

EVERY DAY FOR EVERYONE

365 Devotions
from Genesis to Revelation

N. T. Wright and John Goldingay

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THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE

JOHN GOLDINGAY

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Part 2

THE NEW TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE

TOM WRIGHT

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Note to the reader

The quote on 23 March, ‘All power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely,’ is attributed to Lord Acton, a British historian of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The Jewish scholar mentioned on 25 May is Michael Fox, *Character and Ideology in the Book of Esther* (second edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 12.

Part I

THE OLD TESTAMENT FOR EVERYONE

JOHN GOLDINGAY

January

BEGINNINGS

I In the beginning

Genesis 1

If you were God, how would you tell people about the origin of the world?

God inspired the author of Genesis to paint a picture that is a kind of parable. It says, picture God creating the world as someone doing a week's work, working for six days and then having a day off. This craftsman makes a plan for the execution of the work, spending three days over the project's framework and three days filling in the detail. So on Sunday he introduces light into the natural darkness and on Wednesday he puts the sun, moon and stars in the sky to mediate the light to the world. On Monday he separates the waters into two by means of the air, and on Thursday he creates the creatures that inhabit the (lower) waters and the air. On Tuesday he separates the land from the sea and creates things that grow there, and on Friday he creates the land creatures that will eat this produce, including the human beings who will rule the world.

God did not design Genesis 1 to tell us what a camera would have caught if it had been present to film creation. Faulting it for failing to do so misses the point, and defending it to show that it does do so also misses the point. We have no need to try to show that science is wrong and that actually the world was created in six days just a few thousand years ago. Equally, we have no need to try to conform the 'facts' of Genesis to those of science. That simply means focusing on concerns other than the ones God had in inspiring this story. Genesis 1 is a portrait, a dramatisation, a parabolic story. This fact does not imply it is not true; it means its truth is expressed in the manner of a parable.

Creation meant that God took things from formlessness to order, from gloom to brightness. God did that by speaking, and sometimes God separated things, such as light from dark and the waters above from the waters below. That meant God had introduced order into the world that people's later experience of disorder could not undo.

God, our creator, we marvel at your world and at everything in it that gives you pleasure and glory.

2 To put it another way...

Genesis 2

Genesis 1 had the broadest of horizons. It was concerned with the whole cosmos. Genesis 2 is more down to earth, and even more obviously 'just a story', but one with a further enlightening understanding of God, humanity and the world.

It begins with a bare landscape. Nothing is growing. But eventually, a farmer will be needed. The point about having human beings is revealingly expressed. Humanity is made to serve the ground, to help it grow things. Humanity and creation live in a relationship of mutual dependence.

The point is also hinted at by the way God makes the human being, scrabbling up dirt from the ground and shaping it into a body. In Genesis 1 God is the transcendent creator, often acting simply by speaking. In Genesis 2 God is more like a potter. But he doesn't stop at moulding. He bends down again and does mouth-to-mouth on the body, breathing breath into it to turn it into a living being.

In the garden there is now an orchard full of fruit trees for humanity to look after and enjoy, but also two other trees. If the human beings eat the fruit of the life tree, they will live for ever. Although they had God's breath breathed into them, this does not mean they would not die, but eating the tree's fruit would have that effect. This creation story presupposes the regular human wistfulness about death, and it suggests that death was never intended to be the end.

The other tree can convey good and bad knowledge, which is another way of describing wisdom. Like the life tree, the good-and-bad-knowledge tree is a sacramental means of God's conveying something that human beings will need. But strangely, they may not eat from it. Perhaps initially God just wants to find out whether they will do as he says.

The first human being is on his own, but Genesis doesn't say he is lonely. It does mean he couldn't fulfil the task for which he was made. Humanity is designed to share in caring for the garden. The man needs help. Until he has a partner, creation will not be 'good'. The idea of creation's 'goodness' is a motif shared with Genesis 1, but it is used in a different, complementary way.

Lord, thank you for giving us all things richly to enjoy.

3 Creation asserts itself

Genesis 3

We may see Satan behind the snake, but Genesis emphasises that the tempter is – a snake, the sharpest creature in the garden. Evidently the creatures God made were not necessarily inclined to live the kind of life God wanted. They needed humanity to exercise beneficent control over them. The snake successfully reversed the relationship of leadership between humanity and creation.

But the Old Testament often describes God as harnessing wayward acts to the fulfilment of a good purpose. This could have been the first instance: the ban on the good-and-bad-knowledge tree is a test for Adam and Eve, and the snake becomes part of the test. ‘I can resist everything except temptation,’ Oscar Wilde has someone saying in *Lady Windermere’s Fan*. Adam and Eve don’t wait to discover whether that is true of them. Genesis leaps straight from their creation to their failure. It rather implies there was no honeymoon period.

The snake makes God more restrictive and less generous than God is. Approaching Eve rather than Adam might be another expression of its shrewdness, not because of some weakness in Eve and thus in womanhood that makes her a pushover, but because Eve was not there when God told Adam about the freedom and the constraint. Perhaps the snake can con her?

So they didn’t fall. They were pushed and they jumped. Their eyes do then open, but not with the result the snake promised. They don’t gain anything like true wisdom. They start off as naive, simple people, but when they decline to live by the one constraint God placed on them, they become not mature and wise people but stupid fools.

‘Where are you?’ God asks. Perhaps he knows but wants to give them a chance to come out of hiding voluntarily. Or perhaps God wills not to know and would let them stay hidden if they chose.

The account of the consequences that follow portrays life as we experience it. There is conflict between the human world and the animate world. Eve will find motherhood so painful: she will watch one son kill her other son, so that unique vocation will be a source of pain. The co-equal relationship between the man and the woman becomes one characterised by patriarchy. Work becomes a frustration. Death becomes humanity’s destiny.

God who seeks us, enable us to hear you when you ask where we are.

4 The first family

Genesis 4 – 5

Adam and Eve begin to fulfil the commission to fill the earth. Eve's first son is called 'Cain', which sounds like a verb meaning 'get'. Eve 'got Cain', got him 'with God'. God was involved in the process of conception and birth. So the disobedience that brought cataclysm on her and Adam has not cut them off from God. They are outside God's garden now, but God is active outside as well as inside.

Eve has a second son, Abel. As they grow up, Cain and Abel assume two key roles in the life of a homestead, which needs someone to look after the animals and someone to focus on the crops. As the boys grow up, instinctively they want to worship; it's a natural human thing to do. So they bring gifts to God. In the Old Testament, sacrifice can have various meanings. While it can express penitence, more often it expresses worship, commitment or gratitude. Each young man offers something from the fruit of his work. And God looks with favour on Abel's offering, but not on Cain's. We don't know how they know. And to judge from what follows, God doesn't indicate what was wrong with Cain's offering or what was good about Abel's. That is what raises questions for Cain and for us, who have similar experiences of not being able to see why God blesses other people and not us. What interests God is how Cain will cope when his little brother is blessed and he is not blessed. The horrific answer is that he kills him.

