

Genesis

The English title “Genesis” comes from the Hebrew word *beresit* and the Greek word *geneseos* from the Septuagint (Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible), meaning “in the beginning.” Genesis is the first book of the Torah,¹ which was written by Moses after the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt. Though many dispute Moses as the author of the Torah, Scriptures affirm his authorship (Ex. 17:14; 24:4; Num. 33:1-2; Deut. 31:9; Josh. 1:8; 2 Kgs. 21:8). Jesus Christ also attributed authorship to Moses (Matt. 19:8; Mk. 7:10; Lk. 18:29-31; 20:37; 24:27; Jn. 7:19).²

Setting

Although Genesis starts at the beginning of creation and tells about the origins of humanity, sin, the nation of Israel, and redemption, its audience and reason for being written are established much later. The book of Genesis was written by Moses to the people of Israel after they had just escaped four hundred years of slavery in Egypt (Ex. 14). Not only had they been slaves to the Egyptians, but also to the pagan gods, for many of them had been worshiping the pagan gods of Egypt. After their escape, Yahweh brought them to Mount Sinai, where He gave them His Law and began preparing them to enter the Promised land. Moses wrote and gave Genesis to the Hebrews to explain Yahweh’s uniqueness from all other gods, their origins as a people, and how He had chosen them to be His nation. Genesis tells of the origins of creation, humanity, and sin. However, its focus is on the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Judah and how Yahweh used them to bring about the nation of Israel and, later, the redemption of creation and humanity.

Purpose

Genesis was written in order to reveal the character of Yahweh to the family of Abraham whom He had chosen to restore back to the image of God so that He could bless them in a covenant relationship with Himself and that they would be blessing to the world. Genesis reveals Yahweh as one who is sovereign over and transcends His creation, yet He enters it to initiate a relationship with His people. Thus, Genesis’ primary focus is that Yahweh is faithful to His promises and powerful enough to bring them to fulfillment.³

Genesis’ purpose is communicated through three main events. First, Yahweh reveals Himself as the sole and sovereign creator of the universe in which He places His crowning achievement—humanity, made as His image—in order to represent Himself and be in a relationship with Him. This is, in the second event, ruined through humanity’s rebellion against His law, which casts creation and humanity into a fallen state, separated from their sovereign creator. However, Yahweh does not abandon His creation or representatives; through the Abrahamic Covenant—the third event—He initiates the foundation of redeeming both His creation and humanity. Thus

¹ *Torah* is the Hebrew name for the first five books of the New Testament. The name means “teachings” or “instructions” and was considered the foundational teachings of the Jewish faith and, later, the Christian faith. The purpose of the Torah is to teach that people can experience Yahweh’s blessing by trusting Him and obeying His will.

² Jesus Christ did not specifically say that Moses wrote Exodus, but in His day Jews regarded the Torah as a whole unit and recognized Moses as its author. Thus, they would have understood what Jesus said about any of the five books of Moses as an affirmation of Moses’ authorship of them all. Oswald T. Allis’s *The Five Books of Moses* is a rebuttal of the denial that Moses wrote the Torah. No one has discredited it, though liberal scholars have ignored it.

³ See Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Genesis*, p. 1.

it is the Abrahamic Covenant established in Genesis that becomes the seed from which the redemption of the Kingdom of Yahweh and His image grows through the rest of the Scriptures and finds its fulfillment in His Son, Jesus Christ.

“His theological perspective can be summarized in two points. First, the author intends to draw a line connecting the God of the Fathers and the God of the Sinai covenant with the God who created the world. Second, the author intends to show that the call of the patriarchs and the Sinai covenant have as their ultimate goal the reestablishment of God’s original purpose in Creation.”⁴

Themes

Many themes are developed throughout the book of Genesis, but the main ones have to do with the revealing of Yahweh’s character and the development of His relationship with humanity and the descendants of Abraham.

The Sovereign and Personal Yahweh

The first and foremost concept that is pervasive in the Bible is that Yahweh is the only, the transcendent, and the sovereign Creator over creation. Genesis begins by stating that Yahweh has always existed and is Creator of all things. Because He is Creator of all things, that makes Him sovereign over all things. Thus Yahweh has the right to determine what is right and wrong and to guide and discipline His creation according to His standard. Yahweh is also portrayed as transcendent from His creation. Unlike the pagan gods of the ancient Near East who were gods of nature and the elements, Yahweh is self-existent (Ex. 3:14), He has no origins, and He is separate from His creation. Nothing that happens in the creation affects Him in His being, nor is He dependent upon any other being or thing. Thus He cannot be compared to anything in creation. Yahweh establishes His transcendent sovereignty in speaking all of creation into existence (Gen. 1) and by establishing order and function in creation by which all living things must abide. When humanity violated Yahweh’s order and moral law, He justly punished them by casting them out of the garden of life and its blessing (Gen. 3), cleansing the earth of sin through the flood (Gen. 7), and scattering those who united in rebellion against Him (Gen. 11). He then demonstrated His limitless power over creation to the patriarchs—from defeating enemies in battle (Gen. 14:13-17, 15:1) to bringing life to the lifeless wombs of Sarah (Gen. 17:19; 18:9-12; 21:1-3), Rebecca (Gen 25:21-26), Leah, and Rachel (Gen. 29:31-32; 30:22-24).

Yet at the same time, Yahweh is passionately concerned for and intimately involved in His creation. He chooses to step into space, time, and matter and involve Himself in the affairs of human history. He is fully personal and has made Himself knowable to humanity. Genesis begins with Yahweh creating a garden so that humanity could dwell with Him in a loving relationship and be blessed. Even when humanity sinned against Him, He continued to pursue them in order to redeem and restore the relationship. It was Yahweh, not humans, who pursued a relationship and redemption when Adam and Eve sinned in the garden (Gen. 3:8-10, 21), Cain murdered his brother (Gen. 4:6-16), the world could only think and do evil (Gen. 8:1), and humanity unified against Him (Gen. 11:1-11). And despite this, He still revealed Himself to Abraham in order to bless him and the whole world through him (Gen. 12:1-3). And no matter how many times the

⁴ John H. Sailhamer. “Genesis,” in *Genesis-Numbers*, vol. 2 of *Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, p. 19.

patriarchs failed to obey and screwed things up, Yahweh kept using them because of His unfailing love for humanity and desire to redeem them back into a relationship with Himself.

The Hebrew word *hesed* means an “unfailing love, undeserved love, loving kindness.” So far, this root word has not been found in any ancient Near Eastern text outside of the Bible, whereas *hesed* and its related words occur 275 times in Scripture. It is the idea of someone being given favor to which they do not have the right by someone who does not have to give that favor. It has special covenantal language.⁵ Often associated with the word *hesed* is the Hebrew word *aman*, which means “to be stable, reliable, secure.”

This idea of a transcendent and personal God is radically different from any worldview of the cultures of the ancient Near East and even today. The Greeks conceived of an unknowable being completely separate from the material realm but could not conceive of this being as knowable or personal. The religions of the rest of the world conceived of gods that were personal but were merely the forces of nature made to look like humans. Therefore, they were flawed and lacked true power to alter creation or history. The impersonal transcendence of the Greek gods had no authority or power to sway or change the human heart towards moral truth or loving and just action. The limited personalities of the nature gods were not only incapable of escaping their own destinies but were incapable of entering into meaningful relationship with their worshippers.⁶

The Scriptures succeed in doing what no other theological document has ever done in describing a completely transcendent God who is also personal and fully involved in its creation. This involved the direct, intelligent, and verbal communication by Yahweh to human individuals.⁷ Yahweh is the only God in all the religions who enters into creation and unceasingly pursues humans in a relationship no matter how much they sin and violate His righteous standards.

Yahweh as a Covenantal God

A covenant is a binding relationship between two people or groups wherein each has responsibilities to the other. Thus both are blessed by the other when they fulfill their covenant responsibilities. A covenant can be *conditional*, where if one does not honor the requirements, the covenant dissolves. Or it can be *unconditional*, where it does not matter if one violates the covenant; the other party will maintain their covenant promises.

Yahweh established a covenant with humanity when He placed them in the garden as His image bearers. As His image bearers, they were to represent His character and establish His moral rule on earth by expanding His kingdom across the earth (Gen. 1:26-28). As a blessing, they would get to dwell in a good relationship with Him and experience life and blessings to the fullest in the garden. Thus Yahweh was willing to bind Himself to humanity in a relationship with them. Having become covenant partners with Yahweh, they not only exclusively belonged to Him but were expected to live in a way that reflected His character (Lev. 22:31-33). There is only one holy being, so there is only one holy character.

However, humanity violated this covenant (Gen. 3), and so they lost the right to rule on His behalf and dwell with Him in the garden. Thus suffering and death ensued. Gen. 3-11 develops

⁵ See John N. Oswalt. “Theology of the Pentateuch.” In *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, pp. 850-852.

⁶ See John N. Oswalt. “Theology of the Pentateuch.” In *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, pp. 845-848.

⁷ See John N. Oswalt. “Theology of the Pentateuch.” In *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, pp. 845-848.

the idea of how horrific humanity's sin and rebellion had become and their hard hearts towards Yahweh and His righteous character.

