the thought of her sister Leah being humiliated on her wedding day before all their guests. She gave the ornaments to Leah, instructing her how to wear them. Perhaps at this time in Rachel's life, the love for her sister was greater than her love of Jacob. No doubt, their past experience of survival under their father had brought the two girls close together.

Those seven years of labor have come and gone as yesterday. "*Jacob said to Laban, 'Give me my wife for my time is fulfilled, that I may cohabit with her.'* And Laban gathered all the people of the place and made a feast" (Gen 29:21-22).

It was customary for the girl of a prominent family to receive from her father, at the time of her wedding, the gift of a slave girl to attend her. In keeping with the custom, Laban had given his maidservant, Zilpah, to his daughter Leah as her maid.

A celebration of the groom with all his men friends, and the bride with all her bridesmaids, proceeds to the wedding ceremony. The wine would flow and Laban, attending to business, made sure Jacob's glass was never empty. When evening came, Laban took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob. As customary, the bride remained veiled until she entered the wedding chamber. The wedding went as planned.

Not until the morning light broke into the tent did the wedding bliss end. Leah had her one night of love, ending with an enraged husband, bursting out of the tent, seeking his devious father-in-law.

Jacob confronted Laban with, *"What is this you have done to me?"* Laban, knowing he had the winning hand, offered no defense. He coolly replied to Jacob, *"It is not the custom in our country [Haran] to marry off the younger sister before the older sister."* Of course Laban has his ace in the hole, and now he plays it. *"Wait until the bridal week of this one is over and we will give you that one too, provided you serve me seven more years."* Laban had given him an offer, he lacked the strength to refuse (see Gen 29:21-27).

Jacob waited out the celebration of the bridal week, and then Laban gave him his daughter Rachel as wife, using the same feast to celebrate both weddings. However, Laban did give Rachel the gift of her own maidservant, Bilhah. We read, *"Jacob cohabitated with Rachel also; indeed, he loved Rachel more than Leah, and he served another seven years."* In the phrase "he loved Rachel more than Leah" lays the seed for what will follow.

The deeds of Laban created a very difficult environment, in which the lives of Jacob, Leah and Rachel unfold during the next eight years. Their emotional lives are deeply integrated with one another, causing a great deal of unhappiness for the three of them. In Chapter 31:33, we learn that Leah and Rachel had separate tents, as did their servant girls, Zilpah and Bilhah. This facilitated Jacob's responsibility for having to cohabit with more than one woman.

In the semi-nomadic conditions in which Laban and his family live, children, especially male children, were an important part of economic life and future security. We read in the Jewish psalms,

*Sons are the provision of the Lord; the fruit of the womb, a reward. Like arrows in the hand of warrior are sons born to a man in his youth. Happy the man who fills his quiver with them; they shall not be put to shame when they contend with the enemy in the gate. (Ps 127:3-5)*

*Your wife shall be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons like olive plants around your table. So shall the man who fears the Lord be blessed" (Ps 128:3-4).*

Motherhood was the woman's essential role in society; it determined her social status in the community. For a married woman to be barren caused both physical and spiritual anxiety for a woman.

We find a clear demonstration of the situation in the first chapter of 1Samuel. We read, *“Elkanah had two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. Hannah was his favorite but God had closed her womb...Her rival, to make her miserable, would taunt her that the Lord had closed her womb. This happened year after year, every time they went up to the house of the Lord. The other would taunt her, so she wept and would not eat. ‘Why are you so sad? Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?’ said her husband” (1Sam 1:2, 5-8).* Her sorrow came, not because her husband did not love her, but because in her mind, God did not love her, and she experienced disgrace in the eyes of others.

We find this same situation in Genesis. Jacob loves Rachel as Elkanah loved Hannah, but with a difference. Elkanah loved Peninnah, but loved Hannah more. Jacob only loved Rachel and rejected Leah, feeling bitterness toward her for the part she played in her father's duplicity. Jacob had had no desire to marry Leah, and he could put no heart into this marriage; his heart belonged to Rachel. Where did this leave Leah? Unloved and unwanted!

Jacob loved Rachel and tolerated Leah; his general attitude toward her was not one of care and concern but general indifference. When she was around, it was as if she was not. Hated people often get a great deal of negative attention. Some people spend their married lives in contention with one another; they would rather fight than be ignored. When you are fighting with someone, you have their undivided attention.

Leah suffered in silence. Where was the Lord in all this? We know his eye is upon the sparrow, and His eye was upon Leah. Jacob chose Rachel over Leah, and God chose Leah over Rachel; He did for her what was in His power to do in her particular situation--He made her very fruitful. As we read in Genesis, *“The Lord saw that Leah was unloved and he opened her womb, but Rachel was barren” (Gen 29:31).* The Lord loved Leah and gave her the strength to be herself.

Four sons are born to Leah, and she names them. Seemingly, Leah, in the names she bestows on her sons, memorializes her emotional situation at its birth. She calls her first-born son “Reuben” (*raa beonyi*), declaring, *“It means ‘Yahweh has seen my distress, now my husband will love me.’”* Her second son she calls “Simeon” (*shama*), saying, *“It means that Yahweh heard that I was unloved so he has given me this one also.”*

Her third son she calls “Levi” (*yillaweh*), *“Because my now my husband will become attached to me—I have borne him three sons.”*

When the fourth son was born she said, *“‘This time let me praise Yahweh’; and this why she named him Judah [Odeh]. Then she stopped bearing children (see Gen 29:33-35).*

## JACOB'S LONG HOT SUMMER

As result of four sons being born to Leah, Rachel grows envious of her and blames her husband for her sterility. She tells him, "Give me children, or I shall die!" She makes it clear to him that his love is not sufficient; being his wife does not fulfill her life. The words of Elkanah to Hannah would express well the sentiments of Jacob—"Why are you so sad? Am I not more devoted to you than ten sons?" Jacob gave expression to his hurt with an angry retort, "Am I in the position of God, who has denied you fruit of the womb?" Jacob rejects any blame for her situation; the matter lies between her and God.

Rachel resorts to the custom of the barren woman, giving her maidservant to her husband for the purpose of bearing a child in her place. She said, "*Here is my maid Bilhah. Cohabit with her, and let her give birth on my knees, so that I may produce through her!*" (Gen 30:3). To place a child on one's own knees after its birth acknowledges it as one's own. Normally this would be the action of the father. Here it the act of the adoptive mother, who is intent on establishing her legal right over the child.

Jacob cohabitated with Bilah and she conceived and bore Jacob a son. When the child was placed on Rachel's knee, she exclaimed "*God has vindicated me: indeed he has heeded my plea by giving me a son.*" Hence, she named him "Dan" (*dannanni*). Bilah conceives and bears a second son. At this time Rachel said, "*A fateful contest waged I with my sister, and I have prevailed.*" So she named him "Naphtali" (*Naptule elohim niptalte*), saying "*in a divine wrestling match I have wrestled.*" Rachel's words at the birth of Naphtali imply an involvement in an ordeal--an-on-going problem between Leah and herself--married to the same man.

Later, we see in Leviticus 18:18 that Jewish Law forbids marriage between two sisters. Rabbi Jacob interprets Rachel's words to imply, "I have been entangled in a contest with my sister that only celestial powers could resolve, and I have emerged victorious from the ordeal." It carries something of the concept of a wrestling match with God. The idea of "fateful contest" leaves one with the idea of an on-going war, in which a battle has been won but the war continues.

Leah takes up her sister's challenge. She herself had stopped bearing children, so she took her maid Zilpah and gave her to Jacob as his concubine or consort. Normally concubine means wife, but here it refers to a wife of a secondary station, lacking the full rights of the ordinary wife. Zilpah bears Jacob a son, and Leah exclaims, "*How propitious!*" So she named him Gad (*begad*). "*Then Zilpah bore a second son to Jacob, and Leah exclaimed, 'What good fortune!' meaning 'Women will consider me fortunate.'* So she named him Asher [*beoshri*]" (Gen 30:11-13).

Leah now has six children that she can call her own. Rachel has two adopted sons. We read that Leah's first-born son, Reuben, is out in the field helping with the wheat harvest. He ran across a rare plant called mandrake, which is believed to this day to possess aphrodisiac qualities, increasing fertility in women.

We can safely presume the relationship between the sisters is strained. Rachel hears about Reuben's find, and she asks her sister, "*Please give me some of your son's mandrakes.*" Leah answered, "*Was it not enough for you to take away my husband, that you should also take my son's mandrakes?*" Rachel replied, "*Then let Jacob lie with you tonight, in return for your son's mandrakes.*" Leah gave her the mandrakes.

*"That evening as Jacob was coming in from the fields, Leah went out to meet him informing him, 'You stay with me, for I have paid for you with my own son's mandrakes.' So he lay with her that night" (Gen 30:16).*

"The bitterness of Leah's tragic position as the wife that Jacob never wanted, never loved, is experienced as poignant in the fact she has to bargain with her sister to have her husband just to sleep with her" (Jewish Study Bible).

God blessed Leah, and she gave Jacob two more sons--the fifth son she named "Issachar" (*sekari*) meaning "God has given me my reward;" the sixth son she named "Zebulum" (*zebadani zebed tob*) meaning "God has given me a precious gift."

The Lord gives Leah yet another precious gift, more for herself than for Jacob--a girl is born to Leah, and she named her Dinah.

In the tent of Rachel a great event occurs--Rachel gives birth to her own natural child and she names him "Joseph" (*yosep*), a name that implies, "don't stop now Lord"—"May Yahweh add another son for me!"

Genesis makes clear that this birth results "*because God heeded her and unclosed her womb,*" and not because of that "magical" plant gathered by Reuben. This is not to say an act of God does not occur through natural remedies. Seemingly, God has a preference of using just such instruments for his work in our personal lives. Never ask God for a blessing and leave only the front door opened.

As we bring the curtain down on The Brides of Jacob, we have been introduced to the Eleven Sons of Jacob. Briefly, we have been introduced to eleven men who will become the foundation stones of the Nation of Israel.

Before closing the curtain, Leah steps to center stage and introduces a precious gift to us— a gift that was more for herself than for Jacob. Leah introduces her first-born daughter—Princess Dinah of Haran.

The perfect relationship between men and women appeared in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve before the Fall. There we saw what God wills, now we will see what sinful man wills.

Let us share at this point a meditation on the role of womanhood in modern society, by the Poet Rainer Maria Rilke.

We are only just now beginning to look upon the relationship of one individual person to a second individual objectively and without prejudice, and our attempt to

live such associations have no model before them. Yet, in the changes brought about by time, there is already a good deal that would help our timorous novice.

The girl and the woman, in their view their own unfolding will be in passing but imitators of masculine ways, good and bad, as repeaters of masculine. After the uncertainty of such transitions, it will become apparent that women were only going through the profusion and the vicissitude of those (often ridiculous) disguises in order to cleanse their own most characteristic nature of the distorting influences of the other sex. Women in whom life lingers and dwells more immediately, more fruitful and more confidently, must surely have become fundamentally riper people, more human people, than easygoing man, who is not pulled down below the surface of life by the weight of any fruit of his body, and who, presumptuous and hasty, undervalues what he thinks he loves. This humanity of woman, borne its full time in suffering and humiliation, will come to light when she will have stripped off the conventions of mere femininity in the mutations of her outward status, and those men who do not yet feel its approaching today will be surprised and struck by it: some day there will be girls and women whose name will no longer signify merely an opposite of the masculine, but something in itself, something that makes one think, not of any complement and limit, but only of life and existence: the Feminine Human Being.

This advance will change the love-experience, which is now full of error, will alter it from the ground up, reshape it into a relation that is meant to be one of human being to another, no longer of man to woman. (Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters To A Young Poet*, written circa 1903)

## ACT 1—SCENE 2

The Scriptures present for the first time a man—Laban—in the role of father-in-law. He is an absolute nightmare for any son-in-law.

Our scene opens fourteen years after Jacob arrived as a guest in the home of his uncle Laban. Jacob has completed fourteen years as an indentured servant to Laban, which legally implies that all his labors and the fruit of all his labor belongs to Laban.

Jacob is not the same man that arrived fourteen years ago at a well on the outskirts of Haran. Until that day, he had lived a pampered life in the heart and home of his mother. She centered her life on him and he did likewise. He deliberately betrayed his father and his brother to achieve his desires. He arrived in Haran a fugitive from his brother's murderous intentions.

However, that is not the man he has become. At the well in Haran, he met Rachel and crumbled, falling apart emotionally. Only the possession of her love could bring him back together. He was no longer a self-serving man, but a lover to be tried and tested in the fire. To possess the woman he loved demanded that he give up himself in servitude to another: he could see no life for himself without her.

He had no gold or silver to give her father in exchange for his daughter. For her, he gave himself up to fourteen years of hard labor under the tight-fisted hand of his father-in-law.

The scene opens: his debt to Laban was paid but he was still under the lordship of his father-in-law. He asks Laban's leave to return to his homeland with his family. Laban could exercise little control over Jacob's comings and goings, but he controlled his daughters; legally they remain in Laban's possession.

The past fourteen years have unfolded under the umbrella of the divine promise God made to Jacob at Bethel on his way to Haran:

*Remember, I am with you:  
I will protect you wherever you go.  
And I will bring you back to this land  
I will not leave you until I have done  
what I have promised you.  
(Gen 28:15)*

Only in the eyes of the observer does the promise remain dormant; we see only the mundane occurrences of daily life, which appear quite God-free. As a leaven, the divine presence silently and powerfully permeates the life of a person by writing straight with the crooked lines of sin. We fail to see all the golden threads that are woven amidst all the messes we have made in our life.

Jacob revealed later to Leah and Rachel a dream he had received prior to this encounter with Laban:

*Once, at the mating time of the flocks, I had a dream in which I saw that the he-goats mating with the flock were streaked, speckled, and mottled. And in the dream an angel of God said to me, "Jacob!" "Here!" I answered. Then he said, "Note well. All the he-goats which are mating with the flocks are streaked, speckled and mottled, for I have seen all that Laban has been doing to you. I am the God who appeared to you in Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me. Now, arise! Leave this land and return to your native land." (Gen 31:10-13)*

Jacob knew the time had come for him to leave the house of Laban and return to Canaan. In a dream, the spirit of the Lord had encouraged this move. A major obstacle at the time was personal poverty; he had nothing with which to support his growing family. However, trusting in the Lord, he takes the first step. He informs Laban of his desire. "After Rachel gave birth to Joseph, Jacob said to Laban, "Give me leave to go to my homeland with my wives and my children. You know well how much my service has done for you and now I must do something for myself and my family" (Gen 30:25-26).

This is not good news for Laban. Through the ritual of divination, it had been revealed to Laban that the presence of Jacob in his house was the source of his present prosperity. Rituals of divination were very common in the Near East as a means of discerning God's will in a



particular matter. We will see in the New Testament, when the Church gathered to select the replacement for the office of Judas, they nominated two men for the office and then they prayed, *“Make known to us which of these two you choose,”* and then *“they drew lots between the two men; the choice fell to Matthias”* (Acts 1:26).

Laban, to protect his prosperity, makes an offer that enables Jacob to obtain the material blessings he needs for himself and his family. Laban desires to keep his good luck charm in the household and continue to grow more prosperous through his labors. He says, *“I know though divination you are a blessing to me, name any wages you want from me, and I will pay”* (Gen 30:27b-28).

Jacob knows his uncle well; he wants no obligation to Laban, so he will take nothing that is not his own. He offers Laban a deal, and this time Jacob has the ace in the hole—seemingly with a bit of divine help.

Jacob “clears the air” as we would say, before making his offer. *“You know what my service has meant to you, and how your livestock has fared in my care; the little you had before I came has grown into very much, since Yahweh has blessed you for my action. Therefore, I should now do something for my own household as well”* (Gen 30:29-30).

Laban weighed Jacob’s words and then cautiously inquired, “What should I pay you?” Jacob’s response sent the ringing of cash registers in Laban ears: *“You need not pay me anything outright, if you do this one thing for me.”* What follows becomes a bit confusing for those not involved in the raising of livestock or knowledgeable in animal husbandry. Jacob tells Laban, *“You do not have to pay me anything outright. I will again pasture and tend your flock if you do what I ask: go through your entire flock and remove any sheep that is dark colored, and every goat that is speckled or spotted. Only such animals shall be my wages. The next time you come to check these wages, let my honesty testify against me: any animal in my possession that is not a speckled or spotted goat or a dark-colored sheep, got there by theft!”*

This deal, in the mind of Laban, favored him and not Jacob; already his devious mind schemed to increase his winnings. The spirit of greed possesses Laban--being generous would be impossible, being honest would be difficult. Laban said to Jacob, *“Very well, let it be as you say.”*

While Jacob is on the way to tell his wives the good news, Laban goes immediately out into his flock, separates every dark colored sheep and every spotted or speckled goat from his herd; these he puts under the charge of his sons, and puts a three-day journey between them and the flock Jacob will tend for him. Remember, Jacob had said of them, *“they alone shall be my wages.”* The following morning Jacob found himself leading a sanitized herd: not one sheep or goat belonged to Jacob; Laban has stolen his first month’s wages. Laban stole Jacob’s first wages when he removed the darkened sheep and speckled goats.

After Joseph discovered that Laban had removed all the colored animals, he devised a plan. A common belief of the time concerning animal husbandry was that the image seen by the sheep or goat at the time of conception affected the fetus of the sheep or goat, and seemingly affected its color. By the application of this theory, and the careful selection of animals, Jacob had great success. At mating time, he separated the sheep and goats, placed striped and speckled rods in front of the goat's watering hole, and placed the sheep facing the dark-colored sheep of Laban. He chose only sturdy animals to mate in front of the rods or Laban's dark colored flock, and sent the weaker ones back to Laban's flock. In this way, Joseph's flock of colored animals grew and he became prosperous (see Gen 30:37-43).

One evening, Jacob shared his thoughts with Leah and Rachel, *"You know, I have served your father faithfully all these years but he has not dealt fairly but cheated me: time and again he arbitrarily changed my wages. In the end, God would not permit him to harm me. Whenever your father said, 'The speckled sheep shall be your wages,' the whole flock would bear speckled young; if he said 'all the streaked sheep shall be your wages,' the whole flock would bear streaked young. The bottom line is the Lord reclaimed your father's livestock and gave it to me"* (Gen 31: 5-9). Here Jacob confirms the lordship of God over the produce of the world.

*"At the end of seven years Jacob had grown exceedingly prosperous, and he came to own large flocks, maidservants and menservants, camels and asses"* (Gen 30:43). Let us not forget: during this entire enterprise there has been the Hidden Partner.

Up to this point in the narrative, there has been no mention of the sons of Laban. The Hebrew expression for "sons" has a large umbrella that includes sons, nephews, cousins, and adopted children. Note in Chapter 25:24, Bethuel, the father of Laban and Rebekah, had seven brothers; any of the children of these brothers could come under the heading of "sons."

Jacob's success has left "the sons" of Laban anxious; the decrease in their father's fortune concerned them personally as heirs. Envy is the sister to Greed. The "sons of Laban" spread about the word that, *"Jacob has taken everything that belongs to our father, and he has built up all this wealth out of what should be our father's."* Their grumblings have come to the ear of Jacob; these words are a harbinger of a coming storm.

Prudently, Jacob summons his wives to a conference out in the field where his flock was. What he has to say is only for their ears and the sheep's. *"The attitude of your father toward me has changed, and it is not as it was in the past. The Lord's word to me is, 'Up, then, leave this land and return to the land of your birth, and I will be with you.'"* Jacob realizes the time has come to act upon the exhortations of the Lord,

The sisters, often in disagreement with one another, have become united in their estimation of where they stand with their father. Both Rachel and Leah reply, *"Have we still an heir's portion in our father's estate? Are we not considered by him as outsiders? Not only did he sell us, but he has used up the money he got for us! All this wealth that God has reclaimed from our father is really ours and our children's. Do just as God has told you"* (Gen 31:14-16).

Laban was away at the time to shear his sheep; Jacob had, we are told, *“lulled the mind of Laban the Aramaean, so that he would not be forewarned of his flight.”*

This is not a moment for more words, but action. He gathered all the possessions that he had acquired and the property in his possession—maidservants, menservants, camels and asses. In addition, we are told that Rachel appropriated her father’s household gods. Jacob placed his wives and children on camels, and with his flock driven ahead of them, they “go to his father Isaac in the land of Canaan.” A jubilant family, free from the oppression of the house of Laban, joyfully heads toward Canaan—a symbol of freedom and life for them.

## ACT 2

Jacob and his family had a three-day grace period before Laban received the news of their departure to Canaan. They crossed over the Euphrates and headed toward the hill country of Gilead. They had put about 350 miles between them and Haran. Crossing the Euphrates probably brought them beyond any legal authority Laban may have possessed. They are out of his reach legally, but not from his wrath. The old trickster has been tricked, and he will not take it well.

When Laban got word of the exodus he gathered up all his kinsmen, and began his pursuit of them. They caught up with them on the seventh day in the hill country of Gilead. The night before Laban encountered Jacob and his family, the Lord appeared in a dream to him with the warning, *“Take care not to press matters with Jacob for good or bad!”* The Lord warned Laban to stay out of this whole affair—it was out of his hands.

The dream served as water on the fire of his wrath, which then turns into hurt feelings and self-pity. Laban overtook Jacob, who had pitched his tents on the Heights, so Laban pitched his tents nearby, on Mount Gilead. Meeting Jacob, Laban said to him, *“What did you mean by lulling my mind and carrying off my daughters like captives of the sword? Why did you flee so furtively, and dupe me, and not tell me?”* Laban really stretches the truth when he tells him, *“I would have sent you off with festive music, with tumbrel and lyre. You didn't permit me so much as a parting kiss for my grandchildren and daughters! It was certainly a senseless thing for you to do. I have the power to harm all of you, but the God of your fathers warned me last night not to do any harm to you or yours. Very well then, you had to leave because you were home-sick for your father's house; but why did you steal my gods!”* (Gen 31:25-31).

What Rachel had done was a foolish and dangerous thing, and keeping it a secret from Jacob could have resulted in disaster for the family. He would have never permitted the theft. Did Rachel reason, “What Jacob doesn't know won't hurt him?” She had placed him in a position of not being able to protect her for her crime.

We ought not to attribute Rachel’s devotion to the gods, but rather to money, as motivation for her behavior. “According to ancient documents of the time, possession of the house gods could signify legal title to a given estate, particularly in the cases of the

ordinary, involving daughters, son-in-laws, or adopted sons” (E.A. Speiser). There may be a bit more of Laban in Rachel than we realized.

Rabbi Jacob points out:

“Under Hammurabi law, Jacob's status in Laban's household would normally be tantamount to self-enslavement. That position, however, would be altered if Jacob were recognized as an adopted son who married the master's daughters. Possession of the household gods might well have made the difference. Laban knew this: he keeps up the pretense that he is the legal owner of everything in Jacob's possession. With the images gone, he could not press such a claim in a court of law. Tradition”, Rabbi Jacob reminds us, “remembers Rachel as a resolute woman who did not shrink from taking the law—or what she believed to be the law—into her own hands.” (E.A. Speiser, Anchor Bible).

The accusation of the theft brought an immediate reaction from Jacob. Without realizing that Rachel was the thief, he exclaimed, *“I was frightened at the thought that you might take your daughters from me by force. But as for your gods, the one you find them with shall not remain alive!”* With those words, he signed the death of Rachel, designating himself her executioner. *“In the name of all this company, if you discover here anything that belongs to you, take it!”* On hearing this Rachel, if not already in her tent, quickly entered it.