But Abel's blood cries out to God. It is a terrible fact, but a great fact. The blood of the slain cries out to God, and sometimes God listens. Admittedly, in this story things go further downhill until they reach a grim low point, but then Genesis backtracks to sound the positive note of the birth of a new baby, Seth, to Adam and Eve. In due course Seth, too, has a son, and a bigger sign of hope is that in this period people begin to call out in the name of the Lord, in the name of Yahweh, the God of Israel. The creation story is on its way to the story of Israel.

Lord, have mercy on us when we are resentful of the blessing enjoyed by other people.

5 Filled with violence

Genesis 6 – 7

Eventually, ‘the earth was filled with violence’, which generates four astonishing reactions in God. The first is regret at having created humanity. God’s capacity to foresee things doesn’t stop him having unpleasant surprises, like parents in relation to their children. And it doesn’t stop him wondering whether it was a good idea to create humanity. Second, God sees how things are, and feels pain. Here’s another emotion one might have thought was distinctively human, but it’s felt by God, a further indication of our being made in God’s image.

Third, God decides to wipe out humanity. The Scriptures can be tough-minded about attributing catastrophes to God’s action. Stuff happens; and sometimes God not merely lets it happen but makes it happen. Fourth, nevertheless ‘Noah found favour in Yahweh’s eyes’, found ‘grace’ with Yahweh. If that seems illogical, illogic is the nature of grace. But you could also say it’s totally logical. God isn’t actually very good at being tough-minded or at giving up on his projects. That’s why Noah found grace, or grace found Noah.

After telling us that Noah found grace with God, Genesis tells us that Noah was a person of integrity, the great exception to the Genesis statement about everyone being corrupt. Noah’s being a person of integrity somehow follows from God’s grace rather than being its cause. Messing with the order in this story messes up the theology.

Then Genesis tells us about God giving Noah instructions for surviving the coming destruction, and it introduces another significant theological term, ‘covenant’, which is closely related to grace. It suggests a solemn commitment that one person or group makes to another.

Like the creation story, the flood story is more parabolic than historical. The Israelites could perhaps tell that they weren’t to take too literally a story about a floating three-level box 150 yards long, full of animals. And there are lots of Middle Eastern stories about floods. Genesis takes that experience of floods and that kind of story and turns them into a way of portraying something about the world and humanity and God. In one of these Middle Eastern stories, the Noah figure shuts the boat door. In Genesis, God shuts the family in, like the steward on an aircraft making sure the door is secure.

God who grieves, have mercy on the world filled with violence.

6 But God remembered Noah

Genesis 8 – 9

After six months(!) God remembers Noah. This doesn't mean he has forgotten him. When the Scriptures say God remembers, they mean he is mindful and takes action. God remembers Noah because of the reason for enabling him to survive the flood. He is intent on setting his creation project going again. He has made sure that samples of every species have survived, and now the remnant of the original animate world can leave the box and set about being fruitful and numerous.

Noah's first instinct is to worship, like Cain and Abel. He offers the proper sacrifices, from those 'clean' animals of which he saved seven pairs. And God likes the smell of the sacrifices. Other peoples in Israel's world could imagine deities so humanlike they ate the sacrifices, in between being born, procreating and dying. Yahweh is at least humanlike enough to like the smell of barbecue, partly because of what it signifies about Noah.

When humanity had gone totally wayward and the world was to be flooded, that looked like the end, but it was not. There can be new life when one would have thought there could not. Almost destroying the earth made a point, though it gets no one anywhere. But God is going to have to work with humanity as it is. Only when you have acknowledged the situation can you start to do something about it. We learn nothing about what God will eventually do. Until we get to the Abraham story, God is involved only in a holding operation, 'because the inclination of the human heart is evil from its youth' (Genesis 6:5). God is again wondrously illogical as only God can be. God's grace will have to operate, not *despite* human sin but *because of* human sin.

God announced a covenant with Noah before the flood. Now God says in the present tense, 'I am establishing my covenant', one that looks beyond the family that benefited from God's commitment to preserving Noah and looks beyond the human beneficiaries of God's commitment to the rest of the animal creation. And God's covenant commitment applies to the whole animate world. The creation purpose that gave positive significance to the whole of creation is reaffirmed. Perhaps God won't even let humanity destroy the world, though Genesis doesn't say so.

Covenantal God, be mindful of your people.

7 Babylon becomes Babble-on

Genesis 11

Things have been developing in a promising fashion, on a national scale as well as an individual and family scale. A people is travelling in fulfilment of humanity's destiny to fill the earth. They find somewhere where they want to settle down, and they decide on a building project. It requires some ingenuity. If Israelites wanted to build something strong or impressive, they built it of stone. These poor guys have no stone, so they have to make do with mudbrick for the entire edifice. And they have no proper cement, so they have to make do with tar. They get high marks for innovation and ingenuity, and they bake the brick thoroughly, but please...

God comes down to have a personal look, rather than relying on omniscience or hearsay or distance learning. He brings his aides along ('Come on; let's go down'). He's uneasy about the building project because it suggests an assertion of independence. The issues parallel those in the Eden story, but this story considers them at the level of a people, not just an individual or a married couple. The Scriptures assume that peoples and nations banding together is bound to lead to self-assertion against God, not the furtherance of God's purpose. In human history, one does not need to hypothesise divine intervention to explain the failure of such institutions; human self-will can make them fail without God's needing to do anything. But Genesis here portrays God as recognising a need to take some action.

As if by magic, God makes the members of the community unable to communicate with each other. With typical paradox, Genesis sees it as both a divine judgement and a divine mercy. Nations could do terrible things if they could work together unhindered by differences in language. It's a neat coincidence that the name Babylon and the verb *babble* are so close to each other, like the equivalent Hebrew words (*Babel* is simply the Hebrew form of the name of the city we refer to as Babylon). Another effect of God's making the people babble on is to push them into scattering from Babylon and thus to accepting their role of serving the world on God's behalf by spreading over the whole world.

God who comes down, have mercy on us when we resist engaging in the fulfilment of your purpose.

8 Get yourself out of here

Genesis 12

A man called Terah takes his family on a journey northward from southern Mesopotamia. Then God bids Terah's son Abram move to another new home, in Canaan, a crossing point of east and west, north and south. Here God intends to make Abram a great nation. It seems implausible, given that his wife cannot have children, but God is not inclined to do things the obvious, sensible or easy way.

The people who wanted to settle down in Shinar made a name for themselves, but not in the sense they intended. God promises to bless Abram and make his name great. God will ensure that he has a legacy. God has surely done so, because there are few people better known in world history than Abram.

In making Abram a great nation and making his name great, God will 'bless' Abram. Blessing has been an important theme since Genesis 1. Simply blessing Abram's family does not mean God has given up on humanity as a whole. God will not only bless Abram but will also make Abram into a blessing. Genesis has told us nothing about Abram to suggest he deserves to be singled out to receive God's blessing, any more than Noah deserved to survive the flood. Abram is not being blessed because he has deserved it. That point is fundamental to an argument Paul formulates in Romans 4. God made promises to Abram *before* Abram did anything to merit God's approval.