It is through Abraham that Yahweh chose to restore His covenant relationship with humanity and thus their ability to dwell with Him. Yahweh established a covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15), wherein He promised to bless him and the whole world through him (Gen. 12:1-3). It is through this covenant that Yahweh revealed His attributes and character of love, mercy, justice, etc. He continued to develop this covenant with Abraham until it became finalized and unconditional when Abraham demonstrated his faith, in his willingness to offer up his only son to Yahweh (Gen. 22). It is here that Yahweh forever bound Himself unconditionally to the descendants of Abraham, promising to maintain a relationship with them. It is this covenant that became the foundation for every other covenant that Yahweh established and His plan of redemption for all humanity that is developed throughout the rest of Scriptures. No matter how much Israel sinned and violated the covenant, Yahweh was faithful to pursue them and bring them back into a relationship with Himself. Finally, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the indwelling of Holy Spirit made it possible for all people to begin to be restored back into the covenant relationship with Yahweh that had been lost in the garden (Gen. 3).

These ideas, of sovereign creator and of a relational and covenant God, can be seen in the name of God, Yahweh. Though the name Yahweh will not be officially given to Israel and defined until Ex. 3:13-14, Moses as the author of the Torah inserts it all throughout Genesis to communicate to Israel, which was just brought out of Egypt, that the God who appeared before them is the same God who created the universe, who called Abraham, and who made a covenant and promises to the patriarchs. The context of Ex. 3:13-15 defines the meaning of Yahweh with three core ideas.⁸ First, by stating that He is "I AM," He makes it clear not just that He exists but that He has always and will always exist (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 1:8; 4:8). Second, because He is coming to Moses to begin the deliverance of Israel by dominating Pharaoh and the Egyptian gods, He establishes Himself as the same sovereign creator God over all creation. Third, by the fact that Yahweh keeps responding to Moses' doubts with "I AM with you," He defines Himself as the ever-present helper who is always with you. And fourth, because He is revealing Himself to Israel and is coming to deliver them out of Egypt and into the Promised land, He is honoring the promises He made to Abraham in His covenant. Therefore, He is the only faithful covenantal God.

Thus Moses uses this name throughout the Torah, as do the other authors of Scripture throughout the entire First Testament⁹, to communicate to the readers that this is the only, unique, sovereign God of the universe who makes and keeps His covenants with humanity. This is the name that no

⁸ See the *Meaning of Yahweh* at www.knowingthebible.net.

⁹ The titles *First and Second Testaments* are used in place of the titles *Old and New Testaments* because it is more accurate to their purpose. The use of *old* and *new* unintentionally communicates that the Old Testament is outdated and thus has no purpose, having been replaced by the New Testament. This is not the case. The Second Testament writers viewed the First Testament as the foundation for the Second, as shown by the way that they used it in their writings. Every book in the Second Testament directly quotes or makes an allusion to the First Testament—a total of 695 direct quotes and more than 4,000 allusions. Except for five First Testament books, everyone is referenced in some way in the Second Testament (see Roger Nicole, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 617). Thus, the Second Testament writers assume that their readers have a very good understanding of the First Testament when they write and use it as the basis for the truth that they are writing.

other being has nor can have, for it describes only one God—the God of the Bible and Israel—and so this is the name used throughout this paper.

Promises and Blessing

The central core to Genesis is the concept of divine promises and blessings. Unlike all the other gods, Yahweh created a garden for humanity so that they might dwell with Him and that He might bless them with life to the fullest. The fullest blessings for humanity are found in Gen. 1:28 with the blessings and commands of being fruitful and multiplying, the subjugation of the earth, and the dominion over the animals. One or more of these is present in every episode of Gen. 1-11.¹⁰

With the disobedience of Adam and Eve, they were cast from the garden to experience suffering and death. Thus painful childbirth would hinder reproduction (Gen. 3:16a), and the goal of humans filling the earth would be hindered by everyone dying (Gen. 5). Then there is a reduction in the human population to eight through the flood (Gen. 8:18) and the human refusal to fill the earth at the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:4b). The subduing of the earth is made difficult by the curse on the land (Gen. 3:17-19), humanity returns to the dust in death (Gen. 3:19), the earth is cleansed in the flood, and the fact that there is no mention of subduing the earth at the tower of Babel. The serpent was the first animal to oppose humans (Gen. 3:1-5), which creates conflict between humanity and creation (Gen. 3:15). And then animals become human food (Gen. 9:3). Because of sin, humanity lost the blessings of Yahweh, yet despite this, He keeps pursuing them in a desire to bless them.

In Genesis 12-50 with the patriarchs, the command to multiply and have dominion is transformed into Yahweh's promises of nationhood and land possession (Gen. 12:1-3). Yahweh made these promises to Abraham with the desire to bless him and to bless the entire world through Abraham and his descendants. All the nations that failed to receive the blessings of Yahweh at the tower of Babel because of their disobedience would find their fulfillment in the family of Abraham. Yahweh continued to pursue and appear to each patriarch, reiterating His promises to them despite the fact that their actions continued to threaten the fulfillment of His promises.

Throughout Genesis, each family was crippled by infertility, and they never became more than a small family let alone a great nation. By the end of Genesis, all that the patriarchs have of the Promised Land is a few wells they have dug (Gen. 21:17-19) and a gravesite that Abraham had purchased (Gen. 23:17-19). They are also foreigners in Egypt, and Joseph has confiscated other people's lands and enslaved them for the foreign kingdom of Egypt, making it great instead. The reader is left with the idea that human will and sin hinder the blessings of Yahweh. Yet there is a hope and expectation in the character of Yahweh that His promises will be fulfilled in the succeeding books.

¹⁰ See Laurence A. Turner. "Book of Genesis." In *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, pp. 353-356.

Structure

The structure of Genesis is based on the repeating Hebrew word *toledot*, which comes from the root word *yld*, meaning, “to bear children” (i.e., “generation). Yet what follows is far more than a genealogy—more of a story or an account of that family. Based on the context then, a better understanding would be “this is the account of.” The word *toledot* occurs ten times in Genesis as a heading or introduction to a new division in the book and introduces the subject matter of what is to come. Each *toledot* begins with a name of a person, introduces a genealogy, and then gives the account of the people who follow that person. The account is not about the person mentioned in the *toledot* but what comes after them. For example, the account (*toledot*) of Terah is not about Terah but about what (who) he produced, Abraham.

Introduction (1:1-2:3)

The account of sky and land (2:4-4:26)

The account of Adam (5:1-6:8)

The account of Noah (6:9-9:29)

The account of the Sons of Noah (10:1-11:9)

The account of Shem (11:10-26)

The account of Terah (11:27-25:11)

The account of Ishmael (25:12-18)

The account of Isaac (25:19-35:29)

The account of Esau (36:1-43)

The account of Jacob (37:1-50:26)

Genesis is divided into two main narrative divisions, Gen. 1-11 and Gen. 12-50. In Gen. 1-2 the author establishes the uniqueness of Yahweh as a creator who creates an orderly universe for Himself to dwell with humanity. Yahweh is the unique and sovereign King who formed and filled His good creation and gave rule to His image so that He might dwell with them and they might expand His kingdom. However, in Gen. 3-11 humanity chose to rebel against Yahweh and thus brought disorder into the universe. Gen. 3-11 makes the argument that Yahweh kept giving humans the chance to do the right thing with His good creation and to expand His kingdom. Yet humans kept ruining His creation through their sin. Thus humanity is hopeless and in serious need of redemption if they are going to become what they have lost.

The second division, Gen. 12-50 zooms in and tells the story of the family of Abraham. The two main divisions are linked together by a hinge story (Gen. 12:1-3) in which Yahweh comes to Abraham and promises to give him a land and to make him into a great nation so that He can bless the whole world through Abraham’s descendants. Gen. 12-25 tells the story of how Yahweh chose, revealed Himself to, and made a covenant with Abraham in order to redeem the world through Abraham’s seed. Gen. 25-50 tells how Yahweh kept honoring His promise to Abraham by continually working through His descendants, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Judah, even though they were not much better than the rest of humanity. Thus, despite how “all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23), Yahweh establishes His plan of redemption in the family of Abraham, a plan that will continue to be developed throughout the rest of the Torah and Scripture.

The main narrative divisions of Genesis become increasingly complex in plot, characterization, and theology.¹¹ In the primeval history (Gen. 1-11), Yahweh is always present and is the primary character and initiator in the stories. The individual episodes are relatively self-contained and there is little to no character development and the plot is not very complex. In these stories the morally and justice is very black and white.

In the Abraham story (Gen. 12-25) the stories are more complex in their telling but still feel episodic. Each episode still feels disconnected from the previous though there is a sense of chronology and themes being developed. Yahweh is not as directly present or active in the story, only appearing to Abraham a few times. The story progresses by human initiative rather than divine decree. As human characters become more autonomous, Yahweh becomes less anthropomorphic. Each character is more round and dynamic, and the actions of the characters are more morally gray and ambiguous, requiring the reader to become more engaged in their evaluation.

The Jacob story (Gen. 25-36) is less episodic and more integrated from act to act. Jacob is far more complex and ambiguous in his characterization than Abraham was. Yahweh appears even less frequently in the Jacob story, only appearing to him a couple of times in visions, than He did with Abraham.

The story of Jacob's family (Gen. 37-50) is the most continuous story (not episodic at all), emphasizing the human condition more than any other division in Genesis. Joseph is the dominant character, surpassing Yahweh in character development. Joseph is the most developed and enigmatic character of Genesis. Yahweh never appears to anyone in the story. And compared to Gen. 1-11, the divine omnipresence and morally unambiguous Yahweh is replaced with divine reticence and human ambivalence in Gen. 37-50.