Laban thoroughly searched the tents of Jacob, the servant girls, and Leah. He finally entered Rachel's tent. Rachel had taken the gods, hid them in a camel's cushion, and then sat upon it. She remained seated before her father saying, *“Let not my lord take it amiss that I cannot rise before you, for a woman's period is upon me.”* Rachel had learned a few tricks from Laban: she placed herself in a position that made it unacceptable to touch her, and probably also what she sat on. *“And so, though he searched, he did not find the idols.”*

The whole situation had left Jacob embarrassed and angry. He confronted Laban with, *“What is my crime, what is my guilt, that you should hound me? Although you have rummaged through all my things, have you found a single object from your household? If so, produce it here before your kinsmen and mine that they may decide between us.”*

The affair has taken on the atmosphere of a legal trial at which Jacob is acting as his own defense attorney. *“In the twenty years that I was under you, your ewes and your she-goats never miscarried, nor did I ever feast on a ram from your flock. I never brought you an animal torn by wild beasts; I made good the loss myself. You exacted from me anything snatched by day or by night. Often, scorching heat ravaged me by day and frost at night, while sleep fled from my eyes. Of the twenty years that I spent in your household, I slaved fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, while you changed my wages time and again. If my ancestral God, the God of Abraham and the Awesome One of Isaac, had not been on my side, you would have sent me away empty-handed. But God saw my plight and the fruits of my labors, and he gave judgment last night”* (Gen 31:31-42).

The testimony of Jacob declares, before these witnesses, none of his wealth comes from Laban; God's gracious care during his difficult sojourn provided it all.

Laban offered no defense against Jacob's accusation; he ignored it all and justified his own behavior by proclaiming a legal ownership of all that Jacob possesses. After Jacob finished making his points, Laban goes on to make a show of his own largess, *"The daughters are mine and their children are mine; so too is the flock. Everything you see belongs to me. [When dealing with a man as Laban, you need God on your side.] But since these women are my daughters, I will now do something for them and for the children they have borne. So come, let us conclude a pact, you and I; the Lord shall be a witness between us"* (Gen 31:43-44).

Jacob is relieved and contented to make a treaty with his father-in-law, who for once is not the winner. He erects a pillar and places a stone upon it; he gives directions to the others to gather stones to be piled against the pillar. Laban called the site *Yegar-sahadutha*, Aramaic for "mound of testimony; Jacob called it *Galeed*, mound of witness. As customary at such times, they celebrated a banquet or meal. The meal completed, Laban declared, *"This mound shall be witness, as of this day, between you and me...May Yahweh keep watch between you and me when we are out of sight of each other. If you ill-treat my daughters, or take other wives besides my daughters, remember that even though no one else is about, God will be witness between you and me"* (Gen 31:48-50. The stipulation against taking other wives is found in many ancient documents concerning marriage.

*"Laban goes on the say to Jacob: 'Here is the mound, and here the pillar which I erected between you and me: this mound shall be witness, and this pillar shall be witness, that, with hostile intent, neither may I pass beyond this mound into your territory nor may you pass beyond it into mine. May the God of Abraham and the God of Nahor maintain order between us!' Jacob took the oath by the Awesome One of Isaac his father"* (Gen 31:51-53)

A note of interest: Jacob erected the pillar and placed the stone there; Laban's words imply that Laban was the one who did so, which could indicate that he looks upon Jacob as still under his servitude, with no claim on the work he has done. The absence of the household "gods" may have played a part in the nature of the covenant made.

*"That evening, Jacob offered sacrifice on the Height in gratitude to the Lord, and invited his companions to partake of the meal. After the meal, they passed a peaceful night on the Height."* All is well that ends well! Thanks be to God.

Early the next morning Laban appears in camp, kisses his daughters and grandchildren good-by, and left for Haran—not without a bit of uneasiness concerning the whereabouts of those household gods.

Jacob and his family resume their journey to Canaan.

End of the Play: THE BRIDES OF JACOB

**CHAPTER 29, 30, 31**

**BRIDES OF JACOB**

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

**(Please read chapters 29, 30 and 31)**

- 1. What is your understanding of the concept of Eros?**
- 2. What is the connection Pope Benedict makes between Eros and Agape?**
- 3. How would you describe the love between Jacob and Rachel?**
- 4. How do you see a comparison between what Jacob did to Esau and Laban did to Jacob?**
- 5. What do you understand by the old expression “what goes around, comes around”?**
- 6. How do you see this affecting the lives of Rachael and Leah?**
- 7. How would you see being "unloved and unwanted" affecting a person and their marriage?**
- 8. What does the naming of her children tell you about Leah's married life?**
- 9. What do the words of Rainer Maria Rilke teach you about women in our world today?**
- 10. What do Jacob's later dealings with Laban teach you about his own growth and development?**
- 11. What does Gen. 31:14-16 teach you about the relationship of Leah and Rachael with Laban?**
- 12. What does the episode of Rachael and the household gods reveal about Rachael's character?**
- 13. What do you learn from Gen. 31:36-42 about the life lived by Jacob during his exile in Haran?**
- 14. From the example of Jacob's life, what do you learn about God working in our lives?**
- 15. What do you see as the most important lesson you have learned from this section of Genesis entitled Brides of Jacob?**

## CHAPTERS 32-33-34

### RECONCILIATION

The unfolding of Genesis confirms a fundamental teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures: man on earth is involved in the everyday affairs of human life while unknowingly playing an intimate role in the divine plan of God. God weaves the plan of man into the divine plan.

With the kiss of peace, Jacob and his family bid farewell to Laban. Freedom from Laban's influence begins a new chapter in their lives. Jacob is on his way home. Angels of God greet him on his arrival in Canaan. On the night he first departed from Canaan, he had encountered them at Bethel, and their presence assured him that God would be with him. Their presence at this campsite confirms God's protective love continues for him. "*'This must be God's encampment' he said, and he called the place Mahanaim [man-camp and God-camp].*" Is it not possible, as we sojourn along our way, that God shares our campsites with us? Perhaps when we sit around our campfires, we should invite the unseen guests to join us.

Jacob is returning home with unfinished business to confront--the murderous wrath he had enkindled in his brother Esau. The visitation of the angels encourages him to go forward to encounter his brother.

We know that Jacob is a wily man, and as cunning as his uncle Laban. This situation demands the utmost prudence—their lives may depend on it. Jacob needs the wisdom to discern the desired goal and the prudence to choose the means to achieve it.

Reconciliation with Esau is the goal: restitution is demanded for the offense Jacob committed against his brother. Is Esau open to reconciliation, or only to revenge? That unanswered question leaves Jacob in a state of extreme anxiety. He sends a message to Esau in Seir of his return to Canaan, a message that was probably sent by "camel-express" through a male servant. The message reads, "*My lord Esau, your servant Jacob stayed with Laban and remained until now. I have acquired cattle, asses, sheep, and male and female slaves; and I send this message to my lord in the hope of gaining your favor*" (Gen 32:4-6).

Perhaps the use of "my lord Esau" and "your servant Jacob" may have been standard protocol, however in this particular situation it seems to imply that Jacob recognizes Esau's position of first born, and his own position as second son. The phrase, "I stayed with Laban" carries more meaning than the expression we use today. In the Hebrew, it implies being part of a household, without having been personally affected by your presence there. It would be more like you saying you had rented a room in a person's house. But that is not truly honest in Jacob's case; it was at Laban's house that the deceiver met *his* deceiver. There he learned how it felt to be unjustly treated; it hurts deeply, particularly when the abuse is from a trusted member of your own family. In Laban's house, Jacob took a giant step toward becoming a mature human being.

Jacob's messenger to Esau returned, and what he reported filled Jacob with fear, dread, and a sense of near hopelessness. Esau will come to meet Jacob with four hundred men—a small army, more than Abraham had when he confronted the four kings from the north. Things look grim. Jacob goes forward, walking on eggshells; his situation demands the utmost caution.

A very frightened Jacob prepared for the worst: *“He divided the people with him, and the flocks, herds, and camels, into two camps. He thought, ‘If Esau comes to one camp and attacks it, the other camp may yet escape’”* (Gen 32:8-9).

The situation put Jacob down onto his knees; if ever he needed the Lord's help, it is now. Jacob expressed humility and gratitude for favors received, and appealed for God's mercy.

*Then he prayed, “O God of my father Abraham and my father Isaac! O Lord, who said to me, ‘Return to your native land and I will deal bountifully with you.’ I am unworthy of all the kindness that You have so steadfastly shown Your servant: although I crossed the Jordan here with nothing but my staff, I now have grown into two camps. Deliver me, I pray, from the hand of my brother Esau! Else, I fear he may come and strike me down, mothers and children alike. Yet you have said, ‘I will deal bountifully with you and make your offspring as the sands of the sea, which are too numerous to count’”* (Gen 32:10-13).

The Jewish Talmud does not credit high marks to Jacob in this episode. A person should never put oneself in a dangerous position and then ask for miracles; it borders on tempting God. The prudent man avoids danger if at all possible.

Nevertheless, Jewish Scriptures teach, “the humble heart God does not disdain.” Saint Teresa of Avila writes on one occasion, “I was wondering why God loves humility so much? Suddenly I knew the answer: ‘humility is truth. God loves the Truth.’” Humility is recognizing who we are in the sight of God, and what we have become through our sinfulness. Teresa would insist that humility is not only knowledge of the truth, but acting in the truth, living the truth; knowing that at God's Table, you deserve the last place and you take it. “In times of crisis,” she tells us, “do everything as if the out-come depends totally upon oneself. Pray as if everything depended totally upon God. That combines both prudence and humility.”

Seir, the home of Esau, seems to be approximately 125 miles south of Jacob's encampment. “When Jacob woke up the next morning, he immediately began preparation for the reception of his brothers. He arranged three caravans of gifts to meet Esau as he approached the camp. *“Jacob selected from what he had with him the following presents for his brother Esau: two hundred she-goats and twenty he-goats, two hundred ewes and twenty rams, thirty milch camels with their young, forty cows and ten 10 bulls, twenty she-asses and 10 he-asses”* (32:15-16).



Dividing these gifts into three groups, Jacob sends them in stages to Esau, hoping that by the time Esau receives the third gift his heart will be softened towards him. *“He put these animals in the charge of his servants, and he told them, ‘Go on ahead, and keep a distance between one drove and the next.’ He instructed the one in front as follows, ‘When my brother Esau meets you he may ask you, “Whose man are you? Where are you going? And whose animals are these ahead of you?” You shall answer, “Your servant Jacob’s; they are a gift sent to you my lord Esau, and Jacob himself is right behind us””*” (Gen 32:17-19).

Jacob gave the same instructions to the other two, emphasizing that they are to inform Esau that Jacob is right behind them. Jacob himself is on the move in order to keep his second camp hidden from Esau. Jacob reasoned to himself: *“If I propitiate him with presents in advance and then face him, perhaps he will show me favor.”* Sending the gifts on ahead, Jacob remained that night at camp. During the night he moved his possessions and his family across the Jabbok River, fearing Esau might arrive during the night. He went back across the Jabbok to his camp alone.

The following episode is considered the most enigmatic in the life of Jacob. It is difficult to understand and impossible to explain, as it is inscrutable and mysterious. One cannot explain what one does not understand. When a student in a class given by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen was asked a question, he responded, “I understand it but I can't explain it.” Bishop Sheen responded, “Therefore you do not understand it!”

We read in Genesis:

*Jacob was alone in camp. Then some man wrestled with him until the break of dawn. When the man saw that he had not prevailed against him, he struck Jacob’s hip at the socket, so that the hip socket was wrenched as they wrestled. Then the man said, “Let me go, for dawn is breaking.” But Jacob answered, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” Said the other, “What is your name?” He replied, “Jacob.” Then the man said, “your name shall no longer be Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with divine and human beings and have prevailed.” Jacob asked, “Pray tell me your name!” He answered, “You must not ask my name!” And he took leave of him there. (Gen 32:25-30)*

The first question asked is, “Who is the Stranger in the night?” Some believe it must be a demon; demons come in the night and are gone with the dawn. Nevertheless, demons do not own the night; it is still God’s time. There is a suggestion in the Talmud that the stranger is an angelic being, the patron angel of Esau (we would say today that it was his guardian angel). The Talmud interprets the episode as a future warning to the enemies of Israel: “Your patron angel could not withstand Jacob, do you expect to overcome his descendants?” As the Jewish Scriptures maintain, God can appear in both human and angelic form. The general belief is the “stranger” is surely a supernatural adversary, which does not imply that it is God; it may well be His representative.

We recall a similarly mysterious incident in the life of Moses: *“At a night encampment on the way, the Lord encountered him and sought to kill him” (Exodus 4:24)*. We read this explanation, *“This episode, possibly abridged from a fuller, clearer version, is extraordinarily puzzling because the motive for God's attack is unclear.”*

The concept of struggle indeed epitomizes the life of Jacob. Jacob was struggling and wrestling with his twin brother Esau in the womb of Rebekah, before he was born. What is his struggle all about? He wrestles with Reality—a reality he will not accept. He wants his brother's birthright and he wants the blessing that comes with it—a birthright and blessing that is not his. He struggled to get it and succeeded. He struggled against his father's desire to love Esau, against his father's wish to bless Esau as his firstborn. He schemes to get what he wants. He uses his brother's weakness and ignorance to get his birthright; he uses his father's physical weakness to inherit the firstborn-blessing. He struggles with Laban for Rachel; he struggles to gain Laban's wealth. Jacob gives no concern to God's will in these matters. The stunning part of it all is that he wrestles with God and wins! He sums up his struggle with the stranger by naming the site of the struggle “Penuel,” because, as he says, *“I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been preserved” (Gen 32:31)*. We are in deep mystery here. Even when God loses, He wins.

Jacob struggled with Esau for his life and that of his family, and he is very much concerned about God's will in this matter. Rabbi Jacob gives us his wise summary on the episode at Penuel: *“The encounter at Penuel was understood as a test of Jacob's fitness for the larger tasks that lay ahead. The results were encouraging. Though he was left alone to wrestle through the night with a mysterious assailant, Jacob did not falter. The effort left its mark—a permanent injury—to remind Jacob of what had taken place [it had been no mere dream], and to serve perhaps as a portent of things to come. Significantly enough, Jacob is henceforth a changed person” (E. A Speiser)*

The Scriptures remind us that this “changed person” has had a name change. *“You will no longer be spoken of as Jacob, but as Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed” (Gen 32:29)*. Both the names Jacob and Israel can be viewed symbolically: the transformation of a devious man into a forthright and resolute man.

What is the meaning of the name “Israel”? The true source of *yisra* remains unknown, but it is generally understood to imply “God rules.” However, the popular interpretation is “Struggles with God,” deriving from *sarita*, which means “struggled.” Of the phrase, *“You have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed,”* the Prophet Hosea gives this interpretation:

*“He fought with God and he fought with an angel and he was able” (Hos 12:5-6)*. In the context in which Jacob received his new name, the name implies that he will be successful in his encounter with Esau.

It has been noted that in Genesis, Jacob remains “Jacob,” and is not referred to as “Israel.” It is a name that will be applied to his descendants—“children of Israel.” This suggests that the Jewish People that see themselves as a people struggling with God and

man, and being able to do so—to survive. The dramatic encounter between man and God ends upon a good omen: “The sun rose upon him” as Jacob limped toward the new day, which begins--

### CHAPTER 33

Looking out toward the horizon, Jacob sees Esau coming with four hundred men: The past twenty years have led up to this moment: his life hangs by a thread. He gathers his family together, placing the servant girls and their children in front, Leah and her children next, and Rachel and Joseph at the end. Obviously, the line up reflects the love of his own heart, in which Rachel and her child hold a preferential place.

Having situated his family in this order, he goes out ahead of them to meet his brother. Jacob humiliates himself before his brother: Jacob proceeds toward his brother as a vassal before his king— bowing to the ground seven times before reaching Esau. In the 14th century BC, seven acts of obeisance were demanded as a vassal approached the suzerain (ruler). This act reverses the dominance of Jacob over Esau predicted in Genesis 25:23, “*the older shall serve the younger,*” and fulfills the promise made to Esau, “*You shall throw off his yoke from your neck*” (Gen 25:40). (See Gen 33:1-4)

The union of Jacob and Esau is electrifying. Esau startles Jacob as if struck by lightening. He rushes upon Jacob, flinging himself upon his neck, hugging and kissing him and weeping with joy. A miracle has been witnessed! The miracle of love unfolds, and behind every moment is the Spirit of God. Gifts may placate a certain need we have, they may be oil on the wound, but they cannot heal a wounded heart. God alone heals the broken heart and divine love puts it back together again. All Jacob’s efforts had been for survival, but the love of God proceeded from him. Jacob, the giver of gifts, received God’s greatest gift that day through Esau.

Esau looked up from Jacob and saw all the women and children. “Who are those with you,” he asked. “*These are the children that God has favored me with,*” Jacob says with great relief. As if cued, the family begins their procession. “*The maidservants came forward with their children and bowed low; next came Leah with her children, bowing low; lastly Joseph and Rachel came forward and bowed low*” (see Gen. 33:5-7).

After meeting his extended family, Esau enquired about those waves of gifts preceding their meeting, gifts stimulated by fear of Esau, not for love of him. Jacob honestly replied, “*It was to gain my lord's favor.*”

At this moment the ancient game begins: the beneficiary refuses to accept the gifts; the donor strongly insists that he must; the reluctant beneficiary cedes to the wishes of the giver and graciously accepts it all; all parties concerned are happy, and each obtains what he desires.

*“I have enough, my brother; you should keep what is yours.” But Jacob said, “No, I beg you! If you will do me the favor, please accept this present from me since seeing your face is like seeing the face of God, now that you have accepted me so kindly. Accept,*

*then, from me the bounty offered to you, in as much as God has favored me, and I have plenty.” And since he so urged him, Esau accepted” (Gen. 33:9-11)*

In truth, Jacob had experienced the love of God shining through Esau. God had heard Jacob's prayer, *“Save me from the hands of my brother.”* God did more, he gave Jacob his brother's heart. The Spirit of Peace is the Spirit of God.

Rabbi Jacob observes at this moment, “Jacob the planner and schemer met with Esau and found in him a change of heart. All of Jacob's plans and schemes had come to naught. In spite of them all, God had prepared Jacob's way.” (Sailhamer)

What follows is more than Jacob had bargained for. He desired to have a successful encounter with his brother and safely move on, but “not so fast, Jacob.” Esau said, *“Let us start on our journey, and I will travel alongside you.”* This had not in Jacob's plan. Esau's gracious offer gives rebirth to the wily and scheming Jacob. Jacob's love cannot match that of Esau's; the change of one's character lags behind the change of one's heart. Often in this life, the needed change never catches us. Religious experiences may leave an enduring impression, but they fail to change a person; only the changing of the will accomplishes it.

Jacob replies to Esau's gracious offer with apparent deep concern for the problems this would cause for his brother. *“My lord knows the children are frail and that the flocks and herds, which are nursing, are a care to me; if they are driven hard a single day, all the flocks will die. Let my lord go on ahead of his servant, while I travel slowly, at the pace of the cattle before me and at the pace of the children, until I come to my lord in Seir” (Gen 33:12-14).*

This all seemed reasonable to Esau, but he did not desire to leave Jacob and his family alone. He said to Jacob, *“Let me assign to you some of the men who are with me.”* Esau, a simple man, is no match for the games Jacob can play. Jacob replies as if overcome with Esau's concern for them, *“Oh no, my lord is too kind to me!”* Jacob wins. *“So Esau started back that day on his way to Seir” (see Gen 33:15-16).* The departure of Esau for Seir brings to a close the story of the twin brothers, united now in brotherly affections through the grace of God.

## CHAPTER 34

### A NEW BEGINNING

After his encounter with Esau, Jacob begins a new life. He makes no effort to return to his father's house. Our record tells us Isaac lived to be one hundred and eighty years. We may presume he is still alive in our story since we have not buried him yet.

Returning to the old homestead would put Jacob in close proximity to his brother. Seemingly, Jacob did not desire this. He had endured a very humiliating experience; he was not only humiliated before his brother, but what cut more deeply, he had experienced his brother to be a bigger man than himself. He desired to lay these experiences to rest. The stimulus of a new environment for himself and his family replaces those recent unpleasant memories. *“Let the dead past bury its dead! Act, act in the living present!”*

A revealing light on our moral failings may be very beneficial, and even necessary for growth and development, but that does not lessen the pain. It takes time, even for the best of people, to adapt to a new awareness of self and let it become a foundation stone in their growth as a human being. This character growth will become visible in Jacob's life as it unfolds in Genesis.

If Jacob intended to go to Seir, he would have traveled along the eastern shore of the Jordan River until reaching the Dead Sea, and then turned to the east to the land of Seir. Upon the departure of Esau, Jacob headed directly west, crossing over the Jordan, heading into the midland of Canaan. Seemingly, it was here he planned to homestead.

We read that Jacob journeyed to Succoth after leaving Esau, and *“there he built a home for himself and made booths for his livestock.”* God had promised Jacob he would bring him back safely from Paddan-aram, and he had. Jacob had journeyed safely (*be salom*) back to Canaan. He arrived at Shechem, and in sight of the city Jacob made camp. Evidently, he decided to homestead and raise his children there. He was able to purchase the land upon which he had pitched his tent from the sons Hamor, the founder of Shechem, for a hundred silver pieces (see Gen 33:17-19).

Jacob consecrated the land to God calling it *El-elohe*—Israel. *“He set up a memorial stone there and invoked ‘El, the God of Israel’”* (Gen 33:20). The people of Canaan called God “El;” Jacob identifies El as “Elohim,” the God of Israel. Many centuries later, his descendants would bring the bones of his son Joseph to be buried here.

On their arrival in Shechem, Reuben, his eldest son, would have been approximately thirteen years of age. Here Jacob’s children lived their boyhood and moved on to become young men. Jacob’s daughter Dinah, like her grandmother Rebekah, was a beautiful young lady. To insult a young lady who had eleven older brothers would not only be imprudent but dangerous. The case at hand will make this point only too clearly.

Dinah's charm and beauty had not gone unnoticed by the men of Shechem. “Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit some of the women of the land. When Shechem, son of Hamor the Hivite, who was chief of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her by force. Since he was strongly attracted to Dinah, indeed was really in love with the girl, he endeavored to win her affection. Shechem also asked his father Hamor, ‘Get me this girl for a wife’” (Gen 34:1-4). The young Shechem has created a serious and delicate situation for his father.

The news of Dinah’s defilement had reached Jacob. As his sons were all out in the fields tending the livestock, Jacob delayed any action on the matter until their return. In the meantime, Hamor, the father of Shechem, came to Jacob to arrange for his son to marry Dinah. Jacob deferred any action on the matter until the return of his sons. *“When hearing the news about their sister, the brothers were shocked and filled with rage. What Shechem had done was an outrage and could not be tolerated in the house of Israel!”* (Gen 34:7).

Hamor and his son Shechem presented themselves before Jacob and his sons. *“Hamor appealed to them saying, ‘My son Shechem has his heart set on your daughter. Please give her to him in marriage. Intermarry with us; give your daughters to us and take our daughters for yourselves. You can thus live among us. The land shall be open to you to settle, move about freely, and acquire holdings in it’”* (Gen 34:8-10).

After these words of his father, Shechem himself addressed Jacob and his sons, *“Do me this favor, and I will pay whatever you say. Ask of me a bridal payment ever so high, I will pay whatever you say; only give me the maiden in marriage!”* (Gen 34:11-12).

Jacob remains silent, leaving the response in the hands of his sons. The sons replied with deliberate intent to deceive. *“We could not do this thing, and give our sister to someone uncircumcised, for that would be a disgrace for us. We will agree with you only on this condition, that you become like us by having all your males circumcised. Then we can give our sister to you and marry your daughters, Settle among you, and be one kindred. But if you do not agree to our terms regarding circumcision, we will take our sister and go* (Gen 34:14-17).

Jacob, apparently unaware of his sons’ scheme, was open to this solution to the problem. The request appeared fair to both Hamor and his son Shechem, who lost no time in acting upon the request. Being the most respected young man in the city, he carried a great deal of influence among the other men.