There are two possible ways God wants to make Abram a blessing. With hindsight, one can see that Abram becomes a means of blessing other people, people like us. He is also to become the kind of person that other people can see as an embodiment of blessing, an example of the blessing they seek for themselves.

Abram and Sarai make their move and, like Noah, Abram builds an altar, in Canaan, as a sign that this land belongs to Yahweh. They continue on a preliminary tour of the land which is also a symbolic entering into possession of it. Everything is going brilliantly until they run out of food during a famine. So they continue south out of the promised land into Egypt. What else were they to do? Stuff happens.

Blessing God, make us a blessing in what we bring to other people, and in the prayers your blessing of us inspires.

9 The implausible promise

Genesis 13 – 15

So Abram and Sarai and their family ‘went down’ to Egypt and then ‘went up’ from there (as later their descendants will ‘go down’ to Egypt and then ‘go up’ again). The story is back on track. Except that it isn’t, because another issue arises. Abram’s family business is doing well, but there are just too many sheep and cattle, not to say donkeys and camels, to be able to stay together in the same tract of countryside. They need to split, and Abram lets his nephew Lot exercise the choice about which part of the land he will make his area. He looks east and sees regions like the Jericho oasis where natural springs turn desert into garden. It recalls the garden of Eden or the country of Egypt. That’s the way he wants to go. It will turn out to be a fateful and unfortunate choice.

From where they are, Abram can look north, south, east and west, and God invites him to do so, not in order to choose a particular area to live but to see himself as heir to the whole country as far as the eye can see. He is heir, but not possessor. Some poignancy will attach to his survey of the land. He will look around but will do so as someone who will always be an alien. Possession lies in the future, and not for him personally. He illustrates a consistent feature of the life of the people of God. We live in the present and in the future.

Abram is part of a project God is undertaking. It will not come to fruition in his day, but he is part of it. His tour of the land will remind him of that. As stage one of this exploration, he returns a way he has been before, which might not seem very adventurous, but it is still a kind of enacted declaration of faith in God’s promise. He began this symbolic action before his ill-fated Egyptian adventure; he completes it afterward. That misadventure did not derail God’s purpose. Only at this point does Abram build an altar at Mamre (Hebron) to complement the ones at Shechem and Bethel. The whole country belongs to Yahweh, and Yahweh can be worshipped all over the country.

God of implausible promises, fulfil your promises to your people.

10 Hagar names God

Genesis 16

Sarai can't have children, the biological clock has surely stopped, and this matters not only because their personal fulfilment or security is at stake, but because of God's purpose. 'Yahweh has stopped me from bearing children,' Sarai says, with chilling boldness. Is she right? Genesis doesn't comment. Sarai's proposed solution to the problem and Abram's acceptance of it often shock Western readers, but it's a traditional version of surrogacy. It means Hagar moves from being a servant to being Abram's second wife. But surrogacy can issue in problems, and this one does. Hagar may be the number two wife, but she has the functioning womb.

And poor old Abram gets the blame for the tension between his two wives. Caught between the two women in his life, he throws up his hands and points out that Sarai is Hagar's boss; it's her problem, and she has the authority to deal with it. So Sarai effectively drives Hagar out. And Hagar sets off in the direction of Egypt, her home country.

But God's aide finds her there. And if one of God's aides comes to see you, it's quite like God in person coming to see you, though less scary. But he tells her, 'You have to go back and accept the ill treatment.' Maybe the assumption is that it's better to be with the people who are on the receiving end of God's promise and the place where that promise is going to see fulfilment and where God's purpose for the world is at work, even if it's grim. And as Abram's wife, she is to be the mother of countless offspring.

The aide gives her unborn son his name, 'Ishmael', which means 'God listens'. Really? The aide's words to Hagar draw from her a different response from the one we might have expected. God has pursued her, and this leads her to name God. She has thus been called the Bible's first theologian. He is *El-roi*, she says, 'God of my seeing/looking'. It could imply 'the God who sees me/looks at me/looks out for me' or 'the God whom I have seen/looked out for'. Both are true. She did not dream she would find God in the wilderness, but she did, because God found her.

You are the God who sees me.

II A promise for Ishmael

Genesis 17

In this chapter about covenants, God first gives Abraham two significant biddings attached to his covenant with him. He is to live his life before God, with God watching him and watching over him. It's both an encouragement and a challenge. And he is to be a person 'of integrity'. The word is usually translated 'blameless', but that sounds impossibly demanding. God's word suggests a broader, positive quality. And God spells out some implications of his covenant promise. Abraham's descendants will have Canaan as a possession. It will be a long time before this happens, because there's no basis at the moment for throwing the Canaanites out of the country. But when God can justifiably do so, it can become Israel's holding.

Further, there is now a covenant sign, the circumcision of baby boys. Only the boys get the sign, but the girls are just as much part of the covenant. And everyone associated with Abraham gets the sign, not just the family. The covenant is not ethnically confined. Given that many peoples practise circumcision, making this the sign of the covenant is an example of God taking a practice from the culture and adapting it. But applying the circumcision to babies is a significant adaptation. The sign has the advantage of applying to the organ that often gets men into trouble. It hints at cutting men's sexuality down to size.

Yet further, God reaffirms that Sarah is going to be the mother of nations. He changes her name from Sarai to Sarah to mark the occasion, as he changes Abram's name to Abraham. 'Mother of nations?' Abraham falls down laughing, which might suggest both worshipful submission and a sense that God's promise is too good to be true.

But Abraham and Sarah don't actually need a miracle to fulfil the promise to them. They have Ishmael. Won't he do as the means of bringing about this fulfilment? Apparently not. But that doesn't mean God is not committed to Ishmael. While Isaac will be the son who counts for the fulfilment of the promise, God also loves Ishmael and promises blessing and fruitfulness to him too. The vast numbers of Arab peoples tracing their ancestry back to Ishmael witness to God's fulfilment of this promise. The covenant embraces Ishmael, too.

Lord, keep your covenant with the descendants of Abraham, via Isaac and via Ishmael.

12 Entertaining angels unawares

Genesis 18

Angels or aides are humanlike. When three humanlike figures arrive at Abraham's encampment, there's nothing to suggest that they are anything other than three men. 'Where's Sarah?' they ask. The message that follows is directed to her as much as to Abraham. What she hears again about having a baby makes her laugh, as Abraham laughed in Genesis 17. In response to that, God speaks (so that's who one of the three is). Sarah has to break out of her framework of expectations regarding what is possible – though the miracle birth will happen whether she believes it or not.

It then transpires that the three are actually on their way to Sodom, down in the Rift Valley. But God has been thinking. Given Abraham's significance in his purpose, he will tell Abraham what he intends to do. Abraham has some responsibility for what English translations call righteousness and justice, for the exercise of authority in a faithful way. God has heard that things are not like that in Sodom and intends to check things out and do something about it. Abraham knows what that will mean, and it drives him into talking to God about his intentions. It's less a prayer than a series of questions, but they imply a challenge.