¹¹ See Laurence A. Turner. "Book of Genesis." In *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*. pp. 352-353.

Outline

- I. The Primeval Events (1:1–11:26)
 - A. The Creation of the Sky and Land (1:1-2:3)
 - B. The Creation of Man and Woman (2:4-25)
 - C. The Temptation and Fall of Humanity (3:1-24)
 - D. The Story of Cain and Civilization (4:1-26)
 - E. From Adam to Noah (5:1–6:8)
 - F. Noah and the Flood (6:9–9:29)
 - G. The Tower of Babel and the Scattered Nations (10:1–11:26)
- II. The Life of Abraham (11:27–25:18)
 - A. The Promises to Abram (11:27–12:20)
 - B. The Blessings of Victory (13:1–14:24)
 - C. The Cutting of the Covenant (15:1-21)
 - D. The Birth of Ishmael (16:1-16)
 - E. The Sign of the Covenant (17:1-27)
 - F. The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:1–19:38)
 - G. Abraham and Abimelech (20:1-18)
 - H. Isaac Displaces Ishmael (21:1-34)
 - I. The Sacrifice of Isaac (22:1-24)
 - J. Purchase of Burial Ground (23:1-20)
 - K. The Betrothal of Rebekah (24:1-67)
 - L. The Death of Abraham (25:1-18)
- III. The Life of Isaac and Jacob (25:19–37:1)
 - A. Esau Disdains His Birthright (25:19-34)
 - B. Isaac and the Philistines (26:1-33)
 - C. Jacob Takes Esau's Blessing (26:34–28:22)
 - D. The Marriages of Jacob (29:1-30)
 - E. The Growth of Jacob's Family (29:31–30:24)
 - F. Jacob Flees Laban (30:25–31:55)
 - G. Jacob and Esau Are Reconciled (32:1–33:20)
 - H. Dinah and the Hivites (34:1-31)
 - I. Israel Fulfills His Vow (35:1-37:1)

- IV. The Family History of Jacob (37:2-50:26)
 - A. Joseph Rejected by his Brothers (37:2-36)
 - B. Judah and Tamar (38:1-30)
 - C. Joseph in the House of Potiphar and in Prison (39:1-40:23)
 - D. Joseph's Rise to Power (41:1-57)
 - E. The Brothers of Joseph Go to Egypt for Grain (42:1-38)
 - F. The Brothers Are Reconciled to Joseph (43:1-45:28)
 - G. The Family of Jacob Moves to Egypt (46:1-47:31)
 - H. The Testament of Jacob (48:1-50:26)

I. The Primeval Events (1:1–11:26)

Genesis 1-11 provides an introduction to the book of Genesis and to the Torah as a whole. These chapters explain not only the beginning of creation but the beginning and spread of sin throughout Yahweh's creation and humanity. They also show that this was not His desire for His creation. Genesis reveals that Yahweh is different from all other gods and thus His purpose for creation is different from all the other gods.

The point of Genesis 1-11 is that Yahweh is the sovereign king who formed and filled His good creation and gave rule to His image so that they may expand His kingdom. After the fall Yahweh kept giving humans the chance to do the right thing with His good creation and to expand His kingdom. Yet humans kept ruining His creation through their sin.

Genesis 1-11 tells of how from the very beginning humanity has resisted Him despite how He has intervened and pursued them. It establishes the reason for Yahweh's choosing one man, Abraham, to make into a great nation, through whom He would redeem the world back to Himself and restore His creation back to its original purpose.

The structure of the primeval history of Genesis forms an alternating structure wherein the events of Gen. 1:1-6:8 parallel the events of Gen. 6:9-11:32.¹²

Creation story: first beginning; divine blessing (1:1-2:3)

Flood story: reversal of creation; new beginning; divine blessing (6:9-9:19)

Sin of Adam: nakedness; seeing/covering nakedness; curse (2:4-3:24)

Sin of Noah: nakedness, seeing/covering nakedness; curse (9:20-29)

No descendants of murdered younger, righteous son Abel (4:1-16)

Descendants of younger, righteous son Japheth (10:1-5)

Descendants of sinful son Cain (4:17-26)

Descendants of sinful son Ham (10:6-20)

Descendants of chosen son Seth: ten generations from Adam to Noah (5:1-32)

Descendants of chosen son Shem: ten generations from Noah to Terah (10:21-32)

Downfall: unlawful union (6:1-4)

Downfall: rebellious union (Tower of Babel) (11:1-19)

Introduction to Noah, through whom Yahweh saves humanity (6:5-8)

Introduction of Abraham, through whom Yahweh will bless humanity (11:27-32)

¹² See Bruce K. Waltke. *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 19.

A. The Creation of the Sky and Land (1:1-2:3)

The creation account begins with Yahweh as the only thing that exists and who brings all things into existence. The main point is that because Yahweh *is* order and good, everything that He creates has order and is good. Thus, because Yahweh is the creator of all things and is good, then He is the only one worthy of humanity's devotion.

Other ancient Near Eastern creation accounts are usually poetic, but Genesis 1 is not typical Hebrew poetry for there is no hymnic element in the language.¹³ However, Genesis 1 syntax is distinctively different from normal Hebrew narrative prose; it is an elevated prose.¹⁴ This means there is a type of poetic element that gives the creation account an elevated sense of importance and even mystery, yet there is enough of a historical narrative that makes the creation account historically real. Cassuto observes that “it is simpler to suppose...the special importance of the subject led to an exaltation of style approaching the level of poetry.”¹⁵

This puts the Genesis creation account in a whole new category of genre that cannot be so easily interpreted. As one reads the creation account and the numbering of the days, the sense of chronology makes it clear that what is recorded truly did happen. Yet the language is far more metaphorical than scientific, and there are many gaps in how things were created. This leads to the conclusion that Genesis did not intend to explain how the world was created but who created the world and what its purpose is. The people of the ancient Near East were not interested in cosmogony—how the world came to exist—but rather in cosmology—how the universe as a whole is organized and how it works. The creation accounts of the ancient Near East and the Bible are interested in how the universe is structured, and they explain aspects of our present reality, like why there are seasons or why animals act in the ways they do. Modern science is interested in how things came to be and how they work. Thus the Bible does what science will never be able to do: answers questions of purpose and meaning. Religion and science are, therefore, not opposed; rather, they are answering two completely different questions. We go to the Bible and find that, unlike all the other religions, Yahweh is a sovereign and loving God and has created humanity with a purpose. We go to science to understand *how* the world was created by Yahweh and then stand in awe of how it works. We must not try to force the Bible or science to do what they were not meant to do. Yahweh is the author of both the Bible and science, and they both declare the glory of Yahweh in different ways.

1:1 “In the beginning” refers to the beginning of the world as we know it and affirms that it is entirely the product of the creation of Yahweh. The Hebrew word *beresit* (“beginnings”) does not necessarily mean the beginning of something specific, as in the English language. John Sailhamer has pointed out the unique function of the term as referring to an initial period or duration, rather than a specific point in time.¹⁶ This can be seen in the use of the word in Job 8:7 and Jer. 28:1, where it refers to the beginning *period* of the person's life, not the specific beginning of the person becoming alive. Thus, it is not a specific point in time at which everything began but a period of time in the beginning part of the story.

Gen. 1:1 should be seen as an independent clause that either refers to the creative activity of Yahweh before the official events of the seven-day creation week or is a literary introduction to

¹³ See Gerhard von Rad. *Genesis*, p. 47.

¹⁴ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 10.

¹⁵ See Umberto Cassuto. *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, p. 1:11.

¹⁶ John H. Sailhamer. *Genesis Unbound*, p. 38.

or summary of the events of the creation week, like the title of a story. The second way seems more likely in the context of the narrative as a whole.¹⁷ First, if it is an act of creation before the week began, then why not just start there and call it Day 1? Second, this cannot be the creation of the heavens/sky and earth because Gen. 1:8 and 1:10 make it clear that those have not been created yet. This would assume that there were two creations of the heavens/sky and earth. Some do take this view (the gap theory), but then one has to assume a lot of information that has not been provided between verse 1 and 2 to explain why there were two creations. For those who hold this view, this is explained by the fact that the fall of Satan had destroyed Yahweh's creation in Gen. 1:1, and so Yahweh created again in Gen. 1:2-31. However, why would Yahweh start at the first creation without talking about the events that happened and so create confusion? Likewise, this fall of heaven is not even really discussed anywhere in the Bible to have a common knowledge of it when someone begins to read Genesis for the first time. Third, one can see in the very next episode that Gen. 2:4 is a summary of the narrative that follows in Gen. 2. This is a frequent literary feature that begins all the *toledots* in Genesis. Fourth is the fact that the creation account of the six days closes with the comment that "the heavens and earth were completed with everything that was in them" (Gen. 2:1). Thus, Gen. 1:1 and Gen. 2:1 are parallel statements that open and close the account. Just as Gen. 2:1 is not seen as a separate creative act, neither should Gen. 1:1.

To take this view means that Genesis itself does not account for the original creation of matter. When Genesis begins, the watery deep and the darkness already exist. On days 1 and 2, Yahweh is merely separating these things, not creating them. This view does not deny the Bible's teaching that Yahweh created everything out of nothing, for later Scripture supports the fact that Yahweh is the originator of all matter and that the world was made out of nothing (John 1:3; Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 11:3). In the ancient Near East, the greatest demonstration of the gods' power was not in the creating of matter but in the fixing of destinies and regulating of order and the roles of physical matter.¹⁸ This will be discussed at greater length in the following pages.