Hamor, as the chief of the clan, had the obligation of persuading the men to accept this situation. He and his son went to the town council, which was composed of every able-bodied man charged with defense of the city, and addressed them. Hamor, no doubt a clever politician himself, knew he needed to, as we say, “sweeten the pot” to win them all over. He begins, *“These men are our friends. Let them settle in the land and be free to move about in it; there is ample room in the country for them. We can take their daughters in marriage and give our daughters to them. But the men will accede to our request that they live with us and become one kindred, only on one condition: that all our males be circumcised as they themselves are circumcised. Would not the livestock they have acquired—all their animals—then be ours? So let us give in to them, that they may settle among us”* (Gen 34:21-23).

The men of the city agreed, and every able-bodied man in the community was circumcised. On the third day after their circumcised, when they were weak and ailing, Simon and Levi, Dinah’s full brothers, arrived in the city with swords in hand—we may presume they had their cohorts—and reeked out their revenge: they *“massacred all the males. They killed Hamor and his son and removed Dinah from Shechem’s house, and left”* (Gen 34:26).

*The rest of the sons arrived after the slaughter and plundered the city in reprisal for the sister Dinah’s defilement. They seized their flocks, herds and asses, everything that was inside the city and outside. They carried off all their possessions, their women and their children as captives, and plundered everything that was in the homes* (Gen 34:27-29).

They did all this in good conscience, as the punishment befits the crime. The news of what his sons had done overwhelmed Jacob with fear, dreading the consequences of their behavior. *“Jacob said to Simeon and Levi, ‘You have brought trouble upon me by making me obnoxious to the inhabitants of the land, the Canaanites and Perizzites. With our numbers so meager, if they unite against me and attack me, I shall be wiped out with all my people’” (Gen 34:30).* Once again, human behavior jeopardizes the divine plan. Jacob’s sons had only one response, *“And should our sister have been treated like a whore?” (Gen 34:31).*

At this point Rabbi Jacob offers this sage advice: “The author of Genesis expects his readers to be intelligent enough to read between the lines.” After reflecting upon the episode at Shechem, Jacob sees the imprudence of the act, with no mention of its immorality. Apparently, Jacob had been open to the offer made by Hamor and his son. However, if it had been accepted, it would have led to the complete absorption of his bloodline into that of the Canaanites.

Jacob prudently decided the time has come for him and his family to resume their journey to the south, while the opportunity to do so remained open. Our text informs us, *“a terror from God fell on the settlements round about them, so that they did not pursue Jacob's men” (Gen 35:5).* Reading between the lines, we may presume Simeon and Levi are the stimulus of the terror falling upon the local population. The people of the area gave a wide berth for the departure of Jacob and his caravan to the south. Needless to say they left behind an extremely foul odor.

## CHAPTER 32, 33, 34

### RECONCILIATION

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

(Please read chapters 32-33-34)

1. Jacob prays for God's presence when he travels and camps, he finds God present in his camp. What does it teach you about your journey and your campsites?
2. How would you describe Jacob's psychological state as he plans to meet with Esau?
3. What do you understand about the episode of the stranger and Jacob's struggling with him and its importance?
4. How do you see Jacob exercising prudence in preparation for his encounter with Esau? What does it teach you?
5. How do you understand the virtue of humility and its importance in your spiritual life?
6. How would you describe Jacob's behavior when meeting Esau?
7. How do you explain Esau's reception of his brother?
8. From this encounter, what do you learn about both Esau and Jacob?
9. Why do you think Jacob secretly rejected Esau's plan of family reunion and what does it reveal about Jacob?
10. What do you see as the importance of Jacob's purchasing property in Shechem and erecting an altar there to God?
11. What do you see as the innate danger of Jacob's accepting the requests of Hamor and his son concerning Dinah?
12. How would you describe the subsequent behavior of Reuben and Simon and their brothers?
13. How would you explain Jacob's silence before the massacre and the subsequent despoiling of the people's property?
14. What is your opinion of the sons' reply to Jacob in Gen. 34:31?
15. At this point in Genesis, how would you describe Jacob's family?



## CHAPTER 35-36, 38

### THE CHILDREN OF JACOB

The time came for Jacob to fulfill the promise made many years ago that had been stimulated by an amazing vision on the night of his departure to Haran. As a result of the vision, Jacob swore an oath the following morning, *“If God remains with me on this journey and protects me, and if I return safe to my father's house, the Lord shall be my God. This stone that I have set up as a memorial shall be God's abode. Of everything you give, I shall set aside a tenth part for you”* (Gen 28:20-21). Perhaps Jacob forgot about that last phrase of his promise; there is never any mention of his fulfilling it. What can we say about neglected promises? We give our word; we are our word. People depend upon our fulfilling our promises; they lean upon it and we fail them. They lean upon a leaning fence.

Jacob has been in Canaan some time now and made no effort to go to Bethel. Immediately following the slaughter at Shechem, Jacob receives the command from God, *“Proceed to Bethel, where you shall remain to build there an altar to the God who appeared to you when you were fleeing from your brother Esau”* (Gen 35:1). A very timely reminder; God does not forget the promises we made even though we may do so.

The reminder from the Lord, combined with the disastrous mess they left in Shechem, makes Jacob aware that it is time to put his own house in order—primarily in its relationship with God. When the Hebrew people began their new life in the Promised Land, Joshua addressed this message to them: *“Now, therefore, revere the Lord and serve Him with undivided loyalty; put away the gods that your forefathers served beyond the Euphrates and in Egypt, and serve the Lord. Or, if you are loath to serve the Lord, choose this day which ones you are going to serve—the gods your forefathers served beyond the Euphrates, or those of the Amorites in whose land you are settled, but I and my household will serve the Lord”* (Jos 24:14-15).

To this Rabbi Jacob adds, *“The propensity to idolatry was Israel's curse for centuries.”* We read in Second Maccabees that after the Jewish battle against Antiochus, *“under the tunic of each of the (Jewish) dead they found amulets sacred to the idols of Jamnia, which the law forbids the Jews to wear”* (2Mac 12:40).

The word Hebrew word for “proceed,” also translated “go up,” implies a pilgrimage to a holy shrine. Jacob prepares his family for their holy journey, and the first order of the day was, *“Hand over to me all the alien gods in your possession and remove all those earrings that are adorned with symbols of gods, all amulets and talismans”* (Gen 35:2). When Jacob collected all the images and symbols of alien gods, he dug a hole under a tree near Shechem and buried them. He ordered all to wash, to purify their bodies, and to adorn themselves with their very best clothing in order to show their reverence for the presence of God at Bethel.

*“Jacob arrived in Luz (that is, Bethel) in the land of Canaan, together with all the people who were with him.”* No mention is made of the women and children taken from Shechem. We presume they were taken into their families as servants or sold as slaves. Many years have passed since his first visit at Luz and there would be little, if any, evidence of his earlier visit there. We read, *“There he built an altar and named it El-bethel, for it was there that God had revealed himself to him when he was fleeing from his brother” (Gen 35:7).*

The Lord's instruction had been you *“shall remain to build there an altar to God.”* Presumably, they built something more permanent this time: they certainly had the laborers to do so. We read in the text, *“On the site where he had spoken with him, Jacob set up a stele (pillar) of stone, over which he offered a libation; and he poured oil upon it” (Gen. 35:14).* He reaffirmed the name of the site as Bethel, because God had spoken there with him. There is no mention of any future effort to sustain the sacred site.

God appeared to Jacob again at Bethel, confirming his name as “Israel,” and with a blessing reaffirming that he is the recipient of the promises made to Abraham, God said to him, *“Your name is Jacob, you shall be called Jacob no more, but Israel shall be your name. I am El Shaddai. Be fertile and increase. A nation, yea an assembly of nations, shall descend from you, and kings shall issue from your loins. The land I assigned to Abraham and Isaac I assign to you; and to your offspring to come will I assign the land” (Gen 35:10-12).*

God confirms again that the blessings that will come to his descendants will rest upon Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and not upon their descendants. Rabbi Jacob points out that the three times Jacob's name is changed to “Israel” is always in conjunction with setting up an altar to the worship of the one true God. The true worship of God would forever be associated with the name “Israel.”

When Jacob completed his religious duties in Bethel, they resume their journey toward home. We are informed that Rachel is pregnant again. A goodly number of years have passed since she gave birth to her firstborn son Joseph, his name meaning “May Yahweh add another son for me!” God now answers that prayer, but the price is high. Her labor is especially difficult, and at its height the midwife tells Rachel, *“Have no anxiety, for you had another son.”* Shortly after the birth of the child, Rachel dies. With her dying breath she names the boy *Ben-oni*, meaning “Son of my pain.” Earlier, we had mentioned God chose Leah, but Jacob chose Rachel. If God willed that Jacob have a large family, then Leah was the perfect choice between the two sisters: Rachel was not strong enough to bear a number of children.

When Jacob held the child upon his knee, he called him “Benjamin”—“Son of the Right.” The name implies a child of good fortune, and it also may imply one upon whom you will rely heavily for support. In Jacob's old age, Benjamin would be his father's right hand.

Rachel died on the road to Ephrath (later known as Bethlehem) and there she is buried. On her grave Jacob set up a monument to the woman he had always loved. Our author tells us it was still there in his day.

The joy of returning home was not only marred by Rachel's death, but also by a very unpleasant episode caused by Reuben, his first-born son. After the burial of Rachel, Jacob and his family moved on further south and pitched their tent beyond Migdal-eder. We are told, "*While Israel was encamped in that region, Reuben went and lay with Bilhah, his father's concubine,*" (Gen 35:22a). Jacob's (Israel's) silence on the matter is deafening, and the silence of our author seconds it. Nevertheless, we are told, "*When Israel heard of it, he was greatly offended*" (Gen 35:22b). Hardly could this have been a matter of mere sexual urge; such a deed would be a clear sign of rebellion against the father.

In Chapter 35, our author brings together some loose ends of the narrative. We have been informed that Deborah (whom we did not know we knew), who was Rebekah's nurse, died and was buried under the oak below Bethel; hence it was named *Allon-bacuth* (Oak of Weeping). Following this, we are given a list of the Twelve Sons of Jacob/Israel.

We are informed that Jacob has finally come home. "*And Jacob came to his father Isaac at Mamre, at Kiriath-arba—now Hebron—where Abraham and Isaac had sojourned. Isaac was a hundred and eighty years old when he breathed his last and died. He was gathered to his kin in ripe old age, and he was buried by his sons Esau and Jacob*" (Gen 35:27-29). Now that Jacob has returned to this area, it places him again in close proximity to his brother Esau.

In previous revelations, the Lord confirmed that through the seed of Isaac and the seed of Jacob a universal blessing would come to all humankind. God chose Isaac--son of Abraham, and Jacob--grandson of Abraham, but rejected Ishmael--son of Abraham, and Esau--grandson of Abraham. The choice is a matter of divine predilection; it is not an implication that Isaac and Jacob are better men than Ishmael and Esau. On a natural scale of evaluation, Ishmael and Esau may have been better men, but that did not factor into the choice. They may have been our choice, but not God's. As Saint Paul explains it: God chose the weak things of this earth as his instruments to humble the proud, and so that no man foolishly glorifies himself before God.

When Paul himself became dejected and discouraged by his personal weakness, he repeatedly prayed to God for deliverance from his human weaknesses. God replied to his prayers with a "No!", with the explanation that his weakness is the field in which God reveals his own presence and strength. When a humbled Paul came to understand the meaning of God's negative answer, he replied, "I rejoice in my weakness that the glory of God may be in me."

In Chapter 36 of Genesis, we have a very lengthy genealogy of Esau's descendants. Rabbi Jacob tells us, "It serves to divide the Jacob cycle from the Joseph story." Our author prefaces the genealogy with the reason the families of Jacob and Esau had become divided, and why Esau had moved out of Canaan.

*Esau took his wives, his sons and daughters, and all the members of his household, his cattle and all his livestock, and all the property that he had acquired in the land of Canaan, and went to another land because of his brother Jacob. For their possessions were too many for them to dwell together, and the land where they had sojourned*

*could not support them because of their livestock. So Esau settled in the hill country of Seir—Esau being Edon. (Gen 36:6-8)*

Genesis presents a genealogy of Esau as it did for Ishmael: all descendants of Ishmael and Esau are descendants from Abraham. The genealogy of Esau begins with the first generation with Esau and his three wives; Adah, Oholibamah, and Basemath. ( Earlier his wives are listed as Judith, Basemath and Mahalath. Names of places and people get changed about in Genesis—these differences are attributable to the different sources available to the author. The importance lies in the substance of the message.)

These three wives had five sons between them: Adah gave birth to Eliphaz; Oholibamah gave birth to Jeush, Jalam and Korah; Basemath gave birth to Reuel. Here we have the first and second generation. Next comes the third generation: Adah's son Eliphaz is the father of Teman, Omar, Zepho, Gatam and Kenaz. Eliphaz and his concubine, Timna, bears Almalek.

Basemath's son Reuel is the father of Nahath, Zerah, Shammah and Mizzah. Oholibamah's three sons may have been too fruitful to enumerate; the genealogy speaks of Jeush Clan, Jalam Clan, and Korah Clan. From Eliphaz comes seven clans; from Reuel comes four clans. All in all Esau is the father of fourteen clans. Each clan would be independent from the other, and possess its own political and military organizations.

These are the foundation stones upon which the nation of Edon would arise. Immediately following we have genealogy of the people who settled there and created the Land of Seir. *“These are the sons of Seir the Horite, the original settlers in the land: Lotan, Shobal, Zibeon, Anah, Dishon, Ezer, and Dishan” (Gen 36:20-21a).* Seir has seven sons; his son Lotan has two sons, Shobal has five sons, Zibeon has two sons, his son Dishon has four sons, his son Anah has one son (his son Anah got special attention as he found water in the wilderness while pasturing the asses of his father), his son Ezer has three sons, and Dishan has two sons. Seir has fifteen grandsons.

There are seven clans in Seir, each headed by one of the seven sons of Seir. Seir's genealogy with, *“Those are the clans of the Horites, clan by clan, in the land of Seir.”* In the next sentence we read, *“The following are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom before any kings reigned over the Israelites” (Gen 36:31).*

It would be easy to miss the meaning of what we have just read in verses 30 and 31. Verse 30 speaks of *“the land of Seir”* and verse thirty-one speaks of *“the land of Edom.”* Esau's people replaced Seir's people. Unification has taken place, and it is generally credited to intermarriage; the unification resulted in the kingdom of Edom. Eight kings are mentioned, along with their cities. What is characteristic of these kings is that none of their sons succeeded their fathers as king. The genealogy of Esau concludes: *“These are the names of clans of Esau, each with its families and locality, name by name: the clans Timna, Alvah, Jetheth, Oholibama, Elah, Pinon, Kenaz, Teman, Mibzar, Magdiel and Iram. Those are the clans of Edom—that is, of Esau, father of the Edomites—by their settlement in the land which they hold.” (Gen 36:40-43).*

These genealogies of the twin sons of Isaac and Rebekah bring their era to a close, which permits our author to focus the rest of Genesis on the troubled descendants of Jacob alone. Rabbi Jacob suggests that the author's considerable attention to the family of Esau reveals his own fraternal feeling for Esau.

Before entering deeper into the life of Jacob's family, let us recall the words of the Lord in Genesis 6:3, *"My Spirit shall not remain in man forever for he is but flesh."* We ask, what is the living soul of man without the Holy Spirit of God? The Lord Himself gives us this answer, *"Never again will I doom the earth because of man, since the desires of man's heart are evil from the start"* (Gen 8:21). Just as the Holy Spirit of God may be present in the human soul, the Christian Scriptures confirm that an evil spirit itself may enter in and reside in the human soul.

Jesus teaches us,

*"When the evil spirit has gone out of a man [exorcism], he roams through arid waste searching for a resting place; failing to find one, it says, I will go back to where I came from! It then returns to find the house swept and tidied. Then it goes out and returns with seven other spirits, far worse than itself, who enter in and dwell there. The result is that the last state of the man is worse than the first"* (Lk 11:24-26).

Saint Macarius teaches that the human soul is never the sole occupant in a human person. It houses the Spirit of the Lord, or it houses the spirit of the Evil One. The evil spirit enters the soul through the invitation of sin. If the human soul abides in evil, the power of darkness grows. The spirit of evil becomes, as it were, a second soul to such an extent a person no longer recognizes any difference between its actions and those of the evil spirit. They have had a marriage, and Satan does not believe in divorce.

Perhaps with this bit of spiritual enlightenment, we may better understand the Children of Jacob. The family of Jacob is the first in the scriptures that we have been able to enter into in such depths, and we find that our "first family" is dysfunctional. But if we have eyes to see, we see that God works in dysfunctional families.

We have taken the liberty at this time to reverse Chapters 37 and 38. Chapter 38 becomes an interlude between Chapters 37 and Chapter 39, and its following chapters. We will deal first with the "interlude," then go on to the amazing story that carries us to the completion of our pilgrimage through Genesis.

## CHAPTER 38 THE CHILDREN OF JUDAH

As already mentioned, this chapter interrupts the flow of the story being related; however the matter is in keeping with the general theme of Genesis—the seed of divine promise. When there is something that needs to be said, and there is no harmonious way to say it without disrupting the flow, you simply interrupt harmony and insert it.

The chapter begins with, *“About that time,”* which implies something had occurred before the current story that is about to unfold. It is not certain whether the relationship to the “now” of our narrative is to past events, or to the future in the life of Judah, the fourth son of Jacob and Leah. Apparently, it is a time in which Judah has disassociated himself from his own family. But, in addition to his brothers, a man needs good friends. Judah associates himself with an Adullamite man named Hirah. Judah, through his friend Hirah, meets the Canaanite Shua, and marries his daughter.

This marriage is certainly out of line with the desires of his grandfather Isaac, and his own father Jacob; marrying a foreign woman suggests a spirit of rebellion in Judah. The text implies he steps out of the will of God in this marriage, and the blessing of God does not follow him down his path.

The daughter of Shua bears Judah three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. Judah procures a wife for Er, a woman called Tamar; there is no mention of her origin. The marriage itself is brief, as Er had done something that displeased Yahweh, which apparently shortens his physical life and he dies childless. *“Er, Judah’s first-born, greatly offended the Lord; so the Lord took his life” (Gen 38:7).*

What follows may well be one of the reasons for the interlude: the validation of the custom of the “Levirate marriage.” The Hebrew word *levir* means “brother-in-law.” We read that Judah said to his second son Onan, *“Unite with your brother’s widow, fulfilling the duty of a brother-in-law, and thus maintain your brother’s line” (Gen 38:8).*

Later, you will read in the Book of Deuteronomy 25:5: *“When brothers live together and one of them dies without a son, the widow of the deceased shall not marry anyone outside the family; but her husband’s brother shall go to her and perform the duty of a brother-in-law by marrying her.”* If the first son dies without an heir, in order that his line is not completely extinguished, the second son marries the widow and his first-born son will receive the name of his departed brother. That child receives all the benefits of the first-born.

This meant for Onan that he would have to assume the responsibility and expense of raising a child, one that would not be considered to be his own, but one who would inherit everything that would have legally come to Onan on the death of his brother. This was a role much too unselfish for Onan to bear. Each time he went to have intercourse with Tamar, he sowed his seed upon the ground to avoid pregnancy. Apparently, the practice shortened his life as well: it displeased the Lord. Since Onan refused to give life to another, the Lord took his life. (Is there any similarity between what occurs here and what we read in Genesis 9:6?)

Rabbi Jacob shares this observation with us, “Onan’s offense is obvious: he selfishly refuses the responsibility of fulfilling his duty to his brother as the law provided. That is the point of his offense, and not what is properly called onanism today” (The New Jerome Biblical Commentary).

At the death of Onan, Judah gave Tamar a promise that when his younger son reached maturity, he would marry Tamar. As Judah had purchased Tamar as a bride for his son, he probably had some legal claim over her; in betrothing her to his son, he certainly did have a legal claim over her. Judah tells Tamar, *“Stay as widow in your father's house until my son Shelah grows up’--for he feared that Shelah also might die like his brothers. So Tamar went to live in her father's house” (Gen 38:11).*

Judah had second thoughts about the marriage. Was marriage to Tamar the cause of the death of two sons? He became increasingly reluctant in fulfilling his promise to Tamar. She knew the boy had reached the age of marriage some time ago; she knew her father-in-law would let her wither on the vine before he would marry Shelah to her. Judah underestimated the Lady Tamar.

We are told sometime later that Judah's wife dies. After the mourning period for his wife, Judah planned to go up to Timnah with his friend Hirah, the Adullamite, for the shearing of the sheep. In other words, he was going out of town on a busy trip with his friend Hirah—anything can happen.

Tamar heard about the trip and knew it was the moment to execute her own plan. *“She took off her widow's garb, wrapped a veil about her to disguise herself, and sat down at the entrance to Enaim, which is on the way to Timnah” (Gen 38:14).*

Disguised as a temple prostitute, Tamar seated herself on the public road upon which Judah and Hirah had to pass. There she caught the eye of Judah, who failed to recognize his daughter-in-law. He went over and propositioned her with, *“See now, let me lie with you.’ ‘What will you pay me for lying with you,’ she asked? He replied, ‘I will send you a kid from my flock.’”* That is not exactly a bird in the hand. As a good businesswoman, she demanded some guarantees, some identification. *“You will have to leave a pledge until such time as you send it.’ He asked, ‘What pledge shall I leave you?’ She answered, ‘Your seal-and-cord, and the staff you carry.’”* Now that may not seem much of a pledge to us but at the time, it was equal to obtaining his credit card and driver's license.

Tamar requested from Judah the seal with the cord around his neck and his staff. The seal had a circular hole through which a cord or chain was passed so it could be worn around the neck. This was a common practice in the ancient Near East: the seal served as a religious and legal surrogate for the person wearing it. The seal, when impressed upon a document, symbolized the wearer's readiness to accept the consequences in the event of non-compliance with an agreement. The possession of such a seal was a mark of a responsible man. It is said, *“No Babylonian man of any standing would be seen without one.”* As the seal and chain were considered a unit, both were required for legality. One's staff was often given to another as a sign the transaction had been completed; when Tamar received what was promised, she would return the staff to Judah.

Judah spoke of Tamar as *zona*, a plain prostitute, but his friend Hiran spoke of her as *qe desa*, a temple prostitute. Rabbi Jacob explains, *“In the area of Mesopotamia, there were various classes of women in the temple other than priestesses who were employed in the*

cult worship of the temple. At their entrance into the temple they were required to be virgins: subsequent sexual engagements were acts of cult worship. These women were not *zona* but *qe desa*; there is no evidence that they were socially ostracized. Their position was somewhat lesser than a married woman.

Meanwhile, Tamar returned to her father's house and assumed her status of widow, but a pregnant widow. On returning home, Jacob sent Hirah with the kid goat to take back his pledge from the woman's hand.

When he returned to the area, Hiran could not find her. He asked the people of the place about the presence of the woman, but they replied, *"There was no sacred prostitute here. 'Let her keep the things,' Judah replied, 'otherwise we shall become disgraced. After all, I did send her the kid, even though you were unable to find her'"* (Gen 38:22-23).

Around three months later, news reached Judah, *"Your daughter-in-law Tamar has whored, and, here, she's pregnant by whoring as well."* This was not altogether bad news; it offered Jacob an easy way out of an obligation he was reluctant to fulfill. His immediate response to the news was, *"Bring her out and let her be burned,' But as she was brought out, she sent word to her father-in-law, saying, 'I'm pregnant by the man to whom these belong,' and she said, 'Recognize to whom these seal and cords and staff belong'"* (Gen 38:24-25).