God has to choose between two courses of action, neither of which is very good – act against Sodom and thus act against people there who are themselves faithful people, or not act at all. Abraham urges God to 'carry' Sodom in its waywardness. Translations use the word 'forgive', but Abraham uses the ordinary verb for 'carry'. It provides a vivid image for what we do when we forgive people. Instead of making them carry their wrongdoing and its consequences, we carry them. Paradoxically and boldly, Abraham suggests that this is how God must exercise authority in the world, carrying the people who misuse authority and will not live his way. Abraham cunningly turns back on God his description of Abraham as a person who is to act faithfully and rightly, in exercising authority. He does it with due deference, several times referring to the fact that God is his Lord. The story closes by noting that God has been speaking with Abraham. His 'prayer' takes place within God's purpose, not against it.

Lord, carry your world, though we don't deserve it.

13 Don't look back

Genesis 19 – 20

Lot is sitting in the gate area in Sodom, a natural place to watch the world go by, and his welcome of the two aides (without knowing who they are) resembles Abraham's welcome. But the story somersaults into a nightmare. The city's people want to rape these strangers. Yet what does Lot think he is doing in offering them his daughters? Perhaps he knows they will not accept them. Having sex with them wouldn't meet their desire to subjugate the two visitors. But at best, it's a high-risk policy.

The scene establishes the point God and the two aides have come to establish. No wonder the outcry against Sodom has reached God's ears. Lot needs to get out of there. Yet Lot is torn. He has to be dragged out of Sodom. His wife is also torn. Her look back is another expression of hesitation, an awareness of what she will lose by leaving Sodom, and she becomes frozen in her gaze. 'Remember Lot's wife,' Jesus bids his disciples (Luke 17:32).

In all this, God is mindful of Abraham's questions. By implication, Abraham was trying to persuade God not to destroy Sodom. He didn't mention the idea of rescuing Lot's family from there. But apparently this happened because of Abraham's prayer. The prayer made a difference to what God did, even though it was a different difference from the one Abraham had in mind.

It has been assumed that the condemnation of the homosexual act that the men in Sodom want to commit indicates the Scriptures' stance in relation to same-sex relations in general, but the story doesn't concern a form of same-sex relationship that anyone seeks to defend. Actually, God is taking action against Sodom because of the 'outcry' that has made itself heard in heaven, and when the Old Testament talks about an outcry, it relates to the violent way weak people are being treated by powerful people. If God can't find even ten faithful people in Sodom, maybe the cry is one like that of Abel's blood, one uttered by the blood of people who have been slain in the city. In its entirety the story is horrible, but it is a story about the real world – where God is involved, angels are involved and the people of God are involved.

Lord, have mercy on our Sodoms.

14 Do we ever learn?

Genesis 21

In a competition for designation as the world's most welcome baby, Isaac would be in the running. His name stands for laughter, a laughter in which Sarah rejoices. But then Ishmael laughs, and to Sarah it's as if he is pretending to be Isaac, trying to replace Isaac. So she makes a plan to rule that out. Abraham and God agree with her plan, though God also affirms his original plan for Ishmael.

If Hagar knew about God's renewed undertaking, one can imagine it wouldn't count for much when you have run out of water, know your child is dehydrated and know this is how people die in the wilderness. But God intervenes, not because of seeing Hagar's tears, but because of listening to Ishmael's cry. Either way would be fine with Hagar. She knows that God is one who sees and also one who listens. God lives up to the boy's name.

Hagar sees a well. Her story and Ishmael's story get a fresh start there. God is with Ishmael. He is the first person about whom that is said, even though he is the boy who doesn't count in terms of the great purpose that God is set on accomplishing.

After the pathos of that story, the story of Abraham and Abimelech is down to earth. Beersheba is a spectacular archaeological site, with a well outside the city's gate. You can stand there and imagine the scene in this chapter (there's no indication that this well existed in Abraham's day, but you can still use your imagination). *Beer* is the word for a well, and *sheba* is the word for 'seven', while *sheba* is also similar to the word for swearing an oath; Genesis works with both these links.

Abimelech makes quite a confession: 'God is with you in everything you do.' He can see it in the way things work out for Abraham. It implies God has fulfilled the promise to be Abraham's God. Abimelech is wise enough to want to be associated with that, rather than trying to work against it. Another aspect of God's promise is being fulfilled. Abimelech wants to have a positive relationship with the people where God is at work.

Lord, do not make me look on the death of the child.

(Maybe there is someone to pray that for.)

15 The test

Genesis 22

You might think the story of Abraham and Sarah is nearing its end. But now there is a bombshell. God decides on this test for Abraham. God has promised to turn Abraham into a great nation, Sarah has the son whose existence opens up the way to God fulfilling this promise. Yet God's test imperils the promise. 'Kill him, then, will you?' Isaac is not merely any son but the son through whom God will keep that promise. It is significant that God bids Abraham sacrifice his son and also that in the end God doesn't want him to do so. God wants to test Abraham's obedience and trust, and Abraham passes the test. When Abraham makes inescapably clear that he would do the terrible deed, then God stops him. The point of the test has been achieved.

The Old Testament condemns the sacrifice of children. Israelites, like other Middle Eastern peoples, did sometimes sacrifice their children, as we do in sending them off to war. Perhaps Isaac would know and accept this. Whether or not we would, one significance of the story for people hearing it would be the implication that God does not ask for that sacrifice. God has looked the idea in the face and turned away from it.

Then, at Jesus' baptism, God says to him, 'You are my Son, whom I love, with whom I am well pleased' (Mark 1:11). The words echo the commission of Abraham. They offer Jesus an understanding of his significance that is both affirming and solemn. God is prepared to do what he asked of Abraham.

Why did God need to test Abraham? The story again makes us ask whether God does not know how a person like Abraham would react to a command of this kind. While sometimes tests happen for the benefit of the person being tested, this story is explicit that the test happens so that God can discover something. 'Now I know that you revere God.' Perhaps God could know how Abraham will react, but God does not relate to us and to the world by mind games played inside God's head. It's one thing to know that someone who loves you would do anything for you; it's another kind of knowing when that person actually makes a monumental sacrifice for you.

Here I am, Lord.

16 Where to find Isaac's wife

Genesis 23 – 24

It must be worrying, odd and grievous to have to arrange a marriage for your son or daughter when your spouse has already died. In a traditional society, it's customary to marry someone from outside your household but inside your extended family or clan. So Abraham needs to send 'back home' for a wife for Isaac. But not marrying Isaac to a nice Canaanite girl is not only a cultural and ethnic principle. It is also a religious one. Making sure Isaac marries the right kind of girl is Abraham's last significant act. He can be confident about God's ensuring that his aide's search will be successful. God's own plan depends on it. The servant goes about his commission in light of that. Isaac's special place in God's purpose means that not everyone can expect to pray the servant's kind of prayer and have confidence it will be answered, though we can pray it and hope it might be answered.