The phrase "in the beginning God created" states quite clearly that God was the one who existed before anything else in the universe. The Hebrew word for "God" that is used here is *'elohim*. The origin of the word *'elohim* and its original meaning are not certain. The best understanding seems to be the "strong one" or the "mighty one." *'Elohim* is a plural noun; however, in the Hebrew plural nouns do not always indicate plurality. If a noun is intended to be understood as a plural, then the verbs and adjectives that surround it will also be plural. Yet when *'elohim* is used of the one true God, it takes singular verbs and adjectives with it. Thus Scripture makes it clear that it views God as singular. Thus in the singular *'elohim* communicates the idea of an all-powerful and sovereign God who is king over the whole of creation.

The plurality of the noun does not refer to the trinity since grammatical evidence does not allow for this. There are many times that the First Testament refers to the pagan gods as *'elohim* (Jud. 11:24; 1 Kgs. 11:33), yet one would never see these as references to those gods as trinitarian. The uses of *'elohim* as a singular noun is called an honorific plural. It is not used as a plural in a numeric sense but rather as in a degree of respect. An example of this is Jud. 19:26 and 27; "At daybreak the woman went back to the house where her master was staying;" "when her master

¹⁷ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1-15*, pp. 11-14; John H. Walton. *Genesis*, pp. 67-70; Bruce K. Waltke. "The Creation Account in Genesis 1:1-3." *Bibliotheca Sacra*;

¹⁸ See John H. Walton. *Genesis*, p. 71.

got up in the morning.” The Hebrew word for “master” in these two cases is the masculine plural *adone*, which is surrounded by singular modifiers. Other examples are the word “enemy” in Jud. 16:23 and “owner” in Isa. 1:3.

The verb for “create” (*bara*) is used in Scriptures exclusively for the activity of Yahweh and describes His activity of creating something new, fresh, and perfect (Ps. 51:10; Isa. 43:15; 65:17). Only Yahweh can create something new and unique that no one has ever seen or thought about. The God of Israel is always the subject of *bara* and it is never used of the pagan gods. Contrary to common belief, the verb does not describe something created *out of nothing*, for when it is used, it never is mentioned what Yahweh created out of. See Gen. 1:27, where it refers to the creation of humanity, and Isa. 43:15, where it refers to Israel as a nation. Though the word does not communicate the idea of creating out of nothing, it is clear from the overall thrust of Gen. 1 that Yahweh has this ability (John 1:3; Col. 1:16-17; Heb. 11:3).

The phrase “heavens and earth” should be understood as “sky and land.” The Hebrew word used for “heaven” (*shamayim*) is the same word used for “sky” in Gen. 1:8. When *shamayim* is in the singular form, it refers to heaven, and when it is in the plural, it refers to the sky. In both verses it is in the plural form. The Hebrew word for “earth” (*eret*) is the same word used for “land” in Gen. 1:10. The narrator assumes that heaven already exists with the opening phrase “In the beginning God.” Here he is more interested in giving an account of the material realm – not the spiritual. The phrase “sky and land” forms a merism, which is when two parts of a whole are mentioned to refer to the whole. Merism is like the phrase “flesh and bone;” here, the two parts, “flesh” and “bone,” are used together to refer to the whole body of a person, even though there is more to the human body than just these two parts. The two parts, heaven and earth, refer to the entire ordered universe (Jer. 33:25), including the heavens, the earth, the sea, and everything in them (Gen. 2:1; 2:4; Deut. 3:24; Isa. 65:17; Jer. 23:24). Thus the “heavens and the earth” is a phrase that refers to everything mentioned in the six-day creation account. Totality rather than organization is the main idea here.¹⁹ This also is evidence that Gen. 1:1 should be seen as a summary statement.

If the text was interested in the creation of matter, then the story would begin with nothing existing. Genesis is not interested in the existence of matter but in the organized world in contrast to the chaotic world. Psalms focuses on the defeating or neutralizing of the forces of chaos, not on the creation of matter (Ps. 74:13-17; 89:9-10; 104:7-9). Genesis does not portray this battle but focuses on the forming, filling, and subduing and ordering of chaos.

1:2a “Now the earth” signifies that the earth at this time in creation is not the earth as we know it and its state before the first command and act of Yahweh. The earth is described as being formless and empty, dark, and a watery mass. The Hebrew word *tohu* has two senses, either “nothingness” (Isa. 29:21) or “chaos, disorder.” It is used most frequently of the desert, where a human can lose his way and die (Deut. 32:10; Job 6:18).²⁰ The words “formless and empty” (*tohu* and *bohu*) are used together in two other places in Scripture, Jer. 4:23 and Isa. 34:11. This combination is used to refer to a barren wasteland and of judgment.

“Darkness” is used to symbolize all that is evil and opposes Yahweh (1 John 1:5), the wicked (Prov. 2:13), judgment (Ex. 10:21), and death (Ps. 88:13). Salvation is described as bringing light

¹⁹ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 15.

²⁰ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 15.

to those who are in darkness (Isa. 9:1). Whereas humanity is blind and lost in the darkness, darkness is transparent to Yahweh. Yahweh can even veil Himself in darkness at moments of great revelation (Deut. 4:11; 5:23; Ps. 18:12). There is thus ambiguity to this term. It is just another description of the primeval water. But it could be a hint of the presence and creative work of Yahweh waiting to be revealed.²¹

The “watery deep” (*tehom*) refers to the chaotic primeval oceans that surround the earth and is the great deep under the earth (Gen. 7:11). In the ancient Near East, the chaotic sea is symbolic of evil and chaos (along with the serpent/dragon/leviathan) and is used to describe that which opposes life. In the other creation accounts of the ancient Near East, the universe is described as a dark, watery, chaotic void. This chaos is portrayed as a chaotic god that prevents life or tries to destroy the lesser gods. One of these gods ends up battling and overcoming or destroying the chaotic sea (or sometimes seen as a great sea dragon) in order to establish kingship and create the world. The god usually creates the world out of this chaotic entity, thus using disorder and chaos as the foundation to creation.²²

Just as the pagan accounts do, Gen. 1:1 also describes the world as we know it as a disordered, chaotic, dark, and formless mass. However, there is no hint that the watery deep was a powerful godlike monster independent of or opposed to Yahweh, which He had to then fight and subdue. Here, it is merely a part of His creation that does His bidding (Ps. 104:6; Prov. 8:27-28). Genesis begins by declaring that Yahweh is completely unlike the pagan gods of the surrounding cultures. He is the only absolute sovereign God of the universe who has no beginning and no equal or competition. There is no opponent He had to overcome or chaos that threatened to overtake Him. Yes, there is a formless and empty chaotic darkness, but that is all it is. It will be undone simply by the mere spoken word of Yahweh in the following verses. The cosmos was chaotic and empty of purpose, and function, and Yahweh ordered it and gave it purpose.

1:2b The Hebrew word for “Spirit of God” (*ruach*) means “wind, breath, or spirit.” This word “wind” is often used in the sense of a fluttering bird that hovers over her young in protection before she takes flight or of vultures circling in the sky. It can also be used to describe the motion of the wind. The wind of Yahweh is seen on several occasions in the First Testament as an instrument that Yahweh uses to subdue and control the chaotic waters. Yahweh used the wind to subdue the waters of the flood (Gen. 8:1), to part the Red Sea in Israel’s exodus (Ex. 14:21; 15:8), and to bring forth the pagan nations of the world from the chaotic seas (Dan. 7:2).

Yet the word *ruach* can also refer to the divine spirit that energizes and empowers Yahweh’s people (Gen. 41:38; Ex. 31:3; 35:31; Num. 24:2; 1 Sam. 10:10; 11:6; 19:20, 23; Ezek. 11:24; 2 Chr. 15:1; 24:20). Ezekiel uses it to compare the description of the chariot of Yahweh to “a stormy wind” guided by the Spirit (Ezek. 1:4, 12, 20) and the reference to wisdom watching over Yahweh’s creative work (Prov. 8; Job 38).²³ The wind of God can be used as a concrete and vivid image of the Spirit of God. It would describe here, therefore, the powerful presence of Yahweh moving mysteriously over the surface of the waters. However, we must not read back into the First Testament from the Second Testament and see this as a reference to the Holy Spirit. The original audience would not have seen it that way, and the First Testament describes the spirit as an extension of Yahweh (2 Kgs. 3:15; Ezek. 1:3; 3:14, 22, etc.).

²¹ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 16.

²² See *Yahweh’s Mastery Over Chaos* at www.knowingthebible.net.

²³ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 17.

The Hebrew word used for “water” in Gen. 1:2b (*mayim*) refers to the life-giving waters for creation. This life-giving water in Gen. 1:2b is contrasted with the negative connotation of the watery abyss in Gen. 1:2a. It is the powerful wind/spirit of Yahweh that has subdued the chaotic waters so that He may begin to bring order and life to His creation. This is Yahweh’s first redemptive act of undoing the negative nature of the earth in Gen. 1:2a.