"Judah, recognize the evidence!" He recognized it, and knew immediately why his friend could not find the friendly lady that had sat by the roadside. The truth of the situation became the water, quenching the fire of rage toward Tamar. The humbled Judah recognized that you would find a better person in Tamar than you would find in Judah. *"She is more righteous than I am because I did not give her to my son Shelah"* (Gen 38:26). He had refused to honor the custom of the Levitate marriage, and Tamar tricked him into fulfilling it himself. Her act preserved the legitimate bloodline of the family. In the Christian Scriptures, Tamar is listed in the genealogy of Jesus of Nazareth. The text informs us that Judah does not continue to have sexual relations with her. It leaves the thought, "Why?" Perhaps the answer lies buried in First Chronicles.

Evidently, twins run in the family. Tamar gives birth to twins and we find echoes in their birth from the nativity of Esau and Jacob. Upon delivery, one put out his hand and the midwife tied a crimson thread on it to signify that this one came out first. But just then, he drew back his hand and out came his brother. The midwife said, *"What a breach you have opened for yourself!" So he was named Perez. Afterward his brother came out; he was called Zerah [which signifies red—the red light of dawn]"* (Gen 38:29). The red identifies Zerah with Esau; however his brother Perez is "no heel grabber." Perez shoved himself into first place and his name in Hebrew means "breach;" it carries the concept of an infraction, a violation of a law or making a hole in a wall by battering it in. We read in Numbers 26:20 that Perez eventually overcame Zerah, the elder, and regained the right of the firstborn.



What question does First Chronicles answer for us? Why did Judah no longer have any sex relations with Tamar? We read in 1 Chronicles 4:21 that Shelah, Judah's third son, named his son Er, suggesting that Judah did finally release him to marry the first wife of his brother Er—the Lady Tamar.

Rabbi Jacob observes that Judah does nothing to further the offspring of his own household by refusing to give Tamar to Shelah. It takes the “righteousness” of the woman Tamar to give birth, not to the son of Er (which apparently she does later), but to the very son of Judah himself, Perez. Perez then becomes the channel of the blessed seed. The text shows the promise of offspring was jeopardized by the lack of Judah's concern: the ultimate responsibility for the survival of the descendants of the house of Jacob is Tamar. Later we read something of her success when the clans of Judah are numbered 76,500 persons: King David comes from the line of Perez.

Chapter 38 brings the theme of the Levitate marriage into bold relief. It is a society that set great store upon ties of blood and had little use for adoption. Later biblical laws uphold the obligation to this form of marriage, and frowned on any attempt to circumvent it.

We conclude this subject with an episode in the Christian Scriptures.

*“A group of men from the Sadducees, who maintained there is no resurrection from the dead, came with this case to Jesus of Nazareth, ‘Master in the Scriptures Moses told us, “If anyone dies leaving a wife and no children, his brother must take the wife, and the child to be will be regarded as the child of the deceased man.” Now there were seven brothers, the first married a wife, but he died without children; and the second and third took her for wife, in fact all seven died leaving no or wife is proper to people of this world, but for those considered worthy of children. Last of all, the woman died. On the day of the resurrection, to which of them will the woman be wife? For all seven had been married to her?’”*

Light shines into the darkness. Jesus replied, *“The children of this world marry and re-marry; but those deemed worthy in the world to come, and of the resurrection from the dead, there is no more marriage. Besides, they cannot die for they are like the angels. They too are sons and daughters of God because they are born of the resurrection.”*

Jesus goes on to teach, *“Yes, the dead will be raised, and even Moses implied it in the passage about the burning bush, when he called ‘Lord’ the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. For he is God of the living and not of the dead, for to him all are alive” (see Lk 20:27-40).*

Getting a little personal with the Sadducees, Jesus throws a bit of light upon their own hearts: *“You are badly misled because you fail to understand the scriptures and the power of God” (Mk. 12:24).* If we are ignorant of the power of God, we have failed to experience the love of God. In the power and love of God, all things are possible.

**CHAPTERS 35, 36, 38**

**THE CHILDREN OF JACOB**

**STUDY QUESTIONS**

**(Please read Chapters 35, 36 and 38)**

- 1. What preparations does Jacob demand from his family before presenting them in the presence of God? What does it teach you?**
- 2. What does the presence of amulets and talisman among the members of the family tell you about the spirituality of the family?**
- 3. What does Joshua 24:14-15 teach you about the true faith and its attitude toward the different faiths of others?**
- 4. What does the name “Israel” signify, and how does it apply to Jacob?**
- 5. How would you describe the character of the Lady Rebekah, and what do you learn from her life?**
- 6. How do you understand the “predilection” of God’s choice of men and women with questionable moral character in the work of salvation?**
- 7. What does St. Marcarius teach you about the human soul and its interaction with the presence and power of the Evil One?**
- 8. How would you describe the nature of the sin of Onan?**
- 9. How would you judge the action of Tamar on the road to Timnah?**
- 10. Regardless of the nature of the act, what do you learn about Tamar’s prudence and how is it present in her actions?**
- 11. In the light of women’s conditions at this time, how would you describe the strength and bravery of this lady?**
- 12. How do you explain and understand Genesis 38:26?**
- 13. From this episode in Chapter 38, how would you describe the characters of Judah—fourth son of Jacob, and Leah and Tamar?**
- 14. From your study of Chapter 38, what three things have you learned?**
- 15. What have you learned from Luke 20:27-40 and Matthew 22:29 about the human soul, marriage, and life after death?**

## CHAPTERS 37, 39 AND 40

### THE FAVORITE SON

In Chapter 37, Rabbi Jacob once again invites the class to attend the Theater of Genesis for its final production, *The Favorite Son*. He prepares us for the play by giving us the background against which the play unfolds: Jacob and family have returned to the land of Canaan in which Isaac had lived. They have settled into a semi-nomadic, semi-sedentary life. Joseph, a seventeen-year-old adolescent, has become the favorite son of his father, the child of his old age and loved more than all his other sons. Jacob had made a special tunic for Joseph; it is not like the normal sleeveless ones, but had full sleeves and full length. We have ancient descriptions of such tunics, having many colors with gold often woven into the fabric, to be worn only by certain members of the royal family. Joseph appears as a young prince and performs well as one.

Joseph tended the flocks with his brothers from time to time, but generally he remained at home assisting Bilhah and Zilpah. Both are mentioned as wives of Jacob, but no mention is made of Leah. In Genesis 35:22, Bilhah is still spoken of as the concubine of Jacob, the one Reuben cohabitated with.

Jacob's other sons keenly noted his preferential love for Joseph: *"When they saw the love their father had for Joseph they came to hate him; they were unable to speak a kind word to him"* (Gen 37:4). Joseph did not improve his situation by constantly bringing to his father stories of their bad behavior. We may say that Joseph is the first of younger brothers to say to their older siblings, "I'm going to tell Daddy what you did!" Saying Joseph was an adolescent only reiterates that he is self-centered and imprudent—lacking in foresight. He is also a dreamer.

Rabbi Jacob sets the stage for what follows, informing us, "There will be no theophanies, as in the lives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—no visions, no direct divine communication. God now works in the course of human events, even within the sins of human beings, even by bringing good out of human evil."

He goes on, "Many interpreters see the preferential behavior of Jacob for Joseph as initiating the action to follow and its consequence, which will place Joseph as a pawn in his brothers' hands to punish their father."

Joseph had dreams and he couldn't wait to share them with his brothers, resulting in their hating him all the more. Joseph doesn't help his own cause.

Even when dreams proceed from God, a person needs to be prudent about sharing them with others. Therese of Lisieux, a girl of a saint herself, tells us, "Keep the secrets of the King!" She came to realize that taking such experiences from the natural environment in which they were received actually changes the nature of the experience. In its telling, it loses its heavenly perfume; what you experienced as extraordinary and divine appears commonplace and nothing special to its hearers. Although Joseph's dreams are inspired, they would not be in this category of spiritual experiences.

Joseph's latest dream involves his brothers, and he wants to share it with them.

### ACT ONE, SCENE ONE

(Scene one opens in the Land of Canaan, at the family campsite with Joseph in the midst of his brothers)

Having the attention of all his brothers, Joseph addresses them, "*Listen to the dream I had! In it, we were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf rose up and stood upright, and your sheaves formed a ring around my sheaf and bowed down to it*" (Gen 37:6-7).

The brothers clearly got one point but missed the other; they understood the reference of their bowing before him, but missed the reference to the food. "*They retorted, 'Do you propose to rule over us? Are you to be our master?'*" With his talk about dreams Joseph adds fuel to their fire: And they hated him all the more.

Lost in his own importance, Joseph failed to note the increased hostility of his brothers. Joseph had another dream and he adds insult to their injury; they just had to hear his latest dream. He demands their attention, "Look!" he yelled. They turned to see what he was talking about, and he excitedly informs them, "*I had another dream! This time the sun and then moon and eleven stars were bowing to me.*" That bowled them over: they ignored him. Joseph goes to his father and relates to him the dream, and gets a rebuke, "*What is the meaning of this dream of yours? Shall I and your mother and brothers come bowing to you to the ground?*" Jacob, being wiser about dreams, pondered the matter, "*but in the hearts of his brothers it stirred the embers into a flame*" (see Gen 37:9-11).

*"One day after Joseph's brothers had gone north to Shechem to pasture their flocks [remember the family owed property there], Jacob decided to send Jacob there for news about them. 'Look, your brothers are with flocks at Shechem. Come, let me send you to them.' 'I am ready' Joseph answered. Jacob said. 'Go then and find out how your brothers and the flock are faring, and bring back word'" (Gen 37:12-14)).*

Joseph left the valley of Hebron and arrived safely in Shechem. While wandering around in the fields he met a man who informed him that his brothers were thirteen miles north, around Dothan.

## SCENE TWO

The scene opens in the fields of Dothan. The brothers see Joseph coming across the fields—they couldn't miss that many-colored tunic. His being alone sixty-three miles from home surprised but pleased them: They realized that anything could have happened to him on that long journey. An unexpected opportunity has fallen into their hands, and they act on it.

*“Here comes that master dreamer!” one yelled. Their immediate response was, “Let’s kill him! Kill him now and throw him into one of the cisterns here. We can say a wild beast devoured him. We shall then see what comes of his dreams.”*

Reuben, the eldest brother, had been silent, now speaks up, *“Let us not take his life. Shed no blood! Just throw him into that dry cistern out there in the desert; but don't do away with him yourselves.”* They see the reason for not shedding his blood, as it would cry out of the earth for vengeance (they believed life to be in the blood). Reuben is distancing himself from their plan, hoping for an opportunity later to restore him to his father.

Their greeting to him was to grab him, strip him of that hated tunic and drag him out to the cistern. They threw him into it as Joseph pitifully pleads, *“Please don't do this to me my brothers!”* Words in the wind! They leave him to die of hunger and thirst—if the scorpions and snakes don't find him first. This is no dream but a nightmare!

Meanwhile, Reuben goes out with the flock. The deed having been done, the rest sit down for their meal. Looking up, they see a caravan of Ishmaelites coming from Gilead, their camels bearing gum, balm and laudanum (an essence for perfume) to be taken to Egypt. Judah, having apparently absorbed a bit of Reuben's spirit, speaks up, *“What will we gain by killing our brother and covering up his blood? I say, let us sell him to the Ishmaelites [they are all kin], instead of doing away with him ourselves. After all, he is our brother, our own flesh!”* His brothers agree. (It was the emperor of Rome that said of Herod the Great, “Better to be his pigs than his sons.”)

It is at this point that things get complicated. The caravan of Ishmaelites and a caravan of Midianites are arriving at approximately the same time. This is the best scenario we can come up with: the Ishmaelites have the attention of the brothers, and they negotiate with them for the sale of Joseph for twenty pieces of silver, the lowest going rate for a slave. Meanwhile, the Midianites' attention is drawn to the cistern, and they find Jacob before the Ishmaelites do. They pull him out and he is now in their possession. Subsequently, an agreement is reached with the approval of all involved: the Midianites sell Jacob to the Ishmaelites, who then leave for Egypt with Joseph. *“When Reuben returns, he finds the cistern empty and Joseph gone. Filled with fear and anguish, he rends his clothes and runs to his brothers exclaiming, “The boy is gone! What am I to do now?” (Gen 37:29-30).*

His brothers have the answer. They kill a young goat and dip the Joseph's tunic in its blood, and agree on the story to be told. *"They then send someone to bring the tunic to Jacob with the message, 'We found this. Make sure whether it is your son's tunic or not.' He recognized it and exclaimed, 'My son's tunic! A wild beast devoured him. Joseph fell prey to beasts!'" [Truer words were never spoken]. Jacob rent his clothing, covering his loins in sackcloth and mourns many days for his son. The sons and daughters try to console him: he is left without consolation saying, 'No, I will go down to Sheol in mourning!'" (Gen 37:32-35)*

These words bring down the curtain on Act One.

### INTERMISSION: THE SECRET EVIL

We dealt in the preceding chapter with the effects of evil and jealousy and its disastrous effects upon Jacob's family: effects which no word describes better than "satanic."

The text relates envy with murder: Cain kills Abel; the murderous intentions of the sons of Jacob toward their brother Joseph. Genesis presents the classic case of envy in the family and community; the bitter fruit of it is displayed before our eyes as it manifests its disruptive and poisonous power. Clearly peace and envy do not co-exist.

We have the example of Aaron, the brother of Moses, and how he suffered from the envy of others. *We read in Sirach 45:18, "Men of other families were inflamed against him, were jealous of him in the desert [because of the gifts and the honor of his priesthood]."*

The Scriptures caution us, *"Seek no advice from those who regard you with hostility. From those who envy you keep your intentions hidden. He may tell you how good your way may be and then stand by to watch your misfortune"* (Sir. 37:9-10).

Later in Genesis, we find these repentant words in the mouth of Joseph's brother, *"Alas, we are being punished because of our brother. We saw the anguish of his heart when he pleaded with us, yet we paid no heed"* (Gen 42:21).

Proverbs teaches: *"Anger is relentless and wrath overwhelming but before jealousy who can stand?"* (Prov 27:4).

Christians received this message from Saint James: *"You envy and you cannot acquire, so you quarrel and fight. What you desire, you do not obtain and so you resort to murder"* (Jam 4:2).

In the eyes of Saint Paul, hostilities, bickering, jealousy, outburst of anger, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions in the Church are rooted in envy. He teaches, *"For as long as there are jealousy and quarrels among you, are you not in the flesh—living in darkness?"* (1Cor 3:3; see also Rm 13:13).

Saint Cyprian, in the fourth century AD, put it well, "Human envy is the most dangerous and often secret evil in the life of the church." As it was in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, so it is in the 21<sup>st</sup>.

The preferential love of Jacob for Joseph stimulated raw envy and jealousy in the souls of Joseph's brothers. Their murderous intentions toward Jacob are visible in their effort to make him suffer for his rejection of them. They bring him the blood-soaked tunic of his son, with the implication that a wild beast had devoured him. Holding this evidence in his hands, to what deep-down dark valleys of pain and suffering did Jacob's imagination lead him? Was it meant to be unending? Jacob experienced it so: "*It will go down with me into Sheol.*" Did the author of Genesis say more or less than he intended when he wrote, "*a wild beast destroyed him!*" "Envy" is the beast's name!

In the Book of Wisdom, a Jewish Scripture that found a place in the Septuagint Bible but not in collections published after the first century A.D., gives us our greatest insight into the source of envy in the human soul. We read there: "*By the envy of the devil, death entered into the world, and those who are in his possession experience it*" (Wis 2:24). Wisdom likewise confirms, "*For God formed man to be imperishable; the image of his own nature he made him*" (Wis 2:23). The author of Wisdom does not lay death at the feet of God; he places it where it belongs!

Scripture attributes the source of envy in a person to be the fruit of Satan's activity within the human soul. A human being that is permeated with envy is a satanic person who deceives and destroys, as he oils its way in and out of the lives of others.

If we are envious, we may desire to possess the good of another; their possession appears as our deprivation. Unconsciously, we may attribute our deprivation to God, blaming Him for our poverty and transferring our hatred of God upon others.

Would we be willing to do what the objects of our envy did to in order to be who and what they are? Seeing the blessings of others, we see only our deficiencies. Frozen in our envy and jealousy, we fail to recognize our own gifts and to develop them. Thus, our personal poverty often lies at our own feet.

As for the beautiful in this world, in whose shadow we often stand: "Beauty is a joy forever!" A visual banquet! Physical beauty is a gift of nature; enjoy the beauty in the other. But remember that the beautiful carry their own burden besides being the recipients of the envy of others. People often do not love the beautiful and talented. They can become "things" in the lives of others, sought not for themselves but for their beauty and talent. The beautiful are often reduced to a something to behold, but not to touch or hold. Being put on a pedestal can be both a lonely place and an envious one.

P. S. As the poet told us, "Beauty is its own excuse for being!" With that the bell rings, announcing the end of Intermission.

## ACT TWO—SCENE ONE

### EXILED INTO EGYPT

Joseph, a naive self-centered seventeen year old boy, was traumatized with the suddenness of a lightening strike. He entered into a living, unending nightmare that begins with the vision of himself reflected in the unmasked, contempt and hatred in the eyes of his brothers. Nothing in his entire life had prepared him for the terror that seized his soul, as his brothers, in cold hatred, determined his life or death. He falls into a pit of hopelessness, possessing no inner resources to sustain him. Trauma shattered his frail self-image like a crystal statue thrown off its pedestal. Only the animal of his life remains, but it is without its innate kit for survival. He is left with no thought and no will, with an existence that is subjected to an uncontrollable environment.

Survival lay in knowing how to be no more than a thing that is of less value than a goat. Time and experience determine what that “thing” becomes. Joseph had an innate desire to live; in order to do so, he must discover the secret of living moment to moment. Anything more would cost precious energy. Presently, his concern is heat, cold, nakedness, thirst, hunger, fear, and absolute loneliness in the total emptiness of soul. He has no awareness of possessing anything more than naked existence. He does possess, however, youth, health, and physical beauty. He is pleasant to behold in the eyes of those who do behold such things. And somewhere in utter darkness is God. Where?

The Ishmaelites arrive in Egypt, and place their slave boy up for auction in the market place. *“When Joseph was taken down to Egypt, a certain Egyptian (Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward) bought him from the Ishmaelites who had brought him there” (Gen 39: 1).*

Egypt, at the time of Joseph's arrival, possessed the most advanced culture in the Ancient World. It had created a grand civilization, the scope of which scholars today have been unable to measure. Egypt had built a nation and culture that lasted 3000 years longer than any other nation on this planet. When King Tutankhamen ruled Egypt, the pyramids of Giza were already a thousand years old; when Cleopatra ruled as queen, Tutankhamen had been in his tomb a thousand years. The Pyramid of Cheops existed a thousand years before the foundation of Rome. If the Lord had desired to develop a semi-nomadic tribe into a nation, Egypt would have been the proper training ground.

Into this wonder-world of Egypt, Joseph enters as a slave. Few men begin so low and rise as high as the beloved son of Jacob; the boy had a charmed life. Or else, he possessed a great Agent as his Public Relations manager.

Joseph appears on the slave market as a boy that *“was strikingly handsome in countenance and body” (Gen 39:6b)*. According to the Scriptures, good looks are often a sign of divine favor. We read in 1 Samuel 9:2, *“He had a son named Saul, who was a handsome man. There was no*



*other Israelite handsomer than Saul' he stood head and shoulders above the people."* In Chapter 16:12 of Samuel we hear of David, *"He was ruddy, a youth handsome to behold and making a splendid appearance."*

Standing on the slave block, he gets Potiphar's attention. Having been in the hands of the Ishmaelites, any other hands would be better. The sun shone on him that day--Potiphar purchases him with the intention of bringing him into the household, rather than putting him in his fields to work. To Joseph, being brought into a rich, prestigious house borders on the miraculous. Someone's eye is upon the sparrow. Potiphar, his new master, is courtier of Pharaoh, and is his chief steward.

## ACT TWO—SCENE TWO

### THE HOUSEHOLD SLAVE

At some point, Joseph began to gain some emotional control of his life. He accepts his conditions and he determines to survive the best he can. Joseph makes a virtue out of necessity; he determines to enter completely into the role "fate" had assigned to him.

Joseph seemingly anticipates Paul's advice on how to be a "good slave." *"Slaves, obey your human masters with reverence, with awe and sincerity of heart...Do not render service for appearance only...give your service willingly serving the Lord"* (Eph 6:5-7). Paul may have considered himself a "slave of Christ," but Joseph's situation was quite different. However, Joseph seems to have done as Paul would later suggest.

Once he became a member of the household, Joseph matured considerably. Potiphar began to notice how well he performed all his tasks and he grew very fond of the boy, making him his personal attendant. With this close proximity to Joseph, his master's admiration only increased. Joseph appears to bless everything he touches. Potiphar placed Joseph over his entire household. *"Having placed in Joseph's hands all that he owned, he gave no thought, with Joseph there, to anything but the food he put into his mouth"* (Gen 39:6).

What now occurs retells a very old story: a handsome house-boy catches the eye of his bored mistress, and a dark cloud hangs over the household. Even at that time in Egypt there was a popular story that dealt with this same matter--The Story of Two Brothers.

There is a saying in Proverbs 5:3-4, *"The lips of an adulteress drip with honey...; but in the end she is as bitter as wormwood, as sharp as a two-edged sword."* Joseph catches the eye of Potiphar's wife and finds himself in a no-win situation. His master's wife has cast her eyes upon him, she likes what she sees, and she desires what she likes. As the mistress of the house, accustomed to obedient slaves, she issues a command to Joseph, "Lie with me!" A shocked and shaken Joseph automatically cries out, "No!"

As a woman not to be denied her wishes, she prudently pursues her conquest of Joseph by seeking to weaken his will. *"Although she enticed Joseph day after day, he would not agree to lie beside her, or even stay near her"* (Gen 39:10). He told her, *"As long as I am here, my*

*master gives no thought to anything in this house, and all that he owns he has placed in my hands. He wields no more authority in this house than I do, and he has withheld nothing from me except yourself, since you are his wife. How, then, could I commit so grave a wrong and thus stand condemned before God?” (Gen 39:8-9).*

Nothing Joseph said had any effect upon her. When words fail, action is demanded; Mrs. Potiphar acts. Having sent all the servants out of the house and certain they are alone, she grabbed Joseph by his clothes and said, *“Lie with me.”* The scriptures teach, *“Flee temptation!”* That is now the only course of action left open for Joseph. As she holds him, he slips out of his clothing and runs from the house, naked (see Gen 39:11-12).

This is one rejection too many. He will pay for it. Looking at his garment in her hands, Mrs. Potiphar had all she needed, and she screamed for her servants. When they came to her, she held up Joseph's garment and said, *“Look, my husband brought in a Hebrew slave to make sport of us! He came in here to lie with me...When he heard me scream for help, he left his garment beside me and fled outside” (Gen 39:14-15).*

Note whom she blames for this outrage and how cleverly she includes her servants in it. She places the blame on her husband, not upon Joseph, and the servants were intended to join her in expressing her outrage to her husband for bringing this foreigner into their household. Keeping the garment in her hand, she waited the return of her husband. *“As soon as the master heard his wife’s story about how his slave had treated her, he became enraged” (Gen. 39:19).*

She shrewdly implies that Potiphar, himself, is guilty for what has occurred. Recall, Adam tried to do the same thing when he blamed God and Eve for his own crime. Apparently Potiphar’s wife was more successful than Adam.

Potiphar could have ordered Joseph’s immediate execution, but apparently he was having second thoughts. He ordered Joseph to be put in the royal prison, which apparently was located somewhere in his own building. From what follows, we may assume he told the jailer to deal Joseph a light hand.

A Jewish midrash (Gen. Rab 87:3) [a method of interpreting of biblical stories—ed] finds it difficult to believe Joseph was entirely innocent. He was likened to one “who would stand in the market place, put make-up around his eyes, straighten up his hair, and swing his heels.” The midrash seems to paint him as a “call boy.”