Given that the commission is such an important one, it is striking that Abraham entrusts it to a mere 'servant', and it shows what a responsible and honoured position a 'servant' or 'slave' (the same word) can occupy. The way the servant goes about his task shows how well founded was Abraham's trust in him. He knows how to pray, and he knows how to be silent and watch and wait. He knows how to worship and give honour to the God who has answered his crazy prayer, and he knows how to keep his mission in mind even when social custom would oblige him to accept hospitality and hold back from anything that looks like business until much later.

Like Sarah, Rebekah knows how to find her way in a patriarchal world and knows that the men cannot take for granted her cooperation with men's projects. But, 'I'll go,' she says. So they marry and fall in love. The order seems odd to Western thinking, but it corresponds to the testimony of some people whose marriage was arranged.

Isaac and his family become a new family for Rebekah, and Rebekah becomes the person who brings healing to the grief following Isaac's mother's death, when he is himself presumably no more than a teenager.

Lord, lead me in the right way, so that I may see the fulfilment of your promises.

17 The birthright

Genesis 25 – 26

It's neat to picture Ishmael and Isaac together. Death in the family is one of those occasions when the tensions all come out. But Ishmael is a big man. There he is, joining Isaac in burying their father. Ishmael is a survivor. No one knocks him over. If he falls, he falls on his feet.

Like Isaac's parents, Isaac and Rebekah have trouble starting a family, and getting pregnant is then only the beginning of their problems. What's noteworthy about them is the way they react. It makes both of them pray. Isaac prays for Rebekah. And when she has got pregnant and has a tough time, Rebekah prays. Like other women in these stories, such as Sarah and Rachel, Rebekah is not the kind of person who just sits at home demurely submitting to her husband and accepting her lot. She takes action. At this point she does so by assuming that she too can talk to God about what the heck is going on. She doesn't have to leave prayer to her husband or go to God via him as if she has no relationship of her own with God. She has the freedom the Psalms illustrate to go straight to God with the issues in her life. The story makes clear the simple possibility of taking things to God and getting a response, though her succeeding in doing that doesn't establish that one will get a response every time.

Within humanity in general, there are people who want to be number one and people who couldn't care less. Jacob is the first and Esau is the second. They embody the two types. Esau is the older twin, just by a few seconds, but as they left Rebekah's womb, it was as if Jacob was already reaching out to catch up with his big brother. When they are grown up, Jacob is the chef and Esau is the hunter. Esau wants some of Jacob's stew. Jacob says the price is the position of number one son. Who cares, when what you need is something to eat? Jacob cares. When you need to be number one and you are not number one, you care deeply. You will do anything to get there.

Lord, if it is to be this way, why am I alive?

(Maybe there is someone to pray like that for.)

18 The trick

Genesis 27

We have different ways of being foolish from Isaac and Rebekah's way. Maybe as parents we don't have time or energy to favour one child over another. That is their foolishness: Isaac's favouring Esau, Rebekah's favouring Jacob. It leads to deceit, blasphemy, distress and fury. As the head of the family, Isaac has the responsibility to see things go well after his death, and to see that his eldest son gets the resources he needs to become the new head of the family. Blessing his eldest son is the way he goes about that. His word, solemnly uttered in the context of a meal, makes it rather like a covenant, and it has that effect. So for Esau and Jacob, the implications of what happens here are decisive. Esau loses his position, his responsibility and his security. Jacob gains all those. He gains the blessing. All his life, even before he was born, he has been seeking to grab it. That's what being Jacob, 'grabber', means. It makes all the difference. Except that it doesn't.

It's worthwhile to imagine being the Israelites (Jacob-ites) listening to this story. They would likely feel negative about Esau's descendants, the Edomites, with whom they were often in conflict. But the story puts them in their place. While Jacob is their guy, he is the one who cheats Esau out of his blessing. It is hard to imagine them reckoning that the story approves of the action of Jacob the deceiver. Maybe the audience shuffled their feet somewhat at the picture of Jacob grasping after Esau on his way out of Rebekah's womb – or maybe they were quite proud. Maybe they shuffled their feet somewhat at Jacob's driving a hard bargain with Esau about a helping of stew – or maybe they felt Jacob was vindicated by Esau's attaching such little value to his position as firstborn, with its privileges and responsibilities. Maybe they felt the more vindicated on hearing about Esau marrying a pair of Hittite girls. The Hittites, the people who lived around Hebron, were good neighbours to Esau's grandfather, but the listeners wouldn't be surprised that his marrying local people made Isaac and Rebekah bitter. Abraham had made sure Isaac himself didn't do that, which was what had led to Rebekah's coming all that way to marry Isaac.

Lord, protect me from the desire to be number one.

19 The stairway to heaven

Genesis 28

The fracas gives Rebekah reason to manoeuvre Isaac into sending Jacob off to do what Abraham's servant did for Isaac in getting him a wife from 'back east'. On the way, Jacob has a dream. In our dreams we are often processing questions, problems and upcoming tasks. No doubt Jacob is doing this. But in the Scriptures, dreams can be a way God speaks to people, sometimes in relation to issues that they are needing to process.

Jacob sees a ramp or a staircase joining the heavens and the earth. It constitutes a way for God's aides to move between the two. God thus opens Jacob's eyes to something that is happening all the time as God is involved in the world and sending aides on missions. They are still at work, not because Jacob deserves to have God active in his life, but because God will not be put off from acting by Rebekah and Jacob's stupidity.

God personally shows up in the dream, to give Jacob a message of encouragement. It begins, 'I am Yahweh,' which is a shorthand expression. Israelites know that Yahweh is the only God, so saying, 'I am Yahweh,' is like saying, 'I am God.' Yet it also reminds people that it is their own God, Yahweh, who simply is God. The self-introduction means, 'I remind you who I am. It is the basis for what I say when I declare my intentions or make promises.' All God's power and authority lie behind his promises. Adding 'the God of your father Abraham and the God of Isaac' underlines the point. Historically, that is more likely what God would have actually said to Jacob (given that the name 'Yahweh' itself was first revealed later, to Moses). In a way, all God says is, 'You know those promises to Abraham and Isaac? They apply to you, too, even though you are fleeing the country. They mean I will be with you on this journey that is both shameful (because you are on the run) and auspicious (because you are going to find a wife from your own people).' God will be with Jacob not merely to make him *feel* OK but also to ensure he *is* OK, kept safe until he is able to return.

Of all that you give me, I will definitely give one-tenth to you.

20 I want to know what love is

Genesis 29 – 30

Like most societies, Middle Eastern culture assumes there are some economic arrangements associated with marriage, a significance of which is to seal good relationships between families and to provide a framework for handling the consequences of the marriage breaking down or of one of the partners dying. And Jacob is here doing what Genesis 2 literally says: he has left his father and mother and he is uniting with his wife in the context of her family. If seven years seems a long time to wait, we may need to bear in mind that Rachel is likely just a young teenager and not ready for marriage when Jacob and Laban undertake their negotiation.