Thus, one could translate this verse to read, “The earth was nonfunctional, and a primordial, watery, darkness prevailed, and a supernatural wind that was permeated with the power of Yahweh circled over the surface of the water.”²⁴

“The three ‘chaotic’ elements of verse 2 (formless earth, darkness, and watery deep) are not negative realities, but *ambiguous* ones. They should not be seen as sinister, nihilating, demonic powers and therefore, in Gerhard von Rad’s phrase, as ‘simply the threat to everything he created.’ Nor should they be seen, in Brevard Childs’ words, as a chaotic condition existing independently of God’s creative activity,’ an activity ‘over against the chaos.’ There is certainly no exegetical justification for Karl Barth’s proposal that this should be understood as *das Nichtige*, a nothingness which ‘has as such its own being, albeit malignant and perverse... which God does not will... which opposes God and tempts and threatens His creature.’ The sheer tranquility of the account belies this approach.”

With the opening of Gen. 1:1-2, the earth as we know it is described in three negative ways: as formless and empty, as darkness, and as a watery, chaotic abyss. Life cannot function in this state, so Yahweh has to undo it if He is to redeem creation. Isaiah 45:18 states that Yahweh did not create the earth to be void but formed it to be inhabited. Thus Genesis introduces the need for Yahweh to undo the formlessness and emptiness of the earth in Gen. 1:2. The earth needed to be formed and peopled before Yahweh could call it good.

At the end of the seven six-day creation cycle Yahweh is shown as undoing the negative nature of the creation (formless, empty, darkness, and watery abyss). Through the work of the spirit transforming the watery abyss into living giving waters (Gen. 1:2b), the light removing darkness (Gen. 1:3), the forming what was formless (Gen. 1:3-10), and the filling what was empty (Gen. 1:11-31), Yahweh brings redemption and order to His creation.

The following chart shows a structure and pattern to the creation week. On the first three days of creation, the passage tells us that Yahweh began to form the void into something that He could fill. On the last three days of creation, Yahweh fills that which He formed. The number of creative acts also increases with each triad, starting with a single creative act (days 1 and 4) to one creative act with two aspects (days 2 and 5) to two separate acts (days 3 and 6).²⁵

Forming	Filling
1 Separated light from darkness	4 Lights for day and night
2 Separated sky from waters below	5 Creatures of the air and water
3 Separated water from land and plants	6 Creatures of the land and humanity
7 Yahweh entered and rested in the garden, which was His tabernacle on earth	

²⁴ See John H. Walton. *Genesis*, p. 78.

²⁵ See Bruce K. Waltke. *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 58.

1:3-31 What is unique about the biblical creation account compared to all others is the fact that Yahweh creates and orders the creation merely by His spoken word. In Egyptian creation accounts, the gods also create by speaking, but they do so through magical utterances and phrases, where Yahweh speaks creation into existence simply, through clear commands. It is merely the divine word of Yahweh that brings into existence what is expressed. The word of Yahweh is both creative and effective. The repetition of “God said” for each day of the creation week also makes it clear that He is responsible for bringing *all* things into existence, through His own will, unlike the other gods who were responsible for creating only one or two things. Likewise, the verbal repetition ties the command with its fulfillment. Ten times in this chapter the decree of Yahweh in creation is expressed. The spoken decree of Yahweh also introduces the Law, the words and commandments from Yahweh that must be obeyed. The ten decrees of Yahweh in this chapter anticipate the ten words in the Decalogue (Ex. 20:2-17). Yahweh’s spoken word is expressed in Ps. 33:6, 9. There is a pattern in Genesis 1 that emphasizes the spoken decree of Yahweh. On days 1 and 2 Yahweh speaks once, and on day 3 He speaks twice. On days 4 and 5 Yahweh speaks once, and on day 6 He speaks twice.

The word “good” has the idea that everything is orderly, is in its proper place, and functions the way it should. The repetition of “God saw that it was good” shows that Yahweh approved of all that He spoke into existence, that it was not chaotic. Thus, all that is chaotic and sinful in the world now is a result of humanity’s sin against Yahweh in Genesis 3.

“Perhaps nowhere else in the ancient world is such a positive evaluation placed on created matter and earthly life as here. Indeed, the Bible asserts unequivocally the goodness of all that God made and thus stands in sharp contrast to those religions, which regard the material world as evil and detrimental to the ‘spiritual’ nature of humans. As Walther Zimmerli puts it, ‘the whole thrust of the Old Testament proclamation guards against any flight in a beyond which is turned away from the world.’”²⁶

“There was evening and morning” is in reverse order of what we would expect. In the nomadic times of Israel, the day began with the sunset in the evening and ended with the sunset of the next evening. Later, when Israelite culture began to develop cities, the day began at midnight, but the evening and morning pattern remained with consideration to the Hebrew festivals [e.g., the Day of Atonement (Lev. 23:32) and the Sabbath]. However, there could also be a theological point being made about Yahweh’s ordering of each day. Because evening is associated with darkness, it could communicate the idea of disorder. And because morning is associated with light, it could communicate order. Thus, each day began with the disorder of the formless and empty, dark, chaotic state of the creation (Gen. 1:2a), and Yahweh ended each day by bring order and light to that specific part of creation. This also communicates alternating periods of time (structure and order) and a completion and finality to Yahweh’s work.

The Hebrew word for “day” (*yom*) can mean a literal day or a period of time (e.g., “the *day* that Britain ruled the seas”). However, it is clear that a day has the basic sense of a 24-hour period time due to the fact that each day is numbered in sequential order, the mention of evening and morning, and the divine rest on the seventh bringing the week to an end. It is clear that a week of divine activity is what is being described.

²⁶ Foster R. McCurley. *Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, p. 15.

However, there is no evidence that when Scripture speaks of a six-day creation that a literal 144-hour week is meant. The main idea here is not that of time but that of a pattern of Yahweh's working six days and then resting on the seventh. This creates the basis for humanity's working seven days and then resting with Yahweh on the seventh in the model of the Sabbath.

This is not a scientific device in order to communicate a literal period of time that one can mathematically compute but rather one of many literary devices to communicate the order and structure of how Yahweh created. Other devices include repetition, chiasmic structures, inclusio, and the use of multiples of seven. There is no sense of a scientific account of creation in the way we think of it. And it is very lacking in scientific details, like the fact that the earth is described as formless and empty yet also as a watery abyss. Or that evening and morning appear three days before the creation of the sun, which was for the ordering of days. Genesis 1 stands completely outside the historical accounts (*toledots*) of the rest of Scripture and therefore cannot be comprehended in the same way when it comes to time.

Yahweh created a universe that we cannot even comprehend let alone comprehend *how* He did it, especially when He spoke it into existence rather than building with His hands like we do. We create with something that exists; He creates something fresh and new. The only way that the narrator can explain what Yahweh did is with human language; thus, Yahweh and His actions become analogical. The words that are used are completely lacking and do not have the same meaning to what really happened. We must read the creation account of Genesis 1 with great wonder, mystery, and awe around what an unfathomable and awesome God did to order creation for life and blessing and not reduce it into our limited scientific understanding.

“The Bible-versus-science debate has, most regrettably, sidetracked readers of Gen. 1. Instead of reading the chapter as a triumphant affirmation of the power and wisdom of God and the wonder of his creation, we have been too often bogged down in attempting to squeeze Scripture into the mold of the latest scientific hypothesis or distorting scientific facts to fit a particular interpretation. When allowed to speak for itself, Gen. 1 looks beyond such minutiae. Its proclamation of the God of grace and power who undergirds the world and gives it purpose justifies the scientific approach to nature. Gen. 1, by further affirming the unique status of man, his place in the divine program, and God's care for him, gives a hope to mankind that atheistic philosophies can never legitimately supply.”²⁷

1:3-5 On the first day, Yahweh brought forth the light in response to the darkness in order to put the darkness in its proper place. Even though the Hebrew word simply means “light,” it is used throughout Scripture to symbolize life and blessing (Ps. 19:1-6; 27:1; 49:19; 97:11) and is often used metaphorically to describe life, salvation, righteousness; the commandments, and the presence of Yahweh (Ps. 56:14; Isa. 9:1; Prov. 6:23; Ex. 10:23; John 1:4-5; 1 John 1:5). Light is thus the antithesis of the darkness, and so the first thing that Yahweh did was fix the darkness by bringing light and separating it from the darkness. There is no mention of where the darkness came from, only that it is not good, for without the light there is only chaos. It is the light, not the darkness, that Yahweh calls good.

The act of separating the light and darkness demonstrates Yahweh's sovereignty and mastery over them and His ability to determine their place and function. The idea of separation is primarily with the light and darkness, the waters above and below, and the revealing of the land.

²⁷ Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 40.

This idea of separation is important to the Law with the separation of clean from unclean, holy from profane (Lev 10:10, 11:47; 20:24), and the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies (Ex. 26:33). Separation becomes almost synonymous with divine election (Lev. 20:24; Num. 8:14; Deut. 4:41; 10:8; 1 Kgs. 8:53).²⁸

Yahweh then names the light and darkness “day” and “night.” In the First Testament, to name something is to assert sovereignty over it (Gen. 2:20; 2 Kgs. 23:34; 24:17) and demonstrates the right to define roles. Though darkness is not said to be created by Yahweh nor said to be good, it is still named by Yahweh.²⁹

John Walton makes the point that since nothing has been created here, yet Yahweh names the day and night, which brings about the first evening and morning, what Yahweh has created here is time.³⁰ This is the function that Yahweh has assigned to the light and darkness.