Meanwhile, in prison things go well for Joseph. He charms the chief jail keeper into his favor. *“The chief jailer put Joseph in charge of all the prisoners who were in that prison, and everything that had to be done was done under his management. The chief jailer did not concern himself with anything at all that was in Joseph's charge, since the Lord was with him and brought success to all he did.” (Gen 39:22-23).*

## ACT TWO ENDS

### INTERMISSION--THE SPIRIT OF GOD

Rabbi Jacob says to us at this time, "I want to call your attention to something very important in your study of Genesis that you may have missed, as it is subtle, but is a major change. Up to this point our author has emphasized God's faithfulness to the promises of the Covenant. In the story of Joseph the emphasis falls upon Joseph's faithfulness to the spirit of the covenant that was clearly expressed in the Lord's words, '*Walk in My ways and be blameless*' (Gen 17:1). Where else in Genesis have we heard such a statement on the lips of a human being? "*How then could I do this wicked thing and sin before God*" (Gen 39:9). The spirit that was witnessed in Joseph will be found in both Jeremiah and Ezekiel many years down the road after Joseph's time."

We read in Jeremiah, "*I will make a new covenant with the House of Israel...I will put my teachings into their inmost being and inscribe it on their hearts*" (Jer 31:31, 33). Ezekiel teaches, "*I am concerned for My holy name, which the House of Israel has caused to be profaned among the nations to which they have come. I will sanctify My great name and the nations shall know that I am the Lord when I manifest my holiness before their eyes through you.*" The Lord reveals how this will occur: "*I will put My spirit into you. Then I will cause you to follow My laws and faithfulness to observe My rule*" (Ez. 37:21,23,27).

In all of Genesis, Joseph is the only one described as the one filled with the spirit of God. The Lord will put these words in the mouth of the Pharaoh of Egypt, a symbol of the nations of the world, "*Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the Spirit of God?*" (Gen 41:38).

How will the promised blessing to the nations come to be? First--because of God's fidelity to His promises and secondly--when His people are righteous and just. When these two themes weave together, when we have the Covenant of the Hearts, blessings come to the nations.

The Lord later expresses through the words of Joseph a fundamental principle of God's operation in the world--You intended to harm me but God intended it for good. In other words, you do what you want, but God takes what you want and makes it into what He wants. Only God can make an evil into a good. The Goodness of God is greater than the Evilness of man.

## ACT THREE—SCENE ONE

### INTERPRETER OF DREAMS

From being naive teenager, Joseph moves on a fast track to becoming a mature young man; no more navel-gazing and self pity, but accepting of the situation in which he finds himself. He makes the best of what the circumstances and his talents permit. This he does without sacrificing his own soul; he maintains personal integrity. In a situation that threatened all he had gained, he refused to sacrifice his personal righteousness and his relationship with

God. He personally demonstrates the virtue of Fear of God, which may explain his future successes. Scriptures will later confirm, “Fear of God is the beginning of wisdom!” Joseph becomes a wise man, a remarkably wise young man.

The scene opens with Joseph a prisoner in Pharaoh's prison, falsely accused by Potiphar's wife. Seemingly, the prison is under the jurisdiction of Potiphar: it may even be part of Potiphar's residence, or closely connected to it. Joseph has already moved into a position of authority within the prison; he found favor with the jail-keeper, who put him in charge of the other inmates.

We read in the text, *“Some time later, the cupbearer and the baker of the king of Egypt gave offense to their lord the king of Egypt. Pharaoh was angry with his two courtiers, the cupbearer and the chief baker, and put them in custody, in the house of the chief steward (in the same prison house where Joseph was confined). The chief steward assigned Joseph to them and he attended them” (Gen 40:1-4).*

There seems to be some confusion in the text. Joseph is a prisoner but he still appears to be somewhat in the graces of Potiphar, and still has some freedom of movement in the household. Scholars see this information as coming from two different sources, which our author combines. Substantially, the plot remains the same and it continues on as a coherent story, with a few minor difficulties, which we have conveniently resolved for ourselves.

The royal prisoners apparently are separated from the others, and receive special treatment at the hands of Joseph. The two imprisoned courtiers, sharing the same uncertain fate, have drawn closer together in their misery. On one particular night they both had significant dreams, but with different meanings. They shared their dreams but they were unable to help themselves or one another. The uncertainty of the meanings of the dreams only increased their anxiety concerning their futures. When Joseph arrived in the morning to attend to their needs, he noted the heaviness of their spirits. He asked them, *“Why are you so downcast today?” They replied, ‘We have had dreams, and there is no one to interpret them.’* Joseph intuitively knew these dreams were from God: if so, only God could interpret them. *“Joseph said to them, ‘Surely God can interpret them: share your dreams with me.’”*

*Then the chief cupbearer told his dream to Joseph. He said to him, “In my dream, there was a vine in front of me. On the vine were three branches. It had barely budded when out came its blossoms, and the clusters ripened into grapes. Pharaoh's cup was in my hand, and I took the grapes and pressed them into the cup, and placed the cup in Pharaoh's hand.” Joseph immediately understood the dream and explained its meaning to the cupbearer, “The three branches are three days. In three days the Pharaoh will pardon you, and restore you to your post, you will place Pharaoh's cup in his hand, as was your custom formerly when you were his cupbearer.” (Gen 40:9-13)*

Knowing that the cup bearer would be released in three days, and hoping he appreciated the good news he had given him, Joseph asked him a favor: *“Think of me when all is well with you and the Pharaoh, and do me the kindness of mentioning me to the*

*Pharaoh, so as to free me from this place. The truth is, I was kidnapped in the land of the Hebrews, and I have done nothing here that they should put me in this dungeon” (Gen 40:14-15).*

Encouraged by what he heard, the chief baker is anxious to share his dream with Joseph. *“I, too, had a dream. In my dream there were three openwork baskets on my head. In the uppermost basket were all kinds of bakery products for Pharaoh, but the birds were pecking at them out of the basket above my head.”* Without an instant of doubt, Joseph understood the dream. *“This is what it means. The three baskets are three days. In three days Pharaoh will lift up your head and have you impaled upon a pole; and the birds will be pecking the flesh off your body.”* This dreadful interpretation implied much more to the baker than physical death; it implied eternal death. The Egyptians believed that preservation of the body was important for existence after death.

*And in fact, on the third day—Pharaoh’s birthday—Pharaoh made a banquet for all his officials. With his courtiers around him, he lifted up the heads of the chief cupbearer and chief baker. He restored the chief cupbearer to his office, so that he again placed the cup in Pharaoh’s hand, but the chief baker he impaled—just as Joseph had told them in the interpretation. Yet, the chief cupbearer gave no thought to Joseph; he had forgotten him. (Gen 40:20-23)*

## THE FAVORITE SON

### STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What do you see as the danger in a family where the parents display a special preference for one child over the others?
2. What effect do you see that favoritism having upon the other children?
3. As Joseph makes his first appearance as a young man, what is your impression of his character?
4. How would you describe his brothers' attitude toward Joseph?
5. How do you see this affecting their attitude toward their father?
6. If you had been a silent witness at the episode in the fields of Dothan, how would you have felt when all was said and done?
7. If you had been Joseph, what do you think the actions of your brothers would have done to your soul?
8. What does the presentation of the blood soaked coat to Jacob tell you about his sons' relationship with their father?
9. How would you describe the nature and power of envy and its effect in your own life?
10. What is your understanding Saint Cyprian's teaching that envy is "the secret evil" in the Church? How do you see this secret evil acting in the Church today?
11. How do you see Joseph dealing with these extraordinary sufferings in his life? What effect did it have on his growth and development?
12. What does the episode between Potiphar's wife and Joseph tell you about Joseph's moral character?
13. What do you learn from Joseph's words in Gen. 39:11 about his will? What is the ultimate power directing his life?
14. What do you see as God's role in all that has occurred up to this time?
15. How do you see God working in your life and in your problems?

## CHAPTERS 41, 42, 43

### THE COURT OF PHARAOH

#### ACT THREE-SCENE TWO

Two lifeless years have come and gone since the day Joseph asked the royal cupbearer to speak well of him and his righteous cause. The desire to live reaches into the very depths of his being, bordering on a shore of hopelessness—beyond despair. It is a life without light and without a single person to offer hope or comfort to him. He was abandoned by all but God, who demands patience from Him as he refines the gold in his heart.

Saint Teresa of Avila, once finding herself in such a condition, wrote this message of encouragement to herself, “Let nothing disturb you; let nothing affright you. All things are passing. God alone never changes. Patient endurance obtains all things. Whom God possesses, nothing is lacking. God alone sustains.”

Perhaps the caliber of a soul such as Teresa's could light a lamp of light in her heart, but the struggling soul of young Joseph survived by losing itself in the daily service of the fellow prisoners. Joseph saw no light at the end of this dark dungeon. Yet—a blinding light it would be!

Gaining the undivided attention of a Pharaoh of Egypt could only be done by Pharaoh's having need of you. What were those chances? As the angel Gabriel said, “*Nothing is impossible to God!*” (Lk 1:37). Lord gives Joseph his chance—his day at court.

Our scene opens in the palace of the Pharaoh. For two successive nights, the Pharaoh had two mysterious dreams. They left him with a sense of anxiety, preoccupying his full attention. The Pharaoh called for the magicians and all the wise men in Egypt to come to the palace. He related to them in detail both dreams. No one could interpret them for him.

The distress of the Pharaoh caused much stress and anxiety among all the courtiers. At this moment, the royal cupbearer recalled his experience with Joseph in prison. “*The cupbearer cautiously addressed the Pharaoh, ‘I must make reference today of my offensives. Once Pharaoh was angry with his servant, and placed me in custody in the house of the chief steward together with the chief baker. We had dreams this same night, he and I, each with a dream of its own meaning. A Hebrew youth was there with us, a servant of the chief steward, and when we told him of our dream, he interpreted them for us, telling each of us the meaning of his dream. And as he interpreted for us, so it came to pass: I was restored to my post and the other was impaled.’ Pharaoh ordered Joseph to be brought into his presence, and they hurriedly brought him from the dungeon*” (Gen 41:9-14).

The summoning of one such as Joseph into the presence of the Pharaoh was not without its danger. At a later time, history recorded just such a thing when Nebuchadnezzar ruled Babylon. He too had a troubling dream causing great anxiety.

*(Nebuchadnezzar) ordered the magicians, exorcists, and sorcerers to come to him in the palace. Once assembled, he ordered them to tell him the meaning of what he dreamed. They responded, "O king—Relate the dream to your servants, and we will tell its meaning." The king immediately responded, "If you do not make the dream and its meaning known to me, you shall be torn limb from limb and your houses confiscated. If you reveal it to me, great riches and honor are yours." They responded to the king, "Let the king relate the dream first to his servants and we will tell its meaning."*

*The king grew suspicious and replied, "It is clear to me that you are playing for time; if you don't make the dream known to me, there is but one verdict for you—you have conspired to tell me something false. Relate the dream, then I will know you can interpret the meaning." They responded, "There is no one on earth that can satisfy the king's demands, no one has ever asked such a thing of any of its subjects. The thing asked by the king is difficult: there is no one who can tell it to the king but the gods whose abode is not among mortals." Whereupon the king flew into a royal rage and ordered all the wise men of Babylon to be put to death. (Dan 2:2-12)*

Joseph arrived at the palace. Before being presented to Pharaoh, he had a make over: they washed the smell of the dungeon off of him, gave him a hair cut and clean clothing, and being presentable, he was presented to Pharaoh at court.

*Pharaoh said to Joseph, "I had certain dreams that no one can interpret. Now I have heard it said of you that the moment you are told a dream you can interpret it." Joseph replied, "It is not I, but God who will give Pharaoh the right answer." Then Pharaoh said to Joseph: "In my dream, I was standing on the bank of the Nile, when up from the Nile came seven sturdy and well-formed cows; they grazed in the reed grass. Behind them came seven other cows, scrawny, ill-formed, and emaciated. Never have I seen their likes for ugliness in all the land of Egypt! And the seven lean and ugly cows ate up the first seven cows, the sturdy ones. But when they had consumed them, one could not tell that they had consumed them, for they looked just as bad as before. And then I woke up. In another dream, I saw seven ears of grain, full and healthy, growing on a single stalk. Behind them sprouted seven ears, shriveled, thin and scorched by the east wind. And the seven thin ears swallowed the seven healthy ears. I have told my magicians, but none has an explanation for me." (Gen 41:17-24)*

*Joseph responded to the Pharaoh, "Both of Pharaoh's dreams have the same meaning. God has told Pharaoh what He is about to do. The seven healthy cows are seven years, and the seven healthy ears are seven years--the same in each dream. So also, the seven lean and ugly cows that follow are seven years, as are the seven empty ears scorched by the east wind; they are seven years of famine. It is just as I told Pharaoh: God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do. Immediately ahead are seven years of great abundance in all the land of Egypt. After then will come seven*



*years of famine, and all the abundance in the land of Egypt will be forgotten. When the famine has ravaged the land, no trace of the abundance will be left in the land of Egypt because of the famine thereafter, for it will be very severe.” (Gen 41:25-30)*

Joseph goes on to explain to the Pharaoh that having the same dream twice means that God has reaffirmed the matter, and that He will soon carry it out.

At this point in the narration, Joseph moves into an entirely different role. He has not only interpreted the dream for the Pharaoh, but he goes on to tell him the proper course of action to be taken. This reveals the divine presence of the gifts of wisdom and understanding possessed by Joseph. The Scriptures present to us what we would call “a spirit filled person.” This is the first appearance of such a person in the Sacred Scriptures.

*“Accordingly, let Pharaoh find a man of discernment and wisdom, and set him over the land of Egypt. And let Pharaoh take steps to appoint overseers over the land, and organize the land of Egypt in the seven years of plenty. Let all the food of these good years that are coming be gathered, and let the grain be collected under Pharaoh's authority as food to be stored in the cities. Let that food be a reserve for the land for the seven years of famine which will come upon the land of Egypt, so that the land may not perish in the famine.” (Gen 41:33-36)*

What follows could be seen as the prototype of all fairy-tales; they cut their teeth on this one, when a dark miserable night magically became a bright shining day, and the stars of the drama lived happily ever after. Fairy-tales are fantasy dreams about what would happen if God truly ruled the earth and lives of people.

The sunshine of God's love must touch simultaneously many bases to produce a fairy-tale result. Fairy tales do happen when all participants are properly aligned. As nothing is impossible for God, the “impossible” does happen, because God is a Compassionate Father. And when the “impossible” does occur, it is not a fairy-tale, but a Spirit inspired story.

Perhaps the “impossible” seldom happens because of the difficulty of the human players to align themselves properly. All the players must be open to the active presence of God; then God will act and “impossible” things will occur in daily lives. The Pharaoh of Egypt described the essence of proper alignment when he asked his officials, “*“Could we find another like him, a man so endowed with the spirit of God?” So Pharaoh said to Joseph: ‘Since God has made all this known to you, no one can be as wise and discerning as you are’” (Gen 41:38-39).*

We had our first evidence of the Spirit working in the soul of Joseph when he cried out against Potiphar's wife, “*How could I do so great a wrong and thus stand condemned before God?” (Gen 39:9).*

Perhaps the first step towards the spirit-filled story of our lives begins when we heed the word of blessed Tobit: “*When you turn back to Him with all your heart to do what is right*

*before him, then He will turn back to you and no longer hide His face from you” (Tobit 13:6). It is all summed up in the Lord's words, “Walk in my Presence and do what is righteous and just.”*

These words of Scriptures give us hope for the impossible in our lives. *“In the tender compassion of our God, the dawn from on high shall break upon us, to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace” (Lk 1:79).*

Fairy-tales cannot become reality because magic is their source; magic creates only an illusion of reality.

Let us now listen as our first spirit-filled story unfolds in Genesis. How does the Pharaoh react to the revelation and the solution offered for the foretold problems? His response to Joseph's words says it all. The Spirit of God is working in the Pharaoh as he discerns the Spirit of God in Joseph.

Pharaoh bears responsibility for the lives of many people loved by God. Pharaoh's response to Joseph will save many lives, among them the family of Jacob. A man believed by his people to be a god possesses the wisdom and humility to be open to divine inspiration. If he is indeed their “little” god, he is a humble little god. Religious experience testifies that the virtue of humility opens the human spirit to divine activity.

A deep silence follows upon Joseph's words. No one dared to speak until the Pharaoh responds. Pharaoh doesn't merely listen to the words, he experiences them, and he speaks, *“Your plan pleases me,”* and turning to his courtiers, he finds them in total agreement. Uttermost in mind were Joseph's words: *“Find a man of discernment and wisdom, and set him over the land of Egypt.”* Turning to his courtiers he asks, *“Could we find another like him, a man in whom is the Spirit of God?”* Pharaoh said to Joseph, *“Since God has made all this known to you, there is none so wise and discerning as you. You shall be in charge of my court, and by your command shall all people be directed; only with respect to the throne shall I be superior to you” (Gen 41:37-40).*

The dark night of Joseph's soul ends with bursting brilliance as the butterfly emerges from its cocoon: Joseph son of Jacob and Rachel—Vizier of all Egypt! Thirteen years ago, he had been sold into slavery.

As mentioned earlier, our author presumes his readers are intelligent enough to read between the lines as he presents to us only essential details. The declaration of any man, much less a foreigner, as Vizier or Viceroy of Egypt would have occurred only within a great public and religious ceremony.

We may presume the interpretation of the dream pleased Pharaoh and restored his peace of mind, and that of itself would have brought a sense of relief to the whole court. The words, *“find a man of discernment and wisdom and place him over the land of Egypt,”* would have been taken to heart and seriously reflected upon. Proper protocol called for him to

discuss the matter with his leading courtiers as to whom should this position go. No doubt, some pushing and shoving had already started among the courtiers for the position. Pharaoh ended it with his question, *“could we find another man like Joseph, a man in whom is the spirit of God? So Pharaoh said to Joseph, ‘Since God has made all this known to you, there is none so discerning and wise as you are’”* (Gen 41:38).

The courtiers may not have been as wise and discerning as Joseph, but they were wise enough not to disagree with the opinion of a man they believed to be infallible; all the courtiers were very pleased with Pharaoh’s decision. Perhaps there was a bit of personal disappointment, but on the other hand, no enemy of theirs would come to such a position of power over them. With Joseph, they would all be at ground zero together.

### ACTS THREE ENDS

#### ACT FOUR—SCENE ONE JOSEPH VIZIER OF EGYPT

The appointment of Joseph as Vizier of all Egypt occurred amidst great pomp and ceremony. It would have consisted in the public proclamation by Pharaoh, *“Behold, I put you in charge of the all the land of Egypt,”* at which time he would have removed his signet ring from his hand and put it on Joseph’s hand saying, *“I am Pharaoh, yet without you, no one shall lift up hand or foot in all land of Egypt.”* (The ring bore the royal seal of Egypt and its wearer was known as the Seal-bearer of the King.) The authority of Joseph is nigh absolute: any appeal against any decree of Joseph’s would have to be addressed to the throne of Pharaoh.

Immediately following, Joseph was invested with robes proper to his station, and Pharaoh placed a gold chain around his neck. Pharaoh then had him ride in the chariot of his vizier, and all cried before him, *“Abrek!”* (a title of honor).

It was at this time that Pharaoh bestowed an Egyptian name upon Joseph—*“Zaphenath-peneah,”* which is interpreted to mean, *“the god speaks and he (the new born child) lives.”* Joseph is born again, this as time an Egyptian. It is the desire of Pharaoh that he begin his new life with the gift of a wife. Pharaoh gave him in marriage Asenath, the daughter of Potiphera, priest of Heliopolis. The status of such a marriage was below only that of a royal marriage. The name *Asenath* means *“belonging to the goddess Neth,”* and her father’s name, *Potiphera*, means *“he whom Ra gave”* (see Gen 41:39-46).

*“Joseph was thirty years old when he entered the service of Pharaoh, king of Egypt. After Joseph left Pharaoh’s presence, he traveled throughout the land of Egypt”* (Gen 41:46)

For the next seven years, Joseph prepared the people of Egypt for the great famine that lay ahead. Seemingly, Joseph divided the land of Egypt into five districts, and he appointed a supervisor over each of them. Each district was divided into five parts; during the seven abundant years, the yield of four parts were for public consumption, and the yield of the fifth part was gathered and stored in granaries in the nearby cities. *“Joseph garnered grain*

*in quantities like the sands of the sea, so vast that at last he ceased to measure it, for it could not be measured” (Gen 41:49).*

For the first time in thirty years, Joseph lived his own life. He lived it well, and because he lived it well, he became a great man who brought blessings into his world.

When the seven years of harvest ended, the seven years of drought and famine began. There was famine in all the land, but throughout the land of Egypt there was bread. When the people of Egypt began to experience hunger, they cried to the Pharaoh. He said to all Egypt, *“Go to Joseph; whatever he tells you, you shall do.”* When the full reality of the famine set in upon Egypt, Joseph opened all the granaries and all Egypt had bread to eat.

The famine was not confined to Egypt. All the nations around Egypt suffered famine as well. *“So all the world came to Joseph in Egypt to procure rations, for the famine had become severe throughout the world” (Gen 41:57).*

Joseph also enjoyed his personal life, finding contentment and joy in his marriage to Asenath. The couple had two boys; their first son was named *Manasseh*, meaning, “God has made me forget completely my hardships and my parental home,” and his second was named *Ephraim*, meaning, “God has made me fertile in the land of my affliction” Joseph had a new life and he “let the dead past bury its dead.” (See Gen 41:50-52).

In later Jewish tradition, Asenath came to be the prototype of converts to Judaism. A powerful story is told at length in a Hellenistic novella entitled “Joseph and Asenath.”

Joseph becomes the first man in the Bible to possess divine power; he possessed the power to discern dreams sent by God and he possessed the Gift of Wisdom to interpret the dreams.

## THE FAMILY REUNION

### ACT FOUR-SCENE TWO

As much as we desire to leave our past behind, it catches up to us in unexpected ways. Our past is part of us. Memories suppressed from conscious awareness remain buried in the storehouse of our brain.

What is often called punishment due to sin, is living with the effects of the evil deeds we have done to others or to ourselves. Unfinished business remains unfinished: it is often best it remain that way. There are old flames that have never died, but they are best left unkindled. The poet once said, “Only a fool goes chasing after the winds that blew across the heart strings of yesterday and seeks to unsnarl the knotted roots of time” (Edna St. Vincent Millay—“John Brown's Body”).

At times the past returns in a sudden flashback. Perhaps a long buried ghost appears at the door, very much alive and with all the old baggage. It is the door of dreams that cannot be

shut. The hero of Egypt will be confronted by his past. It will test his soul to the very narrow of his bones. There are dreams left unfinished, work yet to be done. Unseen powers move to their time of fulfillment.

Famine has arrived at the door of Jacob's tent. When he hears that grain is available in Egypt, he chides his listless sons, *"Why are you standing there looking at each other. There are rations to be had in Egypt. Go get some that the family will survive and not die"* (Gen 42:1-2). This is the first tie-in with the presence of Joseph in Egypt and the survival of his family. Jacob sends ten of his sons, them but keeps Benjamin, Joseph's full brother, by his side because he feared disaster may befall the last child of Rachel.

The scene opens in Egypt, with the arrival of the ten brothers at the dispensary for grain, which Joseph himself dispensed. They bowed low to him with their faces to the ground, and Joseph recognized them. Their sudden appearance filled his soul with conflicting emotions. Joseph's dream from so long ago is actually being fulfilled at this very moment—*"We were binding sheaves in the field, when suddenly my sheaf rose up and stood upright; and your sheaves formed a ring around my sheaf and bowed down to it."* He hears his brothers' voices from the past, *"Do you propose to rule over us? Are you to rule over us?"* Joseph would be the first to confess, *"God writes straight with crooked lines."*

The brothers knew the boy Joseph and his multicolored cloak, not the man Joseph, Vizier of Egypt, the man of power second only to the Pharaoh. This is no dream, but reality. The drama begins.