There are further patriarchal assumptions written into the ongoing way things work. A woman's self-esteem and significance are tied to her capacity to have children, so not being able to is a monumental deprivation. Rachel has the love, so God sees to it that Leah has the babies. God gets involved with Leah in her sadness. Further, God is committed to making the offspring of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob into a numerous people. These two women and their maidservants (who all count as Jacob's wives) are going to produce the ancestors of Israel's twelve clans.

Jacob's own involvement with his women differs from that which would seem natural to Western readers. In what sense does Jacob love Rachel, and why? Does he 'love' Rachel more than he 'loves' Leah? Or does he 'like' her more than Leah because she has nicer eyes and a sexy figure? Or is this a context where 'love' is more a commitment than an emotion – is he more committed to Rachel than to Leah? Yet although he especially 'loves' Rachel, he is happy to sleep with three other women.

Leah, at least, assumes she is unloved in all those senses. For Leah, Rachel means everything to Jacob and she herself means nothing. But God sees it. Her fourth son is Judah, whose name makes one think of the word meaning 'thanksgiving' or 'confession', and intriguingly she declares, 'This time I will "confess" Yahweh.' Has she determined to praise God anyway? Or is this her last forlorn hope, that God is about to give her reason for such testimony?

Lord, stay with us in the messiness of our marriages and relationships.

21 The secret leaving

Genesis 31

Most biblical heroes of faith are people with clay feet. Jacob is such a man, with clay hands, heart and mind, too. He continues to be the great deceiver. He decides it's time to get back to Canaan, and Laban tries to make sure he doesn't take too many sheep back with him, but Jacob knows how to defeat his plan. The shrewd Laban has met his match in the even shrewder Jacob.

Laban's sons are understandably resentful at Jacob's having prospered at their father's expense, and thus at theirs. Jacob himself is afraid of what Laban may do. Leah and Rachel know they have nothing to gain from Laban because Laban has nothing to gain from them now that they belong to Jacob.

Pasturing large flocks means spreading them out over a wide area. Thus the family business makes it easy for Jacob and his entourage to make a run for it when Laban is some distance away, sheep shearing. By the time Laban and his posse catch up with Jacob, he has gone three hundred miles and reached Gilead. He is nearly home.

It was God who told Jacob it was time to go home. Ironically, Jacob is then the victim of Rachel's deception when Laban accuses Jacob of stealing his effigies (figurines that Laban would use in seeking guidance), when actually Rachel has stolen them. No one can afford to trust anyone in this family. Given that it was Laban who suffered through the departure of his daughters and their offspring, it is neat that despite the failure to resolve the question about the effigies, the two families become reconciled and finally part happily.

Jacob has a complex relationship with fear. He speaks of God as the 'Fear of Isaac', the 'Reverence of Isaac'. A positive fear expresses itself in reverence, awe and commitment. A negative fear means being scared. Knowing reverence and awe toward God should mean you increase in your confidence in life in general. But the nearer Jacob gets to home, the more scared he gets.

God is again involved in this messiness. He doesn't make a priority of seeing that people who deserve to do well prosper, and that people who do not deserve it fail to prosper (that would mean waiting for ever).

I am not worthy of your love. But rescue me. Because I'm scared.

22 God struggles

Genesis 32

Jacob thinks that his wealth should enable him to buy his way back into a peaceful relationship with his brother, but he now hears that another posse seems to be coming to meet him. He assumes that they may just appropriate the flocks, thank you, and kill him. He is scared.

People refer to what happens next as Jacob wrestling with God. But Jacob doesn't start this fight. God is wrestling with Jacob. Actually, it says 'a man' wrestles with Jacob, though it eventually does speak of Jacob struggling with God. This is another of those occasions when God appears as a human being and only afterward does someone realise he was more than a human person.

Really, God has been wrestling with Jacob all Jacob's life. Here God tries again, but succeeds only by cheating. Jacob doesn't want to yield, and he never does. Yet God does bless him, and he gives him a new name that says something about him. As is often the case, the comment about the name has some subtleties about it. It links Jacob's new name with the fact that he is the great fighter. Yes, Jacob is someone who keeps fighting with God in order to stay the man he is. In the end, God lets him do that because even God cannot force people to change. God can only make them limp.

Yet the new name *Isra-el* doesn't actually mean 'he fights/persists/exerts himself with God'. It's a statement of which God is the subject. If anything, *Isra-el* would mean 'God fights/persists/exerts himself'. God strives to get a person like Jacob to become the kind of person he could be and should be and that God wants him to be, and he keeps at it in this struggle with Jacob. Once more the story presupposes that its audience *is* Jacob, *is* Israel. The people of God are a people whose nature is to struggle with God to avoid becoming the people we could be, and a people with whom God continues to struggle to try to take us there. The listeners might also be inclined to assume that actually the verb in this name looks more like a different one and that the name means 'God rules', which also encourages some reflection.

I will not let you go, unless you bless me.

23 An amicable parting

Genesis 33 – 35

Whereas Jacob assumes that Esau still cares about the blessing, and probably wants to kill him, Esau is interested only in meeting his brother again. Jacob is then all prostration, and Esau just wants a hug. They both weep, with the tears meaning something different for Jacob from what they mean for Esau.

Thus Jacob continues on his journey into Canaan, to Shechem, where a doubly grim story follows. There is something like date rape. The two fathers think they have found a way of handling the situation that will suit everybody. But, again with irony, Jacob falls for his sons' deceit, as Hamor and his sons do. The grim story continues to be told with dark humour. The darkest element is that the descendants of Jacob-Israel are supposed to be a means of bringing blessing to the nations. But they turn the sign of the covenant, the sign of life, into a sign of death.

Did that meeting with God at the river Jabbok change Jacob? The way he approached Esau afterward doesn't make it look like it. Here, Genesis 35 tells us again about Jacob being renamed Israel. But the change of name still doesn't seem to imply a change of personality. This doesn't mean God has given up on him, nor on his sons. With God, hope springs eternal. Even though we do not change, and we carry on making the same mistakes, this does not make God throw up his hands in despair and abandon us.

Jacob's next move, from Shechem to Bethel, takes him only a short distance down the mountain chain, but it brings him to a place associated with God rather than with the shameful events at Shechem. Giving up 'alien gods' fits with that (they are likely something like Rachel's effigies). Although Jacob is not transformed, then, his action does suggest a renunciation.

After a while the family sets off again for the south, where Isaac still lives. On the way, Rachel bears the family's twelfth son, but she dies in childbirth. She gives her life for her child, as women often do in traditional societies. Her grave sits there as a place of weeping when Judahites go off into exile (Jeremiah 31:15) and when Jesus' birth leads to great grief (Matthew 2:16–18).

We promise, Lord, that we will put away the foreign gods from among us.