1:6-8 On the second day, Yahweh separated the waters above from the waters below, creating an expanse between them. It is not the waters above that are named “sky” but rather the expanse. Thus the waters above may be the clouds that contain the rains. John Walton makes the point that since there has been no creation of the waters, then the separation of the waters above is the creation of weather; this is their function.³¹

In the Scriptures the clouds come from the ends of the earth (Ps. 135:7), and in the ancient Near Eastern way of thinking, the ends of the earth were where the gates of heaven were. In the poetic literature, this expanse is described as a metal or glass dome that has been hammered out over the earth (Ex. 39:3; Job. 37:18; Dan. 12:3; Ezek. 1:22; 6:11; Isa. 42:5). It may be seen as a solid entity because in the ancient Near East and in the Bible, it is upon the sky that the gods and, more importantly, Yahweh had built their temple and throne (Ps. 24; 29:3, 10; Isa. 40:22). The sky was also seen as a metaphysical barrier between the material and spiritual realms.

It is not clear how the First Testament sees the nature of this expanse. And since the word is most often used in the poetic text, it may be less scientific and more figurative. What is clear is that Gen. 1 is not interested in defining the nature of the expanse but in asserting the power of Yahweh over the waters. The separation of the heavens and the earth is a common theme in the ancient Near East, but the control of the waters is peculiar to Genesis and the *Enuma Elish*. However, whereas in the *Enuma Elish* the separation of the waters is the separation of the dead body of the defeated Tiamat goddess of chaos, here it is merely water, and Yahweh did not have to battle an opponent to gain mastery. The sea had already been subdued with ease in Gen. 1:2b.

Notice that Yahweh did not call the second day good. This is because there was no land yet, so one could not say that the environment of creation for humanity was good without a land to dwell in. Light was good because it removed the darkness so that humanity could be in the light of Yahweh (1 John 1:5-7). But nothing but water below and above is not good, for it was not functional for humanity.

1:9-10 On the third day Yahweh separated the waters below to reveal the land. He did this by driving back the waters, which are symbolic of chaos, in order to reveal a land where there is life and blessing. It is Yahweh’s power that limited the waters to certain areas (Ps. 104:6-9; Job.

²⁸ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 18.

²⁹ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 19.

³⁰ See John H. Walton. *Genesis*, p. 79.

³¹ See John H. Walton. *Genesis*, p. 112.

38:8-11; Jer. 5:22). Yahweh's naming of the waters below—"sea"—continues to show His mastery over the chaotic waters. Though the sea is neutral here, it is a foreshadowing of when Yahweh drives back the chaos at the Red Sea (Ex. 14-15; Ps. 77:13-20; Isa. 51:9-10) by separating the waters to reveal the dry land. Just as Yahweh separated the waters at creation to provide land for humanity to live on, so in the exodus He would provide dry land in order for His people to be redeemed.

This day is unique in the fact that Yahweh speaks twice on this day, producing land and vegetation. From a literary standpoint this creates parallelism with day 6, on which Yahweh also speaks twice. This day is also emphasized by the fact that the pronouncing of the "it was good" was delayed from the second day to this day. The fact that the land is revealed on day 3, the number three being symbolic of life and redemption in the Scriptures, also points to its significance.

The revealing of the land is the first most important act in the creation week (not in order of importance but of chronology and function, which will be discussed on the sixth and seventh days). Land is a dominant feature throughout Scripture, for it was out of the earth that humanity was created (Gen. 2:7); humanity was placed in the garden/land in order to dwell with Yahweh (Gen. 2:15); and humanity was given dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28). It is the land of Canaan that will be promised to Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3) in the most important covenant (Gen. 15) in the First Testament. Promised land is the focus of Israel's exodus out of Egypt and their entrance into and conquest of that Promised land where Yahweh will give them rest. It is also the land and its blessings that Israel will be removed from when they rebel against Yahweh and His covenant throughout the First Testament. It is the land that becomes the prototype for the coming of the kingdom of Yahweh down to earth in Revelation that began in the garden in Genesis. The idea of the land and blessings of Yahweh for humanity permeates every story in the Scriptures.

The fact that it is Yahweh who brought forth the land, named it, and drove back the waters of chaos so that there could be life and blessing demonstrates that He alone is sovereign over the land and therefore has the right to place or remove whomever He wills from the land and its life. This becomes the basis for Yahweh's right to remove from the land the Canaanites as judgment for their sins, to place Israel in the land as His chosen people, then to remove them for their sins, and then to redeem them back to the land.

1:11-13 Yahweh then provided plants, vegetables, and fruit for humanity to enjoy. It is from the land that all plants grow, which will be used as symbols for life and blessing throughout the Scriptures. Yahweh created different types of plants and gave them the ability to reproduce: "seed bearing, fruit bearing." The different species of plants and animals points to the creativity of Yahweh.

1:14-19 On the fourth day Yahweh created the lights of the sky. Other than the creation of humans, the creation of the sun, moon, and stars are discussed at a far greater length than any of the acts of Yahweh. This is due to the fact that in the ancient Near East the sun and moon were seen as the most prominent and powerful gods of creation. Here, the narrator takes the time to strip the sun, moon, and stars of any godlike quality. First, unlike the Hittite gods, they are not from eternity. Second, they are not given their usual Hebrew names, which might identify them with Shamash the sun god or Yarih the moon god. Instead, they are merely called the greater and lesser lights. This is the only day on which Yahweh did not end by naming what He has created. Third, they were given the role of providing light and governing the day and night as surrogates

of Yahweh. This is a very low and insignificant function in ancient Near Eastern thought compared to how they were normally seen. Fourth, the stars that are seen as divine beings, worshiped, and thought to control the destiny of humanity (Num. 24:17; Deut. 4:19; 1 Kgs. 22:19-22; Job 1; 38:7, 33; Ps. 82; Isa. 6; 24:21; 40:26; Dan. 7:10; Rev. 4; Enoch 14:22-23) are mentioned as almost an afterthought. The notion that the stars *bring about* the seasons of the year is replaced by the notion that they are merely “signs” or markers for the seasons.³²

Here, Yahweh is their creator, and He is the one who assigned them their function. The luminaries were given three functions: to separate the day from the night, to be signs for the seasons and days and years, and to serve as a light upon the earth. It must be seen that the first three days of alternating light was controlled by Yahweh, and He then gave the governing of the light and darkness over to the sun and moon. There is a chiasmic parallel³³ that emphasizes their role (the center, D, D’ points to the focal point of the fourth day) as governors of the day and night and not divine beings.³⁴

God made two lights...

A to divide the day from the night (14a)

B for signs, for fixed times, for days and years (14b)

C to give light on the earth (15)

D to rule the day (16a)

D’ to rule the night (16b)

C’ to give light on the earth (17)

B’ To rule the day and the night (18a)

A’ to divide the light from the darkness (18b)

Gen. 1:14 should be understood as “in the expanse of the sky” (NET, NIV) not “in the heavens” (NASB, KJV). The description is a pre-scientific view of the world and is a phenomenal (a philosophy known or derived through the senses rather than through the mind) description, describing what *appears* to be the case. The sun and the moon are not, scientifically, actually in the sky (below the clouds), but they appear that way from the viewpoint of a person standing on the earth. Even today we use similar phenomenological expressions, such as “the sun is rising” or “the stars in the sky.”³⁵

The Hebrew word for the sun used here is always used in the Torah to designate the sanctuary lamp used in the tabernacle. Only two other passages use it of the heavenly lights (Ezek. 32:8; Ps. 74:16). This points to the fact that Yahweh is creating a sanctuary on earth for Himself, wherein He might dwell with humanity, which will be discussed in Genesis 2.

³² See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 21.

³³ A chiasmic parallel is where a set of events (each event marked by letters A-Z) are paralleled by a set of latter events (each event marked by letters A’-Z’), yet are antithetical to the top half of the structure. These two parallels pivot on a singular event (marked by an X), which sets it off as a pivotal event that becomes the narrator’s focal point in the structure.

³⁴ See Umberto Cassuto. *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, pp. 1:42-43

³⁵ See Allen Ross. *Creation and Blessing*, pp. 109-10, and Bruce Waltke. *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 62.

1:20-23 The fifth day was the first day on which Yahweh created life with intelligence. The birds of the air and fish of the sea will serve as a testimony to Yahweh's creativity and variety. It will provide beauty, companionship, and food for humanity.

The term "the great sea creatures" comes from the Hebrew word *tanninim*, which can mean snake (Ex. 7:9), crocodile (Ezek. 29:3), or other powerful animals (Jer. 51:34). In the pagan accounts, the great sea monster is a god or monster that has to be defeated by the high god in order to demonstrate his right to rule over creation. In Hebrew poetry, it is used to describe Yahweh's victory over his foes and chaos (Isa. 27:1; 51:9; Ps. 74:13; Job 7:12). However, here the sea monster is transformed into a frolicking sea creature, which is included among the other created beings in order to make the point that it is just another one of Yahweh's creations. There is no sea monster or rivals that have to be defeated in order for Yahweh to become sovereign and to create.

The phrase "across the expanse of the sky" (NET) in the Hebrew says "in front of [literally, 'on the face of'] the firmament of the sky." Here the birds of the air are seen as moving through the "waters of the sky" in parallel to the fish in the "waters of the earth."

1:24-25 On the sixth day Yahweh created animals for the land. Not only would animals serve the same purpose as the birds and fish, as mentioned on day 5, but they would also later be separated into clean and unclean categories. These terms will become symbolic of the wicked and the righteous and serve as an illustration that these two need to be separate, like light and dark (1 Jn. 5:1) or the sheep and the goats (Matt. 25:31-33). The animals are not blessed most likely because the blessing on humanity covers everything that was created on day 6.