Speaking through an interpreter Joseph inquires harshly, *"Where have you come from?"* he asked them. *'From the land of Canaan to procure food,'* they responded." Pretending not to believe them, he accuses them of being spies to determine the weakness of the nation in this period of crisis. A sense of dread encompasses them, and they quickly protest, *"But no, my lord, truly your servants have come to procure food! All of us are the sons of the same man; we are forthright men; your servants have never spied!"* Pretending not to believe a word of it he angrily responds, *'Yes, you have come to look at the land in its nakedness.'* Again in defense they respond, *'We your servants were twelve brothers, sons of the same man in the land of Canaan; but the youngest is now with our father, and another one is gone.'*" The "one gone" is beginning to haunt them.

After a long dramatic pause—letting them stew in their own juice—Joseph coldly says, *"Just as I decreed, you are spies and I will put you to a test. Unless your younger brother comes here, I swear by Pharaoh you shall not leave Egypt! Send one of your own to bring your younger brother to me. As for the rest of you, you are to be imprisoned until the truth be known; the truth of your words must be tested. Until that time, you are nothing but spies.'* He had them put in prison for three days."

*"On the third day Joseph said to them, 'I am God-fearing man. Do this and you shall live. If you have been truthful, one of your brothers will remain in prison while the rest of you go and take home rations for your starving household. But you must all return with your younger brother. Your word will thus be verified and you will live.'* To this they agreed."

The guilt of their past crime against their brother flooded their hearts, turning in upon themselves in anguish. *“Alas, we are being punished for our brother, since we looked on in his personal pain and anguish and he pleaded with us and we turned our backs upon him.’ Rueben turned upon his other brothers saying, ‘Did I not warn you not to do any harm to the boy? But you wouldn’t listen! Now we must account for his blood.’ They did not know, of course, that Joseph understood what they said, since he spoke with them through an interpreter.”* The words flooded Joseph’s heart with pain. Unable to contain his feelings, he left their presence as his own tears cleansed his heart.

Recovering control of his feelings, Joseph returned and had Simeon bound in front of them. He ordered that their containers be filled with grain, and he replaced the money of each in their sacks and gave them provisions for the trip home. They loaded their asses with their rations and departed for home (see Gen 42:6-26).

### ACT FOUR - SCENE THREE

Later, one of the brothers discovered the money in his bag and said to them, *“Someone has returned my money; it is here in my sack.”* It was not joyful news to their ears; it only deepened their feeling of dread. *“Anxiously they asked one another, ‘What is this that God has done to us?’”* They should be asking, *“What is this we have done, that God has done this to us?”* Seemingly, there was no need to ask it; their consciences testified to it.

Nine brothers returned home laden with supplies and hearts burdened with sorrow. They reported to Jacob everything done and all that was said between them and the Vizier of Egypt. When they opened the bags, they all found their money returned. It all amazed and deeply troubled Jacob; he began to fear the worst. *“Their father Jacob said to them, ‘I am the one you would leave bereft! Joseph is gone, and Simeon is gone, and now you would take away Benjamin! This always happen to me’”* (Gen 42:35-36). Without being aware of it, Jacob places the blame right where it belongs.

With no words of comfort, and complete misunderstanding of his father’s nature, Rueben replies, *“Put him in my care, and I will bring him back to you. You may kill my own two sons if I fail to bring him back to you.”* Is Jacob to find comfort for the loss of two sons by killing two of his grandsons? Ignoring Reuben’s ignorant response, Jacob firmly replies, *“My son shall not go down with you, for his own brother is dead and he alone is left. If he should meet with disaster on the trip you take, you will send my white head down to Sheol in grief.”* Seemingly, Jacob makes it clear to the other nine that their existence is not enough to give him reason for him to live if he loses the youngest two.

Time passes and the famine continues its tight grasp upon all the land. The people were scraping the button of the barrel for grain. Jacob commands his sons, *“Go back and procure us some food.”* Fearing this would be signing their death warrant Judah told Jacob, *“The man warned us repeatedly, ‘You cannot come before me unless your brother is with you.’ If you let Benjamin go with us, we will go down to procure more food for you. But if you are not will, we will not go down, because the man told us, ‘You shall not appear in my presence unless your brother is with you’”* (Gen 43:3-5).

Jacob had been living with this moment since their return. *“He demanded of them, ‘Why did you make it so hard for me by telling the man you had a younger brother?’ They answered, ‘The man kept asking us about ourselves and our family: ‘Is your father still living? Do you have a younger brother?’ We had to answer his questions! How were we to know that he would insist, ‘Bring your brother here?’”*”

An exasperated Judah urges his father, *“Send the boy in my care, and let us be off and on our way if you and we and our children are to keep from starving to death! I will stand security for him. You shall hold me accountable for him. If I fail to bring him back and produce him before you, I shall stand condemned before you forever. If we hadn’t dillydallied, we could have been there and back twice by this time!”* (Gen 43:8-10).

With no options left, Jacob/Israel agreed. *“If it must be so, then do this: put in your baggage the land’s best products and take them to the man as a gift—some balm and honey, gum and resin, and pistachios and almonds. Take also a double amount of money, for you must return the sum that was put back in the mouths of your bags; it may have been an oversight. Take your brother too, and be off on your way back to the man. And may El Shaddai dispose the man to be merciful toward you, so that he may let your other brother go, as well as Benjamin. As for me, if I am to suffer bereavement, I shall suffer it”* (Gen 43:11-14).

#### ACT FOUR - SCENE FOUR

Meanwhile, Simeon remained in prison, and Joseph patiently waited knowing he held the winning hand. The ten brothers arrived back in Egypt and presented themselves to Joseph. *“When Joseph saw Benjamin with them, he told his house steward, Take these men into the house, and have an animal slaughtered and prepared, for they are to dine with me at noon.”*

Being taken from the open courtyard into the privacy of the Vizier’s home, the brothers feared the worst. *“It has to do with that money put in our containers; it’s but a pretext to attack us and take our donkeys and seize us as slaves.”* As they approached the entrance to the house, they explained to the house steward, *“If you please sir, we were here once before to procure food. When we opened our bags, we found each man’s money in the mouth of his bag—our money in the full amount! We have now brought it back. We have brought other money to procure food with. We don’t know who put the first money in our bags.”* The steward assures them and replies, *“All is well with you; have no fear. Your God and the God of your father must have put treasure in your bags for you. I got your payment.”* He returned in a few moments with Simeon (see Gen 43:18-23).

*The steward brought them into Joseph’s house, gave them water to wash their feet, and got fodder for their animals. They laid out all the gifts to await Joseph’s arrival at noon, for they had been informed they would dine there. When Joseph arrived back into the house, they bowed down to him to the ground, and then presented the gifts they had brought inside. After inquiring about their well-being, he asked them, “And how is your aged father of whom you spoke. Is he still in good health?” “Your servant our father is well and still in good health,” they replied and they bowed respectfully.*

*Looking over at Benjamin, his mother's son, Joseph asked, "Is this the youngest brother of whom you spoke to me?" Then he said to him, "May God be gracious to you, my boy!" With that he hastily left the room, for he was so overcome with affection for his brother that he was on the verge of tears. He went into a private room and wept there. Gaining back his self-control, he washed his face, returning to the room, and gave the order, "Serve the meal!"*

They served Joseph by himself; they served the other Egyptians living in the household by themselves, and then they served the guests. It was understood that Egyptians could not eat with Hebrews, since that was loathsome to the Egyptians. *"When the brothers took their seats as directed by Joseph, the oldest in order of their seniority and the youngest in the order of their youth, they gazed at one another in utter astonishment; and as portions were brought to them from Joseph's table, Benjamin's portion was five times as large as that of anyone else. So they drank freely and made merry with him"* (Gen 43:33-34).

At that moment, Joseph was thirty-nine years of age. It had been twenty years since he had last seen these eleven brothers, ten of whom had sold him into slavery. In truth, the only one he truly related to as a brother was Benjamin—his full-blooded brother, the second child of Rachel, who was but a child when the others sought his destruction. His last experience with them had been traumatic, shocking, and devastating to his very soul—killing any brotherly feeling he may have borne them as his “big brothers.”

Has the opportunity arrived for them to begin again, to heal old wounds? Is it possible to do so? What kind of men are they today? They have all been invited to a banquet in his home, a fiesta; it is charity with a hook. They begin to feel more secure in his presence, *"All is well with you; have no fear"* the steward had assured them. Now they feasted and *"drank freely,"* which implies beyond moderation to the point of feeling no pain. They are getting drunk and Vizier is one with them. Behind the facade of Vizier sat Joseph, encouraging them to relax and enjoy themselves, while he observed each of them carefully as specimens under a microscope. Are they same as always? Have they changed or are they no more mature? An old saying tells us: truth lies in the wine.

The body has its own route to maturity--the natural route of physical growth and development, but the soul remains independent of the physical body. We have a lot big boys' toys for teenagers, who only got bigger and older. Seemingly, the teen years were such a great time that some men and women cannot let it go.

We hear often that people do evil things because they are sick. The behavioral psychologist, Dr. Glasser, teaches us that we become sick by doing sick things: the wrong thing, the unhealthy thing, and the evil thing. The first step to physical and spiritual health is to stop doing the sick thing.

I had a good friend who was dying of lung cancer and was asking for prayers for a cure, with a cigarette in his hand. Of course you pray that God will do all he can within the circumstances of the willed decisions of the person. He that wills an end, wills the means to the end.



Most of us fail to realize the power of our own will over our lives, and to what degree our own wills may hold in check the very compassion of God. A friend once related to me how he was cured of smoking. The incident he related confirmed how forgotten choices might still control our life. My friend had a serious health problem related to smoking, and the word from his doctor was, "Stop or die!" Even with such a dire warning, he could not stop; the addiction controlled his will. He prayed, and he went to prayer meetings where others prayed for him, with no results. On one occasion, a person said to him, "Pray to understand why you smoke." "A ridiculous idea," he thought. "I smoke because I am addicted to nicotine." However, the thought sowed a seed that he could not dismiss. So, he prayed to know why he smoked. Out of a long forgotten yesterday came a scene from his childhood: His father had caught his older son smoking and beat him with a belt. He turned to his younger son saying, "If you try it, you will wish you were dead." The boy said to himself, "You can't tell me what to do!" He went out behind the barn and smoked his first cigarette, and many followed as a sign of his rebellion against the authority of his father.

The long forgotten willed decision became an addiction. That decision had held him hostage, and he prayed for forgiveness for his parental rebellion. As mist before the sun, the addiction was gone.

Joseph began to see positive signs that substantial changes had occurred in his brothers. He needed more evidence before committing himself to them as their brother. He devised an acid test for them.

When the brothers retired to rest, Joseph gave orders to the servants, "*Fill the men's bags with all the food they can carry, and put each man's money in the mouth of his bag. Put also my goblet, the silver one, in the mouth of the youngest one's bag, with the money for his rations*" (Gen 44:1-2).

In the sobering light of dawn the brothers of Joseph were sent on their way—pack animals and all. With lighter spirits than when they arrived, they began their leisurely way home. They were in no hurry as they had lots of provisions for their journey home.

## THE COURT OF PHARAOH

### CHAPTERS 41, 42, 43

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

(Please read chapters 41, 42, 43)

1. How would you describe the spiritual condition of one in state of hopelessness beyond despair”?
2. In Joseph's years of enslavement, where do you see the presence of God?
3. How would you describe Joseph's disposition and behavior before Pharaoh?
4. How would you describe Pharaoh's impression of Joseph?
5. How would you describe the gift of Wisdom and how do you see it expressed in Joseph?
6. Where do you see Joseph displaying the Gift of Counsel before Pharaoh?
7. What would be your description of a person possessing the Spirit of God?
8. What advice does Tobit 13:6 give to those who fail to experience God in their lives?
9. After 13 years of being a slave Joseph becomes Vizier of Egypt. What does that teach you about waiting patiently for God to accomplish His will?
10. What impressed you most about Joseph's first meeting with his brothers?
11. Where do you discern a sense of guilt being expressed in this meeting? What does it indicate?
12. Pharaoh spoke of Joseph as possessing the gift of discernment. How do you see this being expressed with his brothers?
13. Within this episode do you see any change in his brothers?
14. How do you understand “You are sick because you do sick things”?
15. How can the teaching “stop doing sick things if you want to be healthy” affect your own physical and spiritual health?

## CHAPTERS 44, 45, 46

### THE FAVORITE SON

#### ACT FOUR-SCENE FIVE

Long before reaching the border of Egypt, they were overtaken by the Vizier's steward and his armed escort.

That dreadful spirit of fear fell upon them again. "What now!" Well rehearsed by the Vizier, the steward confronted them, "*Why did you repay good for evil? You have taken the silver goblet, the very one from which my master drinks and which he uses in divination. You have done a base thing!*" (Gen 44:4b-5).

Rabbi Jacob explains to us, "It was a common practice in Mesopotamia at that time to obtain an omen from the gods by pouring water or oil into a silver chalice: we don't know what the signs in the chalice were that revealed the omen."

*They were all dumb-founded by what they heard. "They protested, 'How can my lord say such things? Far be it from your servants to act in such a way! In fact, we even brought back to you from the land of Canaan the money we had found in the mouths of our bags. Why then would we steal silver or gold from your master's house! If any of your servants is found to have it, he shall die, and the rest of us, moreover shall be slaves to my Lord!' The steward responded, 'Even though what you propose is just, only he who is found to have it shall become his slave, and the rest of you will be exonerated'" (Gen. 45:7-10).*

With total confidence, all the brothers lowered their bags for the search. The steward started with the oldest and ended with the youngest. They found the silver chalice in Benjamin's bag. The brothers' world ended at that moment as a terrible darkness descended upon them. They rent their garments in despair; reloaded their animals and began their return to Egypt.

#### SCENE SIX

*"As Judah and his brothers reentered Joseph's house, he was still there; so they threw themselves in utter dejection at his feet. Joseph said to them, 'What a thing for you to have done! Surely, you must know that a man like me could discover what happened by divination [determining the divine will in matters].' Judah answered, 'What can we say to my lord? How can we plead, how to try to prove our innocence? God has uncovered your servants' misdeeds.'" Deep down in his heart Judah has come to realize that their brother Joseph has caught up with them, and the time to pay for their misdeeds has come. "Here we are, then, my lord's slaves, the rest of us no less than the one in whose possession the goblet turned up."*

Joseph responds with words that recall the words of Abraham before the destruction of Sodom, a subtle implication that he speaks in the name of God, *“Far be it from me to act thus! Only he who is found to have the goblet shall be my slave; but the rest of you can go back to your father without hindrance.”* They are all free to go except Benjamin, who goes into slavery. The very heart of the test has been sounded; everything depends on what follows. All are free to go but their youngest brother; he goes into slavery in Egypt. Long ago, they had had no trouble with such a decision: Has there been a change of heart in these men?

At this moment Rabbi Jacob says, “Let us go back and review their previous crime. ‘Many years ago, his brothers had treated Joseph with incredible callousness and cruelty. Why? Was it because they had never forgiven their father for favoring Rachel over their own mothers, and then transferring his affections to Rachel's older son? If so, and if they were still much the same, they would most willing to hand Benjamin, the second son of Rachel, over to slavery in order to protect their freedom’ (E.A. Speiser—The Anchor Bible). Joseph's attachment to Benjamin is never in doubt. There is no danger of his suffering any personal harm. As closely as possible, Joseph has duplicated his previous experience. Is there true repentance in their hearts or will they revert to type and sacrifice Benjamin to slavery, this time with a clean conscience?” (E.A. Speiser—The Anchor Bible)

Speaking for his ten brothers, Judah stepped up before the face of the Vizier and addressed him,

*“I beg you, my lord, may your servant speak earnestly to my lord, and be not angry with your servant, you who are equal to the Pharaoh. My lord asked your servants, ‘Have you a father, or another brother?’ We said to my Lord, ‘We have a father who is old, and there is a child of his old age. This one's full brother died, and he is the only one by that mother who is left, his father dotes on him.’ Then you told your servants, ‘Bring him down that I may set eyes upon him.’ We explained to my lord, ‘The boy cannot leave his father; his father would die if he were to leave him.’ But you declared to your servants, ‘Unless your youngest brother comes back with you, you shall not be admitted to my presence again!’ When we returned to your servant our father, we reported my lord's statement to him.”*

*“Some time passed and our father said to us, ‘Go back and get us some food for the family.’ We explained again your words to us and our father responded, ‘As you well know, my wife bore me two sons. One, however disappeared, and I had to conclude that he must have been torn by beasts; I have not seen him again to this day. If now you take from me this one too, and he meets with disaster, you will send my white head down to Sheol in grief’” (Gen 44:18-29).*

For the first time, Joseph heard the rest of the story and the extent to which his brothers had made their father suffer.

Judah continues on, *“If I appear before your servant my father, and the boy—whose very life is so bound up with his—is not with us, when he sees the boy is missing, he will die; and your servants will thus send the white head of your servant, our father,*

*down to Sheol in grief. Besides, your servant got the boy from my father under the following pledge: 'If I do not restore him to you, I shall stand condemned before my father forever.' Therefore may your servant remain here as your slave instead of the boy, and let the boy go with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? Let me not be witness to the ill fate that would overtake my father!" (Gen 44:30-34).*

Judah knew it was impossible for him to return home without the youngest son. How could he bring this same sorrow upon his father a second time? Judah, who had once sent his brother into slavery, now willing gives himself over as a slave to this same brother to save his father from more grief. The test had ended!

Joseph cried out to his servants, *"Have everyone withdraw from me!"* He was no longer able to control himself in their presence. From the depths of his soul poured forth uncontrollable tears and sobs of relief and forgiveness. He knew God had brought it about; he had a clear vision of it all.

Joseph said to his brothers, *"I am Joseph! Is my father still in good health?"* He had asked this question before and knew the answer. Earlier he had asked of "their" father; this time it is "his" father--Joseph has entered back into his family. Immobilized, stunned by his words, his brothers could not speak. *"'Come closer to me,' Joseph gently says to them, 'I am Joseph, your brother, whom you once sold down to Egypt. But do not worry now or reproach yourselves for having sold me here...' With that he flung himself on the neck of his brother Benjamin and wept; and Benjamin wept in his arms. Then he kissed all his brothers, crying upon them; only then were his brothers able to talk to him" (Gen 45:4-5;14-15).*

When they got themselves all together again, Joseph tells them, *"It was really God who sent me in advance of you as an instrument of survival. For it is now two years that there has been a famine in the land..."* His brothers know nothing of Pharaoh's dream and Joseph's interpretation of the seven years of famine. He goes on to explain to them, *"There are five more years of famine in the land and there will no harvest from the tilling of the earth. 'Therefore, God sent me ahead to ensure for you a remnant on earth and to save your lives in an extraordinary deliverance. So it was really not you but God who sent me here, and has made me as a father to Pharaoh, lord of all his household, and ruler over the whole land of Egypt" (Gen 45:5b-8).*

With these words, Joseph answered the question they had asked him twenty years ago, *"Do you mean to rule over us?"* Joseph had not intended it to be so but God willed it to be so.

Rabbi Jacob says to us, "Remember in this time there was no clear understanding of the freedom of human will, and men generally attributed all occurrences in their lives to the will of the gods. However, there was apparent of ambivalence about it all: they still held others responsible for the deeds done. The concept pervaded the Old Testament, resulting with many horrible deeds laid at the feet of God. God is not the source of evil. As God is

greater than any evil, he can bring good out of evil without destroying the evil willed by man. God is not compelled to act in this fashion but when He wills, He does so.”

Joseph tells his brothers, *“Hurry back, then, to my father and tell him, ‘Thus says your son Joseph: God has made me lord of all Egypt; come to me without delay. You will live in the region of Goshen, where you will be near to me—you and your children and grandchildren, your flocks and herds, and everything you own’”* (Gen 45:9-10).

Rabbi Jacob tells us, “Goshen was the district lying nearest to Canaan on the North East frontier of Egypt. Through it ran the fertile valley of the Wadi Tumilat, The territory provided suitable pasture for Jacob's flocks and herds and with the added advantage of making an exodus from Egypt comparatively easy: if ever necessary.”

Joseph tells them, *“I will provide for you—for there are still five years of famine ahead—so that you and your family and all that is yours may suffer no want. Surely, you can see for yourselves, and my brother Benjamin can see for himself, that it is I who am speaking to you. You must tell my father everything about his son's high station in Egypt and all the things you have seen here; but hurry and bring Father down here”* (Gen. 45:11-13.)

Meanwhile, Pharaoh may be sitting securely alone on his throne, but he has an ear all over Egypt. Joseph's cries and sobs had been so loud all the household heard them, so the news reached Pharaoh's palace. Pharaoh and his courtiers were delighted to hear of this miraculous reunion of Joseph with his brothers.

Summoning Joseph to the palace, Pharaoh said to him, *“You shall say to your brothers, ‘This is what you shall do: Load your beasts and go to the land of Canaan without delay. Get your father and your households, and come back here. I will assign to you the best territory in Egypt, where you will live off the fat of the land.’ You are further requested to say, ‘Do the following: Take from the land of Egypt wagons for your children and your wives, and to transport your father, and come back here. And never mind your belongings, since the best in all the land of Egypt is to be yours’”* (Gen 45:17-20).

*“As the Pharaoh said, the sons of Israel did accordingly. Joseph gave them the wagons and supplied them with provisions for their journey. He also gave to each fresh clothing, but to Benjamin he gave five changes of clothing and three hundred pieces of silver. Moreover, to his father Joseph sent ten asses loaded with Egypt's finest products, and ten she-asses loaded with grain, bread, and other provisions for his journey. The last thing Joseph said to them was, ‘Don't be fretful on the way,’”* (Gen 45:21-24).

## SCENE SEVEN

*“So they left Egypt and made their way to their father Jacob in the land of Canaan. When they told him, ‘Joseph is still alive, and it is he who is ruler over the whole land Egypt,’ his heart went numb for he could not believe them.”* It must be a dream and he did not want to be wakened from it. They repeated over and over what they had told him, and showed him the gifts and the wagon that was sent for his transportation to Egypt. Jacob knew the dream was real and his spirit soared with joy. *“‘Enough,’ Israel said, ‘my son Joseph is still*

*alive! I must go and see him before I die.” (Gen 45:25-28).* There would no more about sending his white head down to Sheol in grief.

Our author is associating “numbness of heart” with *lo he min*, “non-believing,” or “he did not believe.” Numbness of heart implies a spiritless life, an absence of spirituality. The Prophet Ezekiel will later speak of numbness of heart as a “heart of stone,” incapable of belief. The Lords says, *“I will remove the heart of stone from your body and give you a heart of flesh; and I will put My spirit into you, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit into you” (Ez 36:26).* The scriptures imply that a heart of stone is incapable of faith in God as there is no evidence of God in such a heart. People write books out of “the numbness of their hearts” to prove to others from their own godless-experienced lives that there is no God. God is a Person, and you know a person through personal experience of them.

If I had a very beautiful watch and wanted to know the person who made this great watch, and took the watch all apart and carefully examined each piece of it, and then put it back together again, I would say, “I know the watch and there is no watchmaker. Somehow or other some force brought all those diverse pieces together in this order and design, and the watch just happened. There is no watchmaker.”

Many years ago sitting on a high hill, watching the sun set over the Pacific Ocean, I asked myself, “How can there be a God?” From somewhere deep inside my soul a whisper was heard, “How can you be?” Those who write those books out of the numbness of their hearts would say to me, “You are not more than that watch.” Some scientists remind me very much of my mother, when she told her friend on the phone, “I cannot tell you any more. I've already told you more than I know.”