24 The dreamer

Genesis 36 – 37

Genesis tells us about Esau's descendants before telling us about Jacob's, on whom the story is to focus. Edom is part of God's story, even if less central than Israel. Now Genesis turns to Jacob's line and notes Jacob's favouritism toward his young son Joseph, which does not thrill his big brothers.

This young son has a dream. There is no hint here that it is a God-given dream, and our modern instinct is to read it psychologically. Young Joseph dreams of being top dog, just as his father wanted to be. And he is so naive, he tells everyone his silly dreams. It almost costs him his life. It gives his brothers a chance to show they have their father's genes: they are as good at deceit as he is. Once again deceitfulness thus catches up with Jacob, who was sometimes beaten at his own game by his cousin and by his wife, and in his dotage is now beaten at it by his sons.

Yet the irony is that Joseph's dreams will come true. The dreams will hang over all that we read in the coming chapters. The question is *how* will they come true, especially when events are such as surely to take Joseph's destiny in quite other directions? But having a hunch that we know where the story must go helps us see the significance of events as they unfold. Not untypically, human waywardness and fortunate coincidence play a part in its development. While one cannot blame the older brothers for regarding Joseph as more than a little tiresome, understanding that does not extend to tolerating the cynical ruthlessness of their action.

The Middle Eastern climate meant people needed ways of conserving water for the dry season, so they collected it in large cisterns. There is something mafia-like about the way the brothers throw Joseph into the empty cistern to die, then coolly settle down for dinner. It then seems strange that Judah's recognition that 'he is our flesh and blood' doesn't extend to hesitation about selling him into slavery. And it seems strange that this recognition doesn't extend to hesitation over putting Jacob through his terrible grief. Perhaps the brothers were glad to get back at their father for making Joseph his favourite.

Lord, fulfil your dream for your people.

25 The false allegation

Genesis 38 – 39

Deceit again plays a key role in the story of Judah and Tamar. After the death of two of his sons, Judah declines to follow the expectation that when a man dies without children, something needs to be done to keep the man's memory alive, to keep his family going, to provide a destiny for his inheritance and to produce offspring who will look after his widow as she grows older. So Tamar pretends to be a prostitute, manipulates Judah himself into getting her pregnant, and makes a public fool of him into the bargain.

With the subsequent story of the mess with sex that Joseph manages to avoid, we may wonder about the woman's version of what happened. Would she say that this hot guy was flaunting his muscles around the house, asking for it? We get hints that her husband is clueless. All he cares about is his work and what's for dinner. The story is a melodramatic tale about a handsome young man, a stupid husband and a lonely wife.

But another element in it is God's involvement, and linking these two aspects of it is wisdom. Stereotypical characters such as these people are the staple of the teaching in Proverbs. Proverbs wants to help young men avoid getting entangled with the 'strange woman', the 'other woman', the woman who doesn't mind having an affair, the woman from outside the community who may have different mores or religion and may lead one astray. Potiphar's wife fits the category, but Joseph deals with sexual temptation or sexual instincts in a different way from Judah.

And God is with Joseph. This doesn't just mean he has a feeling that God is with him. It means God makes things work out well for him. As William Tyndale's old translation put it, 'The Lord was with Joseph and he was a lucky fellow.' It does look as if this idea of God being with him collapses when Joseph ends up in jail, yet Genesis then takes up that idea again. Joseph is the guy who keeps bouncing back, not because he has an inherent resilience but because God is with him. He ends up in the same position of responsibility in the jail as the one he held with Potiphar.

Lord, inspire us to stay by you, and will you stay by us.

26 Interpretations belong to God

Genesis 40

Like people in the modern West, the people of ancient Egypt believed in research and sought to base their lives and their policies on the best resources of information. In their case, an equivalent to scientific research was dream research. We have Egyptian examples of dream books listing motifs that recur in dreams and what they ‘mean’. If you dream about a well, or about weaving, or about looking at yourself in a mirror, or about thousands of other things, these could portend something good or bad that was going to happen. While such guidance might be general, it could point to some specific future event. But dreams reveal the future only in an oblique way. You need to know how to interpret them. In Egypt there were unofficial and officially recognised dream experts who could help ordinary people interpret their dreams.

Whereas Joseph is in prison despite the fact that he has resisted the temptation to ‘offend against God’, Pharaoh’s chief cupbearer and chief baker have ‘offended’ their boss. We don’t know how they did so. The perils of life in a Middle Eastern court may mean only that the fish pie was not spicy enough. In their troubled situation in prison and their anxiety about what the future may hold, they assume there should be something to learn from their dreams, but they don’t have a dream book or a dream expert handy; at least, so they assume. But Joseph asks them the rhetorical question that both undermines their natural assumption about dreams and promises that they might be able to find a way forward: ‘Don’t interpretations belong to God?’

Our own expertise in research has to have set alongside it the limitations in what empirical research can discover. Its findings are always provisional, and they themselves need interpretation. We cannot sell our souls to research or think we can save ourselves through research. It may be even more dangerous that we see research as the key to politics. We spend millions on ‘intelligence’ yet continually make decisions about involvement in other nations’ affairs that turn out to have been misguided. We had lots of information, but we lacked a big picture and we lacked wisdom.

Lord, interpretations belong to you. Give us the humility to face our limitations.

27 Joseph as Prime Minister

Genesis 41

Pharaoh in turn dreams, and he has all those resources, but his experts are baffled by his dreams. This is where Joseph comes in again.

It's tempting to live by the motto, 'Spend first, save later.' Joseph's interpretation of Pharaoh's dreams makes it possible to save first and then manage through the crisis when it comes. Joseph surely doesn't have to be a genius to formulate a plan to handle what will unfold over the periods of surplus and shortage. Yet with hindsight one could say that likewise our world doesn't have to get into the economic messes it gets into from time to time. One big factor that generates the messes is a combination of greed and stupidity. More specifically, greed makes people throw wisdom to the winds. The years of prosperity could make Egypt do that. Joseph shows them how to stay cool and take the longer view.

We might reckon it is not surprising that someone who lives by God's promises and by trust in God would have the insight to see the wise basis on which to run the country's economic policies in years of plenty and in years of lack. On the other hand, there will in time be a downside to the 'big government' that Joseph suggests.

The actual factor that makes Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of implementing his economic policies is not so much the innovative nature of his proposals but the supernatural insight indicated by his ability to interpret dreams. It leads Pharaoh to identify Joseph as the first person in the Scriptures in whom the spirit of God is at work. Wisdom is a gift of God's spirit, to be desired in any ruler.

But Joseph misses his family, and he expresses the point indirectly in naming his sons. For people listening to the story, the account of the two boys' births will have a further significance. Manasseh and Ephraim became two of the most significant Israelite clans, dominating the northern part of the country. Yes, God made Joseph fruitful. Ephraim's own name could remind people of this because of its overlap with the word for 'be fruitful'. For one of Jacob's youngest sons to be the forefather of these two significant clans is typical of God's working in Genesis.