1:26-31 The creation of humanity is the second most important act in the creation week, but not in order of importance as mentioned above, for the creation of humanity is the whole point of the creation week. This importance is emphasized by the facts that four divine speeches are given, which is twice as many as any other day (Gen. 1:24, 26, 28, 29), that there is more space devoted to the creation of humanity, the formula "it was so" is replaced by a threefold blessing (Gen. 1:26-28), and the use of other literary devices that are unique to this creative act, which will be discussed below. Also the fact that Yahweh speaks twice on sixth day ties humanity to the land on the third day, on which Yahweh also spoke twice. This connection between the land and humanity will be developed in more detail in Genesis 2.

The personal phrase "let us" has replaced the impersonal "let there be," showing a more divine intent and personal nature with the creation of humanity. The use of the plural "let us" is universally accepted that this does not refer to the trinity, for there is nothing in the text nor in all the First Testament that points to this interpretation. Early church fathers took this view because they allegorized everything in Scripture, but just because the early church fathers and philosophers took this view does not mean that it is correct. Most likely, the "let us" refers to the divine council of Yahweh. The divine council is the angelic host and sometimes prophets that surround Yahweh in heaven, and He allows them here to enter into His decision-making process (1 Kgs. 22:19-23; Job 1:6; Ps. 82:1; Isa. 6:1-8). This plural reference can be seen in Isaiah 6:8 when Yahweh asks, "Who should we send?" He is referring to the seraphim that surround Him. This does not mean that the angels helped Him create, for the singular verb "create" makes it clear that God alone created. This should be seen as a divine announcement to the divine council as in Job 38:4, 7, which states that at creation the angels shouted for joy.

The phrase “in our image” communicates the idea of rulership. Yahweh created humanity in order to represent Him and rule over all He had created. The term “image” (*selem*) is used in the First Testament for the forms of idols (1 Sam. 6:5, 11) and reliefs (Ezk. 23:14). The divine spirit of a god was seen as indwelling the idols as a representation of his rule, thus creating a close link and unity between the god and the image. Likewise, in the ancient Near East when a king would conquer a nation and then have to move on, he would erect an image of himself in that conquered nation as a reminder that it was he who was the sovereign ruler, even though he was not present.³⁶ The kings of the ancient Near East could also be seen as the image of a god, as seen both Egyptian and Assyrian texts.

The context of Gen. 1:26-28 also defines the image of God as headship and rulership over creation. When Yahweh states that He would create humanity in His image, He states that He is creating humanity in His image so that they may rule and subdue creation (Gen. 1:26). Immediately after He completed the act of creating humanity (Gen. 1:27), He blessed humanity with kingship and commanded them to rule and subdue creation (Gen. 1:28).

The term “likeness” (*demut*) is more abstract; it further explains the meaning of “image.” It describes a similarity (“like a man,” in Ezk. 1:10) and may communicate the idea of reflecting the character of Yahweh. Thus ruling and subduing is not done in a forceful or domineering way, for this is not the character of Yahweh. Rather, humanity has been given charge over creation to maintain the order and goodness of creation that Yahweh has already established. Anything that threatens this order and goodness is to be subdued and driven out.

In Gen. 1:27 the word “man” (*adam*) should be translated as “humanity,” for in the Hebrew it is “the *adam*.” Names are never preceded by the article “the”—e.g., the David, the Abraham. Man is not portrayed as an individual until Genesis 2. Thus, the narrator is making the point that all of humanity has been made in the image of God. Gen. 1:27c states that both male and female were created in the image of God, thus there is equality between the female and the male. Gen. 1:26-28 declares that there is not just a king over creation or a nation, but every human is a king and queen over creation. Psalm 8 speaks of man as a little lower than the angels in order to rule over creation. This is unique, for none of the ancient Near Eastern texts ever speak of any other person as the image of the gods except for the king of a nation. Likewise, the animals are never said to be in God’s image nor are given the command to rule and subdue.

“First, God’s deliberation shows that he has decided to create man differently from any of the other creatures—in his image and likeness. God and man share a *likeness* that is not shared by other creatures. This apparently means that a relationship of close fellowship can exist between God and man that is unlike the relationship of God with the rest of his creation. Secondly, in Gen 1, man, the image bearer, is the object of God’s blessing. According to the account of creation in Gen 1, the chief purpose of God in creating man is to bless him.”³⁷

The emphasis on humanity as unique and the apex of all creation can be seen in the fact that in Gen. 1:27 the creation of humanity as God’s image is stated in three poetic lines, and each line in the Hebrew has seven syllables. Three is often used symbolically of redemption, and seven is used symbolically of completion. Thus, the creation of humanity as the image of God completes the redemption of creation. This is seen in the fact that the “it was good” mentioned in the

³⁶ See I. Hart. “Genesis 1:1-2:3: As a Prologue to the Book of Genesis.” *TynBul*, p. 318.)

³⁷ John H. Sailhamer. “Exegetical Notes: Genesis 1:1–2:4a.” *Trinity Journal*, p. 80.

previous days is modified here to refer to all that Yahweh had created, and “very” is added to the phrase to give greater emphasis. Thus humanity brings completion to the ordering of creation and is to maintain this order.

“Man’s dignity rests in God who assigns an inestimable worth to every person. Man’s origin is not an accident, but a profoundly intelligent act by One who has eternal value; by One who stamps His own image on each person. God creates men and moves heaven and earth to redeem them when they fall. Our origin is in creation and our destiny is for redemption. Between these points every human heartbeat has value.”³⁸

In all the pagan creation accounts of the ancient Near East, humans are created by the gods as an afterthought and then only to serve them. Their primary purpose is to provide the gods with food. In contrast, Yahweh not only created humanity to be in His image and made them rulers over His creation, but He then provides food for all humans from the soil of the land that He created. Notice that there is no specific forbidding of eating the animals. Nowhere has Yahweh forbidden the eating of meat. In fact, when He specifically states that humanity may eat the animals of creation in Gen. 9:3, this does not mean that they were not allowed before that, for Yahweh made an animal sacrifice in Gen. 3:21 and had required animal sacrifices of humanity before the flood (Gen. 4:4).

2:1-3 The seventh day closes this section by fact that the terms “heaven and earth,” “God,” and “create” are repeated in reverse order from Gen. 1:1. The emphasis is put on the seventh day by the threefold repetition of the word seventh, each time in a sentence with seven Hebrew words. The seventh day breaks the “it was good” pattern and instead shows a ceasing, blessing, and sanctifying. The Hebrew word for “rested” actually means “cease,” which means that Yahweh did not *need* to rest after His creative work; rather, He is ceasing His actions because He is finished, and what He has done is complete and good. The seventh day is the first thing to be declared holy. Only here and in Neh. 8:9, 11 is a day called holy.

This is the third most important act in the creation week, for it is here that Yahweh entered His creation. Even though Yahweh finished His creating in six days, it is still a seven-day week. The point of the seventh day is not that He did not do anything but that His work was complete, so now He can enter into His creation and dwell there. The point of the creation is not that Yahweh created a place for humanity and then hangs out in heaven for all eternity. The point was to create a place for Himself to dwell with humanity in a relationship. This is what makes Yahweh unique to all the other gods: that He is the sovereign and transcendent God of the universe yet chose to step down into creation in order to have a relationship with humanity. Thus Yahweh has created a tabernacle on earth for Himself and humanity to dwell together. This is the whole point of Genesis 2, which will be discussed below. In the ancient Near East, the people after building a temple (which is a more permanent stone version of a tabernacle) would have a six-day ceremony sanctifying the temple, and then on the seventh day they believed that the spirit of the god indwelt the temple. The tabernacle/garden in Genesis 2 becomes the whole basis for the tabernacle of Yahweh in Exodus and the Kingdom of Yahweh coming down to earth from heaven in Revelation (Rev. 21).

The significance of the seventh day as something more than just a day is highlighted by the fact that there were no evening and morning on the seventh day, which shows that the rest (Sabbath)

³⁸ R. C. Sproul. *In Search of Dignity*, p. 94.

has no end and that the garden was to be for humanity an eternal rest with Yahweh. However, sin ruined this rest, and humanity was exiled from the garden and the rest. Nonetheless, Yahweh still allows and desires for humans to participate in the Sabbath—a shadow of the true rest—throughout history (Ex. 31:17) and to look forward to the true eternal Sabbath (Heb. 4:3-11) that will be restored in Christ. The book of Hebrews demonstrates that the Sabbath was a symbol for the true eternal Sabbath, in which believers will participate for all eternity in Heaven with Yahweh, just as He has been since the creation of the world.

There are many similarities that Genesis 1 shares with the pagan accounts of creation in order to communicate to a Hebrew people who just came out of slavery in Egypt and have been steeped in the thinking of the pagans and even worshiped their gods. Yet Genesis 1 does not adopt the pagan theology; instead, it clearly proclaims that Yahweh is drastically different from all other gods and philosophies. There is a great power, order, beauty, and mystery to the universe that He has created that leaves one in awe of this God and can only lead to falling before Him in praise.