#### THE PLAY “FAVORITE SON” ENDS THE REUNION

They set out with all their belongings to return to Egypt. One night after arriving in Beersheba, Israel offered sacrifices to the God of his father Isaac. It was there that Isaac had lived and had built an altar to El Shaddai, and it was there that Jacob and Esau had been raised. *“There God, speaking to Israel in a vision by night called, ‘Jacob! Jacob!’ ‘Here I am,’ he answered. Then He said, ‘I am El, the God of your father. Be not afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation. Not only will I go down to Egypt with you; I will also bring you back here, after Joseph has closed your eyes’” (Gen 46:2-4).*

They were all leaving the known for the unknown, but Jacob gave them the assurance that it was the will of God, and they were not going alone. If we could set their march to music, it wouldn't be the Triumphal March from Aida for it was more of sojourn than a triumph, but perhaps the words and music of the Te Deum would be appropriate, for it was a journey to salvation.

TE DEUM  
YOU ARE GOD: WE PRAISE YOU;  
YOU ARE THE LORD: WE ACCLAIM YOU;  
YOU ARE THE ETERNAL FATHER:  
ALL CREATION WORSHIPS YOU.  
TO YOU ALL ANGELS, ALL THE POWERS OF HEAVEN,  
CHERUBIM AND SERAPHIM, SING IN ENDLESS PRAISE  
HOLY, HOLY, HOLY LORD, GOD OF POWER AND MIGHT,  
HEAVEN AND EARTH ARE FULL OF YOUR GLORY!

### EXODUS FROM CANAAN

Jacob had set out with all his sons, their entire families, and all their possessions and proceeded on the journey from Beer-sheba to the land of Goshen.

Our author lists at this time all the sons, grandsons and great-grandson that issue from the loins of Jacob. They are the foundation stones of a new nation that will come forth from Egypt some four hundred years later. Rueben has four sons: Hanoah, Pallu, Hezron, Carmi; Simeon has six sons: Jemuel, Jamin, Ohad, Jachin, Zorah, and Shaul; Levi has three sons: Gershon, Kohath and Merari; Judah has three living sons Shelah, Perez and Kerah, and two grandson from Perez—Hezron and Hamul; Issachar has four sons: Tola, Puah, Jashub, Shimron; Zebulun has three sons: Sered, Elon and Jahleel; Gad has seven sons: Ziphon, Haggi, Shuni, Ezbon. Eri, Arod and Areli; Asher has four sons and one daughter: Imnah, Ishvah, Ishvi, Beriah and Serah; two grandsons from Beriah: Heber and Malchiel; Dan has one son: Hushim; Naphtali has four sons: Jahzuel, Guni, Jezer and Shillem; Joseph has two sons: Manasseh and Ephraim; Benjamin—last but not least—has ten sons: Bela, Becher, Ashbel, Gera, Naaman, Ehi, Rosh, Muppim, Huppim, and Ard. All of these with the exception of Joseph and his two sons met Jacob at Beer-sheba along with their wives and their daughters.

According to our author, these men, along with Jacob himself and those already in Egypt, are the seventy foundation stones composing the nexus the of New Nation to be known later as the People of God.

Jacob (Israel), sent his son Rueben (Judah) on ahead of the family to inform Joseph that they were on their way to Goshen. When Joseph heard they had arrived in Egypt, he ordered his chariot and went to Goshen to end the seventeen years of separation from his father. As soon as Joseph appeared before Israel, he flung himself into his father's arms and, as his father held him close to his heart, Joseph wept and wept—a lost child back in the arms of his Abba, his father. *“And Israel said, ‘At last I can die, now that I have seen for myself that Joseph is still alive’” (Gen 46:29).*

When all the brothers had gathered around Joseph, he tells them, *“I will go and inform Pharaoh, telling him ‘My brothers and my father’s household, whose home is in the land of Canaan, have come to me. The men are shepherds, having long been keepers of livestock, and they have brought with them their flocks and herds and everything they own.’ So when Pharaoh*



*summons you and asks you about your occupation, you should answer, 'Your servants, like our ancestors, have been keepers of livestock from the beginning down to the present,' in order that you may stay in the region of Goshen. For every shepherd is abhorrent to Egyptians" (Gen 46:31-34).*

An important reason to mention the livestock is their need for pasture and water, which would be available only in the Nile Delta in this time of famine. This would be a primary reason in the Pharaoh's mind for them to remain in Goshen.

Why were shepherds abhorrent to Egyptians? Rabbi Jacob gives this explanation. "In all likelihood the term "shepherds" is a play on the popular interpretation of the Hyksos as "shepherd kings," whose temporary domination of Egypt dealt a severe blow to national pride" (E.A. Speiser). Another and more personal reason may have that shepherds were noted for being physically dirty, and the Egyptians gave high priority to bodily cleanliness. In addition, if the Egyptians were a cattle-raising people, we know from our stories of the "Old West" that cattlemen hated shepherds because sheep eat grass close to the earth, leaving nothing for cattle to eat.

Joseph returned to Pharaoh to inform him his family had arrived in Egypt and were now in Goshen. He brought five of his brothers and presented them to Pharaoh. When Pharaoh asked the brothers what their occupation was, they answered Pharaoh in the way Joseph had instructed them. "*Pharaoh turned to Joseph, saying, "As regards your father and your brothers who have come to you, the land of Egypt is open before you: settle your father and your brothers in the best part of the land; let them stay in region of Goshen. And if you know any capable men among them, put them in charge of my livestock" (Gen 47:5).*

When Joseph had his father and family settled in Goshen, he brought his father, Jacob, and presented him to the Pharaoh. "*After Jacob paid his respects to Pharaoh, Pharaoh asked him, 'How many are the years of your life?' 'The years of my sojourn are one hundred and thirty. Few and hard have been the years of my life, and they do not compare to the years my fathers lived as wayfarers.' Then Jacob bade Pharaoh farewell, and left Pharaoh's presence" (Gen 47:7-10).*

Jacob speaks of his life as a "sojourn;" he was one who had no place to call his own, no place to put down roots and feel at home. Some see him as a pilgrim and his life as a pilgrimage. Does that actually apply to Jacob? A pilgrim is on a journey to a holy place. There was no such known destination in Jacob's life; he certainly would not have looked upon Egypt as a holy place. We would certainly agree with Jacob that he has had a very hard life, with many more sorrows than joys. From our position, we see his life as a whole, and are able to play a bit of a God-role in his life. There were many good years of growing up in the warm, caring environment created by a loving father and devoted mother. His troubles began when he seriously offended his father and his brother, creating a hostile spirit within his own family, which forced him into exile—into the loving arms of Uncle Laban for the next twenty-one years.

There is a quote from Jeremiah 17:10 that says, *“I the Lord probe the heart, search the mind to repay every man according to his ways, with the proper fruit of his deeds.”* Because of the evil Jacob did, he created circumstances in his own life that brought suffering into his life. It appears the mercy of God uses the effects of our bad deeds as a means for our atonement for our sins. If we suffer such things as God's will, it is certainly from the permissiveness of God's will. We are the prime cause of our own sufferings. We may say that God lets us stew in our own juices.

Unless the Lord gives us the wisdom to see ourselves as we really are, we will no doubt blame our troubles on someone or something other than ourselves. Didn't we have a perfect example in Chapter 3 in Genesis, where Adam blamed God and Eve, and Eve blamed the Serpent? When we are looking at the mistakes of others, Jesus of Nazareth tells us, *“Be compassionate as your heavenly Father is compassionate.”*

Returning to our text we read, *“As Pharaoh had ordered, Joseph settled his father and his brothers, giving them holdings in the choicest part of the land of Egypt in the region of Ramses. And Joseph sustained his father, and his brothers, and all his father's household with bread, down to the little ones” (Gen 47:11-12).*

We know from the earlier vision of Abraham that all this and more had been foretold. The sons of Jacob were the nucleus of a great nation, but these were not men possessing the qualities for the formation and governing of a nation; they were semi-nomads. The Providence of God brought them into Egypt, which possessed the greatest civilization of the known world. There they would learn the art of civilization, both its blessings and shortcomings. Joseph would help create an Egypt that would serve as a model for the nation that the Sons of Israel were called to become.

## THE REUNION

### CHAPTERS 44, 45, 46

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

(Please read Chapters 44, 45, 46)

1. How would you describe the nature of Joseph's final test of his brothers?
2. What does this episode teach you about Joseph's relationship with them?
3. How do you see the two early dreams of Joseph being fulfilled?
4. What does this teach you about God's way of dealing in your own life?
5. What do you learn about the maturity of Judah in this episode?
6. What did Joseph make possible in Egypt for his family?
7. What do you see this having to do with the future of the family?
8. How would you describe the effect on Jacob when he heard the good news about Joseph?
9. How would you describe "numbness of heart" as interpreted in Genesis? What is the cause of it and what is the cure?
10. How would you describe the exodus of Joseph and his family from the land of Canaan? What significance do you see in the number 70?
11. What do you see to be the significance of Jacob's vision in Gen. 46:24?
12. What does Joseph's care for his family teach us about the care of our own families?
13. How does Jacob describe his life to Pharaoh, and how do you understand the concept of "sojourn"?
14. What would you say was the major cause of Joseph's suffering and how does this apply to your life?
15. What do you discern as God's purpose for bringing Jacob's family to Egypt?

## CHAPTERS 47, 48, 49, 50

### JOSEPH CREATES A THEOCRACY

Once his family was comfortably settled in Goshen, Joseph proceeded with his plan for the Nation of Egypt. He would bring into reality the nation it only professed to be. Joseph takes all the calculated steps necessary to bring this about. As we follow these steps, I am certain we will all be amazed at what he accomplishes, and the means used to do so. Perhaps we may a bit scandalized.

The great famine was now reaching into its third and fourth year, and we are told,

*“There was, however, no food in any country, for the famine was very severe; and the lands of Egypt and Canaan languished from hunger” (Gen 47:13-14). “Joseph gathered in, as payment for the rations that were being dispensed, all the money that was to be found in Egypt and Canaan, and he put it in Pharaoh’s palace. When all the money in Egypt and Canaan was spent, all the Egyptians came to Joseph, pleading, ‘Give us food for our money is gone. Joseph responded, ‘You have livestock, do you not? Bring me your livestock and I will exchange food for your livestock.’ So all Egypt brought their horses, their stocks of sheep and cattle and asses, and through that whole year, he provided the people with food in exchange for them” (Gen 47:13-17).*

However, the inevitable day came when there were no more horses, sheep, cattle or asses, only hunger. What now? Joseph has saved the best to the last. They came with their empty stomachs and empty hands for food and made a final and desperate offer, *“We cannot hide from our lord, there is nothing left at my lord’s disposal except our persons and our farmland. Why should we perish before your very eyes, both we and our land?”*

At that point, Joseph heard the offer for which he had patiently waited.

*“Take us and our land in exchange for bread, and we shall become serfs to Pharaoh, and our land his property; only give us seed, that we may survive and not perish, and that the land not turn into a waste.” Joseph took over all the land of Egypt in the name of the Pharaoh....Only that of the priests Joseph did not take, for their land was their allotment from Pharaoh. Since the priests had a fixed allowance from Pharaoh and lived off the allowance Pharaoh had granted them, they did not have to sell their land. (Gen 47:18-20a,22)*

What has Joseph done? He has reduced all the people of Egypt to serfdom. Joseph informs them, *“Now that I have acquired you and your land for the Pharaoh, here is the seed for you to sow the land. But when the harvest is in, you must give a fifth to Pharaoh, keeping*

*four-fifths as seed for your fields, as food for yourselves and members of your household, and to feed the children” (Gen 47:23-24). When Joseph had made clear that they had traded their freedom for their lives, they responded, “You have saved our lives! We are thankful to my lord that we can be serfs to Pharaoh” (Gen 47:25).*

Our author concludes this amazing episode with these words, *“And Joseph made it a law of the land in Egypt, which is still valid, that a fifth should go to Pharaoh. Only the land of the priests did not pass over to Pharaoh” (Gen 47:26).*

What has Joseph done? He made Egypt a perfect theocracy before it had even loosely considered itself to be one. For the time, it seemed appropriate, and with the passing of time, it did not seem to suffer as a nation from this condition. Herod the Great, even in his day, spoke of Egypt as a land still owned by the Pharaoh and the priests.

What is meant by a theocracy? Theocracy means “government by God,” and refers to an institutional form of government that is based on the revealed teachings of God as implemented through God's representative. The religion of Egypt believed that God was made present in Egypt in and through the Pharaoh. For the next four hundred years, the family of Israel would live under a theocracy, and they would grow into a people that were trained, educated and lived within a theocracy. When it came time for the People of Israel to leave Egypt under the leadership of Moses, to encounter Yahweh at Mount Sinai, what did God call them to be in this world? A theocracy! Where had Moses and his people been trained for such a government? Egypt!

God's plan in this world, and in our individual lives, very often has a long range plan, but many times we are too short sighted to be at peace with the unfolding of it. Only much later do we confess: God has been writing straight with crooked lines. Often those crooked lines are but our own sins and weaknesses.

### JACOB'S FINAL DAYS

Jacob lived seventeen years in Goshen; the span of his life came to a hundred and forty-seven years. Knowing his time was drawing near for him to join his forefathers, he sent for Joseph and asked him to take an oath—the same type of oath Abraham had asked of his servant. *“He said to Joseph, ‘If you really wish to please me, put your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast loyalty to me: do not let me be buried in Egypt! When I lie down with my fathers, have me moved from Egypt and bury me in their burial place.’ He answered, ‘I will do as you have said.’ ‘Swear it to me,’ his father demanded. So Joseph he swore to him” (Gen 47:29-31).*

After Joseph swore to his father that he would do as he asked, we are told that Jacob bowed at the head of the bed. Rabbi Jacob points out that the meaning of that one phrase has caused trouble as far back as the translation of the Septuagint Bible, but it is simply making too much of something. “The problem derives from taking the Hebrew stem too literally. The term to “bow low” needs to signify no more than a gesture of mute

appreciation on the part of a bedridden man on the point of death. The bow would naturally come from the head of the bed” (E.A. Speiser).

Sometime after this episode Joseph was informed, *“Your father is failing.” “Joseph immediately took his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, and the three of them went to see his father. When Jacob was informed, ‘Your son Joseph has come to see you,’ Jacob summed up all this strength and sat up in bed.”*

When Joseph came into his father with Manasseh and Ephraim, Jacob's eyesight was too dim to discern the children. He went on to tell Joseph of the blessing he has received from God, *“El Shaddai appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan, and He blessed me, and said to me, ‘I will make your fertile and numerous, making of you a community of people; and I will assign this land to your offspring to come for an everlasting possession.”*

Recalling the words of the Lord, *“I will assign this land to your offspring to come for an everlasting possession,”* suddenly another silent voice sounded deep within Jacob's soul. It was Rachel's voice calling, *“Give me children, or I shall die!”* The day of her death was like yesterday; it was the day the light of his heart quietly faded into a sweet, haunting face within the mist. It had been much too early for her to go to rest in the shade with old Sarah and Rebecca—her work yet undone. In his own way, Jacob would answer her cry and it would be his eternal memorial to their love: she will become mother of her grandsons, and share fully in God's promises to them. Forcing his attention back into the present, he tells his son Joseph, *“Now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt shall be mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine no less than Reuben and Simeon.”* Jacob, at this moment, is declaring his personal adoption of Joseph's sons.

Jacob goes on to tell Joseph, *“Progeny born to you after them shall remain yours; but their heritage shall be recorded in the names of their two brothers.”* What Jacob actually is doing is replacing the positions held by Reuben and Simeon as first born and second born with Joseph's two sons. We may recall that when the behavior of both Reuben and Simeon seriously offended their father, he remained silent; now Jacob is revealing what that silence hid at the time. Many children discover their father's true feeling about them at the reading of his will, when they hear his final word to them—a word now beyond questioning.

Jacob simply states to Joseph, *“I want this because when I was returning from Paddan, your mother Rachel died, to my sorrow, as we were traveling in Canaan, only a short distance from Ephrath; and I buried her there on the way to Ephrath [that is, Bethlehem]”* Gen 48:7. There are no more words said on the matter; the rest will be said in his deeds.

*“When Jacob became aware that two children were present, he said to Joseph, ‘Who are these?’ ‘They are my sons,’ Joseph answered his father, ‘whom God has granted me here.’ His father said, ‘Bring them to me that I may bless them.’ (Now Israel's eyes were dim from age, and he could not see well.) When Joseph brought them close to him, he kissed them and held them both close to his heart.”* He placed them both upon his knees—now they were his children. Jacob said to his son, *“I never expected to see your face again, and here God has let me see your progeny as well!”*

Joseph removed the two boys from Jacob's knees and he bowed to Jacob with his face to the ground, thereby expressing his total submission to his father's will. *“Joseph takes Ephraim by his right hand and places him on his father's left and taking Manasseh by his left hand and places him on his father's right side.”* We see the scene Joseph has arranged: Jacob is sitting up with Ephraim on his left side and Manasseh on his right.

*But, Jacob raises his right hand and, crossing it over his breast, he lays his right hand on the head of Ephraim and prays:*

*“The God in whose ways walked my fathers, Abraham and Isaac,  
The God who has been my shepherd from my birth to this day,  
The Angel who has delivered me from all harm  
—bless the boys,  
That in them be recalled my name,  
and the names of Abraham and Isaac, my fathers,  
And that they may become teeming multitudes upon the earth!”  
(Gen. 48:15-16)*

*When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on Ephraim's head, this seemed wrong to him; so he took hold of his father's hand, to remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's, saying, “Not so, Father, for the other one is the first-born; lay your right hand on his head!” But Jacob resisted, saying, “I know it, my son, I know. That one too shall become a tribe, and he too shall be great. But his younger brother shall surpass him, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations.” So when he blessed them that day saying, “By you shall the people of Israel pronounce blessings;” may they say, “God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh,” he placed Ephraim ahead of Manasseh.” (see Gen 48:1-20)*

In the subsequent history of Israel, Ephraim and Manasseh would hold major portions of Northern Canaan. Eventually Manasseh would be united with Ephraim, which would eventually become the Northern Kingdom opposing the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Joshua, the successor of Moses, would come from the line of Ephraim and so, too, the Prophet Samuel.

Jacob says to his son Joseph, *“I am about to die, but God will be with you and restore you to the land of your fathers. As for me, I give you, as the one above your brothers, Shechem, which I captured from the Amorites with my sword and bow” (Gen 48:21-22).*

That last statement of Jacob makes us pause and wonder if, behind the facade of a man who would walk a mile out of his way to avoid any contention with another human being, there lay the heart of a warrior. Seemingly, the episode he refers to is Gen 33:19—*“the parcel of land where he pitched his tent he purchased from the children of Hamor, Shechem's father, for a hundred kesitahs.”* Did a bit of arm twisting involving sword and bow precede the purchase of the property?

In Jacob's blessings of Joseph's children (a blessing that subsequent Jewish fathers would impart to their sons at the beginning of the Sabbath feast), he reveals to us how he saw God within his

own life: A Shepherd who leads him to green pastures and refreshed his spirit; an Angel who protected him as he walked in the dark valley, and freed him from the snares of his enemies. He sees himself as a common man upon whom the Eye of God falls, and despite all the clay in his life, he finds some gold--or does the Lord merely put it there? No one had to tell Jacob, *"His eye is upon the sparrow."*

With the ending of Chapter 48, the curtain comes down on Joseph's career: the beloved son who takes on the role of slave and becomes the savior of his people. He leaves an image to be contemplated.

As our text was leading us on to the finishing line--Chapter 50, verse 26--I had the feeling we were on a downhill sleigh ride, coasting into the finishing line. That is, until the end of Chapter 48, where we run slap-dab into a lofty, craggy mountain, standing in our way to our finishing line in Chapter 50.

We realized we had reached a point that demanded we seek the expertise of Rabbi Jacob. He calls our attention to the fact that we have suddenly been transferred from dealing with individual person to dealing with tribes of people. "We are explicitly told that Jacob was speaking about those things that would happen 'in the last days'—in the days to come. The poetic discourse of Chapter 49 plays a key role in the overall strategy of the patriarchal narratives, as well as in the strategy of the book as a whole. Jacob's last words to his sons have become the occasion for a final statement of the book's major theme: God's plan to restore the lost blessing through the offspring of Abraham. It is to be found in the narrative framework that surrounds them" (Sailhamer).

The interpretation of this poem is beset with extraordinary difficulties, as is to be expected from a work of such scope, complexity, and antiquity, and replete with unfamiliar expressions and allusions. The body of the poem proves to be much earlier from the internal evidence; it may have its beginning as a collection of tribal sketches, which at some point were given a poetic rebirth—beautifying, but deepening the essential message.

Some have found allusions to the signs of the Zodiac in the allotted names of the twelve tribes. It is doubtful whether some of the problems here encountered can ever be resolved with any degree of confidence. On several points there is considerable disagreement among the oldest versions. At times, the attempted solutions are diametrically opposed to one another: one says certain symbols refer to plants, others say they refer to animals. It may be said without exaggeration: A comprehensive commentary on this poem would require a book itself." (E.A. Speiser)

From a personal view, we may say Chapter 49 belongs to Jacob, and Judah is his Star. From the standpoint of the individuals gathered around Jacob, the time has come for Jacob to join his fathers, Abraham and Isaac; it is time to put his house in order. He calls his sons to his side and shares with each their portrait that he sees mirrored within his soul.



In order to appreciate the poetic beauty and inspiration of the poem, we will read it in its completion, and then we will mine the mountain for the gold, silver, precious gems, and even the slag it contains.

### LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT

*Jacob called his sons and said: "Gather around that I may tell you what is to happen to you in days to come:*

*Assemble and listen, sons of Jacob, listen to Israel, your father.*

*You, Reuben, my first-born,  
my strength and the first fruit of my manhood,  
excellent in rank and excelling in power!  
Unruly as water, you shall no longer excel,  
for you climbed into your father's bed and  
defiled my couch to my sorrow."*

Reuben (his name possibly implies chief or captain) as first-born, was called to leadership of the family. He excelled and was clothed with honor; he had the power to excel in life, but he forfeited it by his disgraceful conduct. He lost his place in the family because he violated the honor of his father. The younger son of Joseph replaced him. His elimination made room at the top for both Jacob and Joseph.

*Simeon and Levi, brothers indeed,  
weapons of violence are their knives.  
Let not my soul enter their council,  
or my spirit with their company;  
For in their fury they slew men,  
in their willfulness they maimed oxen.  
Cursed be their fury so fierce,  
and their rage so cruel!  
I will scatter them in Jacob,  
disperse them through out Israel.*

Simeon and Levi—brothers in cruelty, two of a kind. They coldly killed innocent people and maimed helpless animals. Their behavior scandalized their father; Jacob found no kindred in spirit with these two sons. They were unworthy of governing others, for they were unable to govern themselves. Simeon's possessions were scattered in the territories of Judah and, as for Levi, his descendants were assigned cities and land in all the other tribes. Apparently, the tribe of Levi would merit a blessing for the part they played in the episode of the golden calf in the desert. After release from Jacob's sentence, they received the honor of the priesthood in Israel—but no inheritance in the land. The tribe of Simeon all but disappeared after the Conquest of Canaan.