Lord, you have made me forget. You have made me fruitful.

28 What game is Joseph playing?

Genesis 42 – 43

Joseph is a mystery throughout this story. For several chapters he seems to be playing games with his brothers. Is it because he needs to draw them to genuine repentance for the wrong they have done, and because they need to be pushed lower and lower into remorse and shame before it will be wise to let them rise from it? ‘What is this that God has done to us?’ they ask. Are they serious enough yet about the question?

Or is Joseph playing games with his brothers because he has some understandable resentment in his heart for what his brothers did to him as a teenager in selling him into servitude, exiling him from his family and his homeland and (indirectly) causing him to end up in prison through no fault of his own?

If we were able to ask him which of these motivations impels him, perhaps he would not know. If he deserves his reputation as a person of insight, he might be wise to acknowledge the possibility that both motivations drive him and that he is not sure which is dominant. And if we could ask God’s opinion about what is going on, perhaps God would reckon that the brothers do need to be brought to a deep and genuine repentance, that the way Joseph is treating them does have the capacity to bring this about, and that even if Joseph’s resentment is driving him more than it should – well, God works through human weakness and sin as well as through human strength and righteousness (as Joseph himself will eventually point out).

Not only may Joseph be playing games with his brothers, but the author of Genesis may also be playing games with the people listening to the story. In the end, we cannot be sure of the answer to the questions about Joseph’s motivation. The effect of the story’s lack of clarity is to put the ball into the readers’ court and make them examine themselves. If they were Joseph, what would be their motivation? What do they learn from the way they read the story? Paradoxically, the Scriptures can work on readers by leaving things unclear, making them fill in the gaps and then asking why they fill them in the way they do.

God Almighty, grant us compassion before the people who could be tough with us.

29 Not you but God

Genesis 44 – 45

If Joseph is not simply trying to exact revenge from his brothers; he may also be trying to combine willingness to forgive with rigour in seeking to get his brothers to face the facts about what they have done. The story would have challenging implications for many of its readers. After Israel (that is, Jacob's descendants) divided into two nations dominated by the Judah and Joseph clans, relations between them were often adversarial. This story about the relationship between their forebears points them toward a realism that doesn't hide from issues, but also toward an openness to and desire for family reconciliation.

For the third time, the brothers prostrate themselves before Joseph, fulfilling his annoying dream. This doesn't alter the fact that it was an expression of his brashness. Nor does it quite establish that the dream was God-given. Once again, Genesis doesn't connect the dots. It leaves the audience with the questions. But they can think about them with the conviction that Joseph expresses, even if he does not mean it literally when he says it was not his brothers but God who sent him to Egypt. The Scriptures assume that events can sometimes be described at more than one level.

Joseph refers to God using the brothers' action to keep alive 'a body of survivors'. It is a term that will be of significance for many people hearing the story. The expression is usually translated 'a remnant'. It denotes people who go through some catastrophe but live to tell the tale. Specifically, it comes to denote those who survive the destruction of the people by Babylon centuries later. It is an expression that initially conveys bad news; the people who survive are only leftovers. But it can imply good news; at least some people survive who can be the nucleus of a renewed and restored people. God promises that this restoration will indeed come about, even in a foreign country such as Egypt (or Babylon).

God knows about the human weaknesses manifested by Joseph and his brothers, and he makes these the means of providing the whole family with a way of surviving the famine and thus of keeping in existence the family through whom God has promised to bless the world.

Lord, you make all things work together for good, and we thank you.

30 Call no one happy until they are dead

Genesis 46 – 48

An ancient Greek saying urged people to call no one happy until they are dead. It's not the gloomy statement it at first sounds; it means that only at the end of someone's life is it possible to make a judgement, when you can look at the life as a whole. Looking at the stories of Abraham and Isaac shows God involved in the individual incidents in their lives, but also in the whole. The Joseph story shows God involved in the long haul of a life. It shows how experiences and events are interconnected, with God involved in the interconnections. Only at the end can you make a judgement on Joseph's story, or Jacob's.

Jacob now goes down to Egypt. So the entire family goes, which will be the means whereby it will not only survive but flourish, and whereby God's purpose will not only stay on track but also advance. Jacob seems to hesitate for a moment at Beersheba, the southern boundary of Canaan. So there God appears to him again, once more telling him that things will be OK. God will be with him in going and in coming back (for his burial in Canaan). Jacob knows Egypt is not the land of promise. He wants to be buried back in Canaan with his family, not in this foreign country, and he gets Joseph to swear a solemn oath in this connection.

Joseph is the Scriptures' great nationaliser. He exercises power in Egypt at a moment of great crisis, a crisis he knew was coming, and one with which he knows how to cope. Presumably he is able to store the surplus grain from the good years because he buys it from the people. Then, when they need to buy it back from Joseph, it will not be surprising if they find the price has gone up. It feels as if there is something wrong with a process whereby everybody ends up as Pharaoh's servants or serfs, something like sharecroppers, but it is what happens. The deepest irony is that the serfdom Joseph introduces naturally embraces his own family and dependants. It means that eventually they will need to be rescued from a 'household of serfs'.

Lord, help us see what we can of the big picture of our lives, and live accordingly.

31 Am I in the place of God?

Genesis 49 – 50

When you know you are going to die soon, it may concentrate the mind. Jacob is the first of a line of Old Testament figures who deliver significant discourses when they are about to die. Jacob's is distinctive for the way it speaks to his sons and to their descendants, the clans bearing his sons' names. Sometimes it speaks in the future because these are events that are yet to happen; sometimes in the present or past because they are already actual in Jacob's mind's eye and in the experience of the clans. Once again we can imagine the clans listening and finding that Jacob's words answer questions they might ask about themselves. The importance of the blessing theme throughout Genesis makes it appropriate that this should be prominent as the book ends, and the motif's importance to Jacob makes it an appropriate one for Jacob himself to emphasise.

When you have been wronged, you want justice. Joseph's brothers knew it would be natural for Joseph to want justice, though the plan they hatch to avoid his having his justice is laughably pathetic. Joseph does not even point out how patent are their lies. It is as well for his brothers that he has a different framework for looking at events. He's willing to 'carry' his brothers' wrongdoing; that is the literal meaning of the word for 'forgive', the word Abraham uses in Genesis 18 in urging God to 'carry' Sodom's wrongdoing. When we forgive someone, we take responsibility for the effect of their wrongdoing and its consequences, even though the responsibility really belongs to them. We refuse to let it have the effect that it logically should have.

There is not much indication that the brothers feel contrite about the wrong they did. Their dominant feeling is fear for their own future. What if Joseph relates to them in the way they related to him? Notwithstanding how he may have been trying to drive them to repentance earlier, he does not ask himself questions about whether contrition is a necessary condition for forgiveness. He knows he must carry their wrongdoing, as he has been doing for most of his life. If there is some ambiguity about the way he treated them earlier, there is none here.

Lord, we acknowledge that we are not in your place.

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