*You, Judah, shall your brothers praise—  
 your hand on the neck of your enemies;  
 the sons of your father will bow down to you.  
 Judah, like a lion's whelp,  
 You have grown up on prey, my son.  
 He crouches like a lion recumbent.  
 the king of beasts—who would dare rouse him?  
 The scepter shall never depart from Judah  
 or the mace from between his legs,  
 While tribute is brought to him,  
 And he receives the peoples' homage.  
 He tethers his donkey to the vine,  
 his purebred ass to the choicest stem.  
 In wine he washes his garments,  
 his robes in the blood of grapes.  
 His eyes are darker than wine,  
 and his teeth are whiter than milk.*

Judah the fourth son is the star: his strength and bravery place him First in the constellation of Leo. Judah, above all others, is chosen as the royal tribe. We read in Psalm 78:67-68), *“The Lord rejected the tent of Joseph, chose not the tribe of Ephraim. God chose the tribe of Judah, Mount Zion, which he loved.”*

Judah is the victorious warrior who returns from battle and is greeted with shouts of praise from his brothers. This image finds an extension as the “young lion.” He is king, who holds the scepter and the ruler's staff. Jacob implies he will hold this position until the one comes “to whom it belongs. Verse 10 of Chapter 49, has traditionally been viewed in both Jewish and Christian traditions as a messianic prophecy.

Jacob’s words imply his kingdom will extend beyond the tribes of Israel to include other nations as well, which is seen as a future reference to the universal reign of a future Davidic king. We read in Psalm 2:8, *“Ask of me, and I will make the nations (goyim) your inheritance.”* Jesus of Nazareth implies this when he stands accused before the Sanhedrin and applies the prophecy of Daniel 7:13-14 to himself. We read in the Gospel of Luke as the Angel Gabriel tells the virgin Mary, *“the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and his kingdom shall be without end (Lk 1:33).*

With the exception of Joseph, the other tribes are treated with brevity; the central theme uniting them will be the blessing of prosperity.

*Zebulun shall dwell by the seashore and his flank shall be based on Sidon.*

Zebulun will draw on the wealth of the seas. The name Zebulun in Hebrew means “lofty abode”—he will extend the reaches of the Promised Land into the borders of Sidon. The Jewish historian Josephus mentions that the territory of this tribe touched the sea.

*Issachar is a rawboned ass,  
crouching between the saddlebags.  
When he saw how good a settled life was,  
and how pleasant the country,  
He bent this shoulders to the burden  
and became a toiling serf,*

Issachar is spoken of as strong-built ass. In the Near East, the ass was esteemed for its utility. The idea expressed is that he enjoyed the easy life, joined with security. His tribe's territory lay largely in the plains of Esdraelon, which was noted for its fertility. The people were also praised for their war-like spirit. Josephus speaks of these people as being warriors from their youth. However, their description implies they also maintained a close relationship with agriculture, labor, and served as manual laborers.

*Dan shall achieve justice for his kindred  
like any other tribe of Israel.  
Let Dan be a serpent by the roadside,  
a horned viper by the path,  
That bites the horse's heel,  
so that the rider tumbles backward.*

Dan was one of the smallest of the tribes, and its success did not depend upon its military power but its cunning—its snake-likeness: a snake strikes at the heel of the horse and the rider is thrown to the ground. Its power lies in the suddenness of its attack. Samson was of the tribe of Dan, and he was notable for the stratagems used in his exploits.

*Gad shall be raided by raiders,  
but he shall raid at their heels.*

The Gadites dwelt in Galaad, which was exposed to attacks by the Ammonities and the raiding Arab tribes. Jacob's poem implies the Gadites will be attacked by raiders, but in return they will trail them and surprise and conquer their enemies by coming up behind them, inflicting heavy losses upon them.

*Asher's produce is rich  
and he shall furnish dainties for kings.*

The territory of Asher laid along the coast from Carmel northward—a very fertile area. The tribe owes its wealth to its proximity to Phoenicia, with which it will have a large share of trade. In other words, they will live high off the hog. The sons of Asher will enjoy great abundance and rich delicacies; they would be the relatives to visit.

*Naphtali is a hind let loose,  
which brings forth lovely fawns.*

Naphtali conveys the image of the hind--a free roaming creature possessing branched antlers. The sons of Naphtali possess a free loving spirit, and they will be quick to defend it.

*Joseph is a wild colt,  
a wild colt by a spring,  
a wild ass on a hillside.  
Harrying and attacking,  
the archers opposed him;  
But each one's bow remained stiff,  
as their arms were unsteady.  
By the power of the Mighty One of Jacob,  
because of the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel,  
The God of you father, who helps you,  
God almighty, who bless you,  
With the blessings of the heavens above,  
the blessings of the abyss that crouches below.  
The blessings of breasts and womb,  
the blessings of the fresh grain and blossoms,  
The blessings of the everlasting the mountains,  
the delights of the eternal hills.  
May they rest on the head of Joseph,  
on the brow of the prince among his brothers.*

Joseph: what can be said of Joseph? He was a Prince among his brothers. The allusions here are to Joseph, and to the two tribes of Ephraim and Manasses. The vigorous vine, with all the advantages of abundant moisture and a protective wall, is unhampered in its growth, and suggests the numerical strength of the two tribes. At the same time, the pleasant picture recalls the physical beauty of the face and form of Joseph. There are allusions to the attacks of his brothers in persecuting him, and to other attacks he endured. The Arabs, who were noted for their archery, apparently attacked him from both sides of the Jordan.

Joseph and his tribe triumphed over their enemies through the help of God. Strong arms were needed to handle the bows for war, and they possessed them. The blessings of the heavens are sunshine, rain and dew; and those of the great subterranean oceans are the springs and rivers that nourish the land and provide the abundance needed for the herds and flocks; the blessings of the eternal mountains, the desires of the desirable things, the choicest products of the everlasting hills--all come to them. The mountains symbolize the stability of all these blessings. Over and above the blessings, there is the promise of continual divine help, of the possession of the land of Canaan, of a multitude of descendants, and in Joseph and his seed, all the tribes of the earth shall be blessed.

*Benjamin is a ravenous wolf;  
mornings he devours the prey,  
And the evening he distributes the spoils.*

**Benjamin—a ravenous wolf: being the smallest of the tribes was also one of the most warlike tribes. He is lustful at all times for spoils, and he is always ready for the attack. The picture of Benjamin is similar to that of Judah—the lion and the wolf. They are both conquerors and vicious predators. In the case of Benjamin, the sense of sudden victory and conquest is much stronger than in the imagery of Judah.**

**Jacob's words to his sons are generally summed up in the word “blessing.” One side of the blessing carries the concept of a successful warrior that precedes the messianic peace, and the other side stresses the imagery of great prosperity and abundance. Behind these imageries of peace and prosperity lies the vision of the Garden of Eden.**

**“The focus of Jacob's words promises that when the One comes to whom the kinship truly belongs, there will once again be the peace and prosperity that God intended all to have in the Garden of Eden. There will be new heaven and new earth” (J.H. Sailhamer).**

*“For Thine is the kingdom, the Power and the Glory forever!”*

**Jacob's long sojourn on earth is ending with his twelve sons gathered at his side. To each he said his farewell, with a special message to each of them. In his words he speaks to his descendants to come through them, and in them, he blesses all Israel.**

**His final words express his last desire and command, “*Since I am about to be taken to my kindred, bury me with my fathers in the cave that lies in the field of Ephron the Hittite, the cave that lies in the field of Machpelah, facing on Mamre, in the land of Canaan, the field that Abraham brought from Ephron the Hittite for a burial ground*” (Gen 49:28-30). It is the one piece of land in Canaan that Abraham had owned. Here Abraham had determined that Sarah and he would remain. It was a concrete symbol of his faith in the promise God had made to him, “*I am the Lord who brought you out of Ur of Chaldeans to assign this land to you as a possession. . . To your offspring I assign this land*” (Gen. 15:8,18).**

**Here in the cave of Machpelah, within the earth of Canaan, Jacob had buried his mother Rebekah and father Issac, and his wife Leah. Jacob had remained always one in spirit with his father, and as testimony to them and to the God they worshipped, his body must rest beside that of Abraham and Isaac: one in life, one in eternity.**

*“When Jacob had finished giving these instructions to his sons, he drew his feet into the bed [he had taken the last step of his sojourn] breathed his last, and was taken to his kindred” (49:33).*

## EXODUS OF JACOB

With abundant tears and deep emotions, Joseph bids his father farewell. *“He threw himself on his father's face and wept over him as he kissed him.”* His final expression of devotion for Jacob would be expressed in a burial as royal as was within his power to give him: *“He ordered the physicians in his service to embalm his father. When they embalmed Israel, they spent forty days at it, for that is the full period of embalming.”* In the later period of Herodotus II, it is recorded that embalming took seventy days. Later Jewish law forbids both embalming and cremation; they believed the body should be returned to the earth from which it was taken. This would also express much of the Christian sentiment. Because of Joseph's exalted position in Egypt, his father was mourned for seventy days; we know that the mourning period for the Pharaoh was seventy-two days. When both Moses and Aaron died, they were mourned thirty days by the Israelites.

When the mourning period ended, Joseph spoke to Pharaoh's courtiers and asked them to go to Pharaoh in his name. It seems that when one was dealing with a dead body, they were not to enter into the presence of the Pharaoh. Joseph said to them, *“Please do me this favor and convey to Pharaoh this request of mine. Since my father, at the point of death, made me promise on oath to bury him in the tomb that he had prepared for himself in the land of Canaan, may I go up there to bury my father and then come back?”* When Pharaoh heard Joseph's request and the oath he had taken, he immediately sent word, *“Go and bury your father, as he made you promise on oath.”* It was common among high officials of the court and wealthy men in Egypt to prepare their own tombs before their death.

When one of the founders of the Ruth's Chris Steak House Chain was informed her remaining time on earth was short, she had a lovely mausoleum built (above ground since it was in New Orleans), and about a year before her death, she invited all her family and friends to its blessing and to a grand cocktail party that immediately followed at the mausoleum. That was in keeping with the Christian Spirit—at least in New Orleans.

To honor his servant Joseph, Pharaoh pulled out all the stops, as we would say, for an extraordinary funeral for his father. *“So Joseph left to bury his father, and with him went all of Pharaoh's officials who were senior members of his court, and all the other dignitaries of Egypt, as well as Joseph's whole household, his brothers, and his father's household; only their children and their flocks and herds were left in the region of Goshen. Chariots, too, and charioteers went up with him; it was a very large retinue”* (Gen 50:7-9). With so many important men from the court of Pharaoh attending the funeral outside of Egypt, we may be assured this solemn caravan was well protected, which was the reason for the charioteers.

Probably for some political reason, the caravan did not follow a straight route into Canaan, but went south around the Dead Sea and kept to the east side of the Jordan, until they came to a section called Goren-ha-atad (Bramble Threshing Floor). They held there a very great and solemn memorial service; and Joseph observed seven days of mourning for his father. *“These seven days of mourning for his father by Joseph is later seen in the Talmud as the inspiration for the Jewish celebration of Schiv'ah—seven days of intense mourning for the deceased.*

*When the Canaanites who inhabited the land saw the mourning at Goren-ha-atad, they said, "This is a solemn funeral the Egyptians are having" That is why the place was named Abel-mizraim [meaning 'Egyptian brook' or 'meadow']'. (Gen 50:11)*

The Egyptian caravan did not cross into Canaan presumably for the same reason that they had taken the easterly route. The presumption is that Joseph and his brothers interred their father in the Cave of Machpelah and returned to the caravan for the return to Egypt. Our author makes it clear, *"Thus Jacob's sons did for him as he had instructed them. They carried him to the land of Canaan and buried him in the cave in the field of Machpelah, facing on Mamre, the field that Abraham had bought for a burial ground from Ephron the Hittite" (Gen 50:13).*

Jacob's burial fulfills the Lord's promise to him the night before he went to Egypt, *"Fear not to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I myself will also bring you back here, after Joseph has closed your eyes" (Gen 46:4).*

*After Joseph had buried his father he returned to Egypt, together with his brothers and all who had gone up with him for the burial of his father. (Gen 50:14)*

We may be certain that Jacob would have been delighted to know that the path taken for his burial in Canaan would be the very same path his descendants, four hundred years later, would take for their entrance into the Promised Land.

We may say that Jacob lies peacefully in his grave, but it cannot be said that Joseph's brothers settled peacefully back in Goshen. The ghost from the past haunts them, and they are frightening themselves with the possibility that Joseph's friendliness toward them, his forgiveness of them, is only a façade. Now that his father is buried, it may be the time for him to demand restitution for what they did to him. They were saying to themselves, "Suppose Joseph has been nursing a grudge against us and now plans to pay us back in full for the wrong we did him!"

They project onto Joseph what is within themselves. That is the type of people they are, and it is what they would be doing if the shoe were on the other foot. Joseph is a bigger man than all of them put together. He had tested them with the episode of his little brother Benjamin, and he was satisfied that they were willing to sacrifice themselves before throwing his little brother to the wolves. He was confident that they had changed sufficiently enough for him to love them. The problem was that they may not have been able to love themselves, and deep down in their souls, they doubted if anyone else could either.

The brothers had previously admitted to themselves the evil they had done to Joseph, but they had never apologized to him. Everyone was acting as if it had never happened. How often has the cycle of fear, anger and hate continued on down the years within families because there was never "one," who was entitled to restitution, who stopped the cycle of hatred by forgiving and even loving the perpetrators of the evil. It would later become a law in Israel; we read in the

Book of Leviticus, *“You shall not hate your kinsfolk in your heart. Reprove your kinsfolk but incur no sin because of him. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against your countrymen. Love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord. You shall observe my laws” (Lev 19:17-18).*

It is easy for us sinners to delude ourselves about our repentance. Many of us are indeed sorry for the consequences of our sins because they have personally caused us a lot of pain, or we had to pay dearly for them, but did our sorrow ever touch the sin? It was Saint Catherine of Genoa who teaches us that guilt in the soul of the sinner comes from impenitent sins. Our Church has never told us, “Be guilty for what you have done!” No! Always, the Church says, “Repent! Be sorry for your sins and you will be freed of your guilt.” Those of us who often blame “the Church” as the cause of our guilty feelings, need to take a deeper look within our own souls. Maybe all the Church did is teach us what a sin is. If there is deep-down guilt within us, we may find the sin there also, and that is the cause of our guilt. We are all great projectors of our sins upon others. It began with Adam and Eve.

Meanwhile, Joseph's anxious brothers had devised a plan to ensure their safety, and they were not above using their dead father in order to do so. Many would agree that what these brothers come up with needs to be taken with a grain of salt; if Jacob had had such a message for Joseph, he would have given it to Joseph personally. *“So they approached Joseph and said, ‘Before your father died [not “before our father”] he gave us these instructions: “You shall say to Joseph, Jacob begs you to forgive the criminal wrongdoing of your brothers, who treated you so cruelly.” Please, therefore, forgive the crime that we, the servants of your father's God, committed.”* They pushed the right button: *“When they spoke these words to him, Joseph broke into tears.”* Seeing the effect of their words, they do not miss a step: *“Then his brothers proceeded to fling themselves down before him and said, ‘Let us be your slaves!’”* Did they realize at that moment, they had fulfilled Joseph's prophecy concerning them and himself? (See Gen 50:15-18)

Joseph immediately responds to them, *“Have no fear. Can I take the place of God? [It is only God that can judge you!] Even though you meant harm [ra ah-evil: here is the sin], God intended good [le to bah] to save many lives [le hob yot am-rab]” Gen 50:19-20.* Therein lays the unchanging plan of God. God has only one will for the world: *“It is Good!” (Gen 1:4).* Joseph comforts and reassures them, *“Therefore have no fear. I will provide for you and for your children.’ By thus speaking kindly to them, he reassured them.”* We cannot help but recall the words of the Lord to Isaiah: *“Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and declare their term of service is over, their iniquity is expiated; for they have received at the hand of the Lord double for all their sins” (Is 40:1-2).*

After Joseph settled all the fears of his brothers, and all were once more settled peacefully back in Goshen, we are told, *“Joseph remained in Egypt, together with his father's family. He lived a hundred and ten years. He saw Ephraim's children to the third generation, and the children of Manasseh's son Machir were also born on Joseph's knees” (Gen 50:22-23).* In other words, Joseph adopted Machir as his own son. Later we read in Judges that Machir is listed as one of the tribes of Israel.



We are told that Joseph lived to be “a hundred and ten.;" It is generally agreed that the number signifies a fullness of life—it concerns more the quality of the life than chronological years. It is in this Genesis text that we have the explanation of it: *“He lived to see his children’s children to the third generation!”* I think we could safely say that those one hundred and ten years of Joseph’s were far more than a “sojourn”—but a nigh unbelievable ADVENTURE!

Joseph knows it is about time for the curtain to come down on one great Act. Joseph said to his brothers, *“I am about to die. God will surely take care of you, and lead you out of this land to the land that he promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.’ Then putting the sons of Israel under oath, he continued, ‘When God thus takes care of you, you must bring my bones with you from this place.’”* Joseph is the only son of Jacob that owns his own plot of land in Canaan. Jacob had given it to him--the plot he owned up around Shechem. Later we will find recorded in the Book of Joshua, *“The bones of Joseph, which the Israelites had brought up from Egypt, were buried at Shechem, in the piece of ground which Jacob had bought for a hundred kesitahs from the children of Hamor, Shechem’s father, and which had become a heritage of the Josephites” (Jos 24:32).*

The last words of Joseph confirm his faith in the promises God made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and that Joseph is part of a much greater plan than this present one. And so we read, *“Joseph died at the age of a hundred and ten. He was embalmed and laid to rest in a coffin in Egypt” (Gen 50:26).*

The Book of Genesis ends with the two words: IN EGYPT!

In Egypt, in Hope!

(A Christian Walks Through Genesis - Ended December 18, 2008  
at 11:12PM)

A Christian Walks Through Genesis

Dedicated:  
TO THE WOMAN OF GENESIS AND HER SEED  
GENESIS 3:1 5

## STUDY QUESTIONS

### THE THEOCRACY

#### CHAPTERS 47, 48, 49.

(Please read chapters 47, 48, and 49 to Exodus of Jacob)

1. What do you understand by a theocracy and what important role did it play in Jacob's family?
2. How does Joseph turn Egypt into a real theocracy?
3. What do you see as the purpose of Jacob's adopting the two sons of Joseph?
4. Do you see this adoption having any effect on the future?
5. What does the blessing in Gen. 48:15-16 tell you about how Jacob saw the presence of God in his life?
6. Why does Jacob make this special gift to Joseph, a man who seemingly has it all?
7. What do you see as the importance of Jacob's Last Testament?
8. What has made this Testament so difficult to interpret?
9. What kind of character does the Testament attribute to Reuben? How would you interpret "unruly as water"?
10. For a man possessing so many attributes, to what would you attribute the cause of Reuben's fall?
11. How does Jacob describe his sons Simeon and Levi? How would you interpret Gen. 49:6?
12. What does Jacob proclaim about his son Judah and his future importance?
13. What is the interpretation that both Jewish and Christian sources give to Gen. 49:10?
14. How would you describe Jacob's blessing of Joseph?
15. At this point in our narrative how would you describe the person of Joseph?

Continue on next page for Study Questions—Chapters 49 & 50

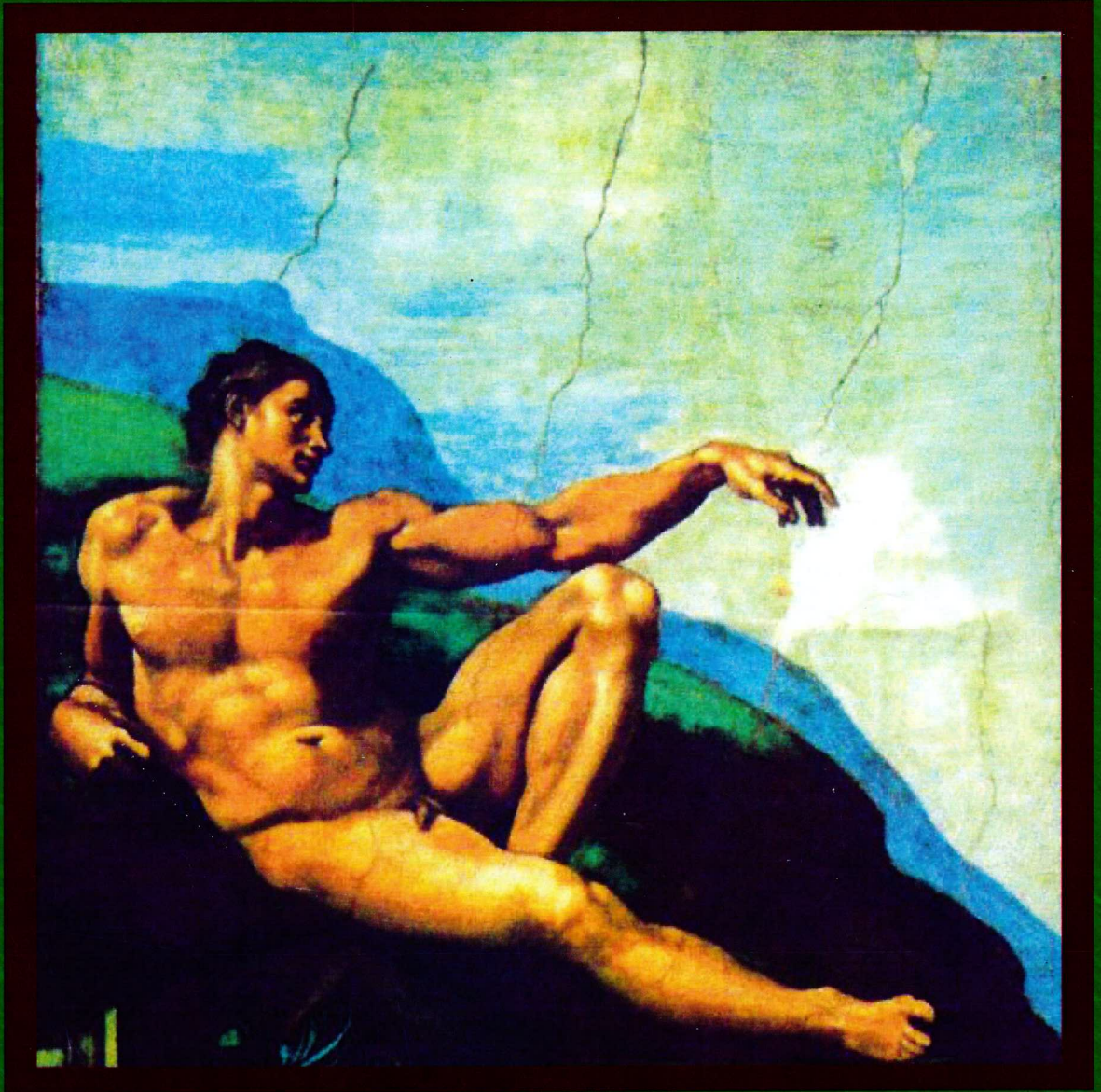
## EXODUS OF JACOB

### CHAPTERS 49 AND 50

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

(Please read chapters 49 and 50)

1. What is your general description of the family of Jacob?
2. How do you see God's predilection for this family?
3. What you see is the symbolic image of the family of Jacob being the first family presented to us in detail?
4. What do we learn here about the problems of dysfunctional families?
5. If you could choose one of these brothers as a personal friend, which would you choose and why?
6. Which of them would be your last choice, and why?
7. What does Jacob's last request, "bury me with my fathers" tell us about him?
8. In what way does Joseph express his final devotion to his father?
9. What is the request Joseph seeks from Pharaoh and why does he request it through a courtier?
10. What does Gen. 50:7 tell you about Jacob's funeral? What do you see as the significance of such a funeral?
11. What kind of picture does Genesis paint of Joseph's brothers after the funeral?
12. What does this tell you about their true relationship with Joseph?
13. What do you see being expressed by Joseph's brothers in Gen. 50:16-17? How would you explain Joseph's reaction?
14. How do you see Joseph's last words giving hope to his people?
15. As your "sojourn" though Genesis comes to an end, what has it revealed to you about the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, and how can you apply this to your life?



**LET US MAKE MANKIND  
IN OUR IMAGE AND LIKENESS  
MALE AND FEMALE HE MADE THEM  
GENESIS: 1:26**