“On each day of creation another set of idols is smashed... On the first day the gods of light and darkness are dismissed; on the second day, the gods of sky and sea; on the third day, earth gods and gods of vegetation; on the fourth day, sun, moon, and star gods. The fifth and sixth days remove from the animal kingdom any associations with divinity, while at the same time all human beings, from the greatest to the least—not just Pharaohs, kings and heroes—are granted a divine likeness.”³⁹

“The story of the Hebrew Bible can be described as a struggle to destroy the heathen deities of the ancient world and to replace their worship by the belief in one God. The Bible as a whole can be regarded as a protest against paganism of every description.”⁴⁰

The silent treatment of the gods is a devastating dethronement of their authority and power over the creation. Genesis 1 offers a completely different option than all the others in the ancient Near East and today.

First, in the pagan accounts of creation, the gods are not eternal but are born into existence. The pagan myths also tell of their demise and deaths through heavenly wars or humanity’s forgetting them. They are also portrayed as being a part of creation and nature. Therefore, what happens to the one affects the other. However, Yahweh is portrayed as eternal, past and future, and His existence is not dependent upon the belief of humanity (Neh. 9:6; Job 41:11; Ps. 102:25; Heb. 11:3; Rev. 1:8). Yahweh is transcendent from His creation. What is done to the creation is not automatically what happens to Yahweh in His being. Though He is emotionally and relationally affected by creation, He is not ontologically affected in His essence.

Second, with the pagan gods there is a struggle against other gods and/or monsters in a cosmic battle in order to gain kingship, along with a struggle to subdue and separate the upper and lower waters. And in Egyptian creation accounts, the gods create through magical utterances. In contrast, Yahweh is the sovereign king over the universe, and there are no rivals. There is no battle in which Yahweh engages to gain or keep His kingship. He separates the waters and creates all things by simple, divine fiat and clear words. The things of creation are His handiwork, not His rivals (Ps. 19:1).

³⁹ Conrad Hyers. *The Meaning of Creation: Genesis and Modern Science*, pp. 44-45.

⁴⁰ Leah Bronner. *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemic against Ba'al Worship*, p. 1.

Third, the pagan gods are responsible for the creation of one or two elements but sometimes none at all. Thus, they are limited in power and control over one or two elements and are also portrayed as being limited in power over only certain regions/nations. In contrast, Yahweh is seen as creating all things in creation on every day of the creation week, making Him sovereign over all things in creation because He created all things.

Fourth, in the pagan accounts, either the gods are born out of chaos and contain chaos within themselves or the creation is seen as the result of some spiritual bloody and violent war. However, Yahweh created an orderly and good creation. Likewise, Yahweh is more than creator; He is the law-giver. He divides and separates the lights and waters, names them, and gives them functions to perform. He creates animals and humanity and commands them to be fruitful. He commands humanity to rule and subdue. He orders creation and sets up the boundaries for all things and expects all things to adhere to His directives.

Fifth, the pagan gods are portrayed as immoral, selfish beings who are just as sinful as humanity and so are not trusted nor respected by humanity, but rather are feared. In contrast, Yahweh is not only seen as a morally righteous being who is unlike any other in creation but also *is* the standard of all righteousness.

And finally, in the pagan accounts the creation of humanity is merely an afterthought, created to alleviate the work of the gods and to provide them with food. Humanity has no real purpose or value. In contrast, Yahweh created humans in His image to represent Him over creation. Humanity is the apex of creation, and everything in the creation week moves toward the creation of humanity. Everything was made for humanity: the land is to provide for them, plants are for their eating, and the animals belong to them. Humanity alone is made in the image of God. And Yahweh placed humanity in the garden, made for them, where He dwelt in order to have a loving relationship with Him.

“The myths of the Ugarit [Canaanite], like other mythologies of the Near East, pictured the gods in human forms, having similar aims and aspirations, desires and passions. The amazing aspect about these gods and about Baal himself, is that they appear to have no standard of morality governing their actions. Goodness and godliness did not go hand and hand. They lived immoral lives, hated, warred, killed often for pleasure... They certainly were not models for man to emulate, either ethically or religiously.”⁴¹

“The Biblical concept of God is remarkably different. The God of Israel is not subject to nature; He is above it and controls it. He stands alone and there is no being on His level. He does not eat or drink or make love. Neither does He marry nor has He a wife or children. Biblical Hebrew possesses no term for goddess. Another unique feature, strikingly different to the rest of the ancient world is that God of the Bible prohibits the making of images. When the Bible employs human phrases to describe God, i.e. anthropomorphism, it aims to teach that God has a personal relation to history and to human society. The only image possible of Him is the mental one of a person with whom man can have personal relations.”⁴²

⁴¹ Leah Bronner. *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemic against Ba'al Worship*, p. 45.

⁴² Leah Bronner. *The Stories of Elijah and Elisha as Polemic against Ba'al Worship*, p. 136

B. The Creation of Man and Woman (2:4-25)

This begins the first *toledot* of Genesis (Gen. 2:4-4:26, which is I:B-D in the outline). The *toledot* here “must describe what is generated by the heavens and earth, not the process by which they themselves are generated.”⁴³ This *toledot* covers the creation of humanity and Yahweh’s placing them in the garden, the fall of humanity, and the sin that permeates the first family. This is the *toledot* of what humanity was to be and what they became due to sin. The next three acts in this *toledot* (Gen. 2, 3, and 4) begin with a narrative story (Gen. 2:4-22a; 3:1-13; 4:1-22) and conclude with a poem (Gen. 2:22b-23; 3:14-19; 4:23-24), followed by a short epilogue (Gen. 2:24-25; 3:20-24; 4:25-26).

In this section (Gen. 2:4-5), everything comes together—the dwelling of Yahweh and humanity in the land and the true significance of Genesis 1. Whereas Genesis 1 focused on Yahweh as a sovereign God who created all things and brought order and life to creation, Genesis 2 will focus on Yahweh as a relational God who created a garden of life so that He could dwell with humanity in an intimate relationship. In Genesis 1 Yahweh made humanity rulers, and in Genesis 2 Yahweh made humanity priests.

Genesis 1 and 2 are parallel stories, or *synoptic*. Whereas Genesis 1 covered all of what Yahweh created in the creation week, Genesis 2 will zoom in and retell the creation of humanity on day 6 in a more detailed way. The fact that there are two creation accounts (Gen. 1 and 2), with such differences between Genesis 1 and 2, shows that the Hebrews had no problem with letting these two differing accounts stand side by side in the Torah.

2:4 In the pagan accounts, the heavens and earth are seen as gods who bring forth other gods. Here, however, the heavens and earth are merely matter created by Yahweh to bring forth provisions for the humans created by Yahweh. This heading is a link back to the previous section and serves as the title to Gen. 2:5-4:26. Here, the words “heavens” and “earth” are mentioned twice but in reverse order. This creates a chiasmic structure that emphasizes Yahweh as the creator of the heavens and earth (C, C’).

A The heavens

 B and earth

 C when they were created

 C’ on the day Yahweh made

 B’ earth and

A’ heavens

The narrator introduces a second name for God: *Yahweh*.⁴⁴ Even though the narrator uses the name Yahweh here, this name is not officially given by God Himself until Ex. 3:14. The insertion of the name Yahweh is the narrator’s way of connecting the God of Moses, the Exodus, and the Mosaic Covenant to the God of creation and the covenants that God will make with humanity throughout Genesis. The narrator establishes the sovereignty and consistency of God by inserting the name *Yahweh* with God’s other names in the book of Genesis.

⁴³ John Skinner. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, p. 41.

⁴⁴ See *Meaning of Yahweh* at www.knowingthebible.net

Here, both *Elohim* and *Yahweh* are used together. The term *Elohim* refers to Him as the sovereign creator of the universe, while *Yahweh* refers to Him as one who enters covenant relationships with humanity and directs their lives throughout history. By introducing the name *Yahweh* in Genesis 2, the narrator shows that God’s involvement in these events is far more relational and covenantal with the creation of humanity than the previous events of Genesis 1. The title “Yahweh God” appears 20 times in Gen. 2-3, one other time in the Torah in Ex. 9:30, and 16 times in the rest of the First Testament. *Yahweh* is the sovereign creator and king as well as the covenant God of Israel (Ex. 9:30; 2 Sam. 7:25; Ps. 72:18; 84:12).

2:5-6 The first term, “shrub” (*siakh*), refers to the small, wild, bushy plants that grew on the border of the fertile crescent (Gen. 21:15; Job 30:4, 7). The second term, “plant” (*‘esev*), refers to the cultivated grains that came through humanity’s efforts in working the ground (Gen. 1:29, 30; 3:18). It is a way of saying, “back before anything was growing.” This is not a contradiction of Genesis 1, which states that vegetation came before humans. The idea is that wild plants had not yet come because the fall had not happened and that cultivated plants did not yet exist because there were no humans to grow them. These were two things that came about after humanity came into existence. There are two types of land or field—the open, uncultivated plain or field of the desert and the dusty land where agriculture is possible.⁴⁵ Cassuto as well as others argue that the creation of Genesis 1 is presupposed and that this is a description of the land before humanity was created in order to work and till the land.

The reference to *no rain* in connection to the cultivation of the ground simply refers to a pre-human state of creation. This is the only time that Scripture mentions there being no rain. It does not mean that the flood during Noah’s time was the first time it rained (Gen. 7). Once humanity was created and they begin to cultivate the ground, the rain could have come. Fresh water, as in a spring, only appears here as coming from the ground, not from the sky as Job 36:27 uses the word. The abundance of water in an arid land emphasizes the absence of humanity to make things grow. The point is that there was no rain to make the desert bloom, and there was no human to work the agricultural land. This is made clear by the creation of humanity in the next verse. Here is part of what it means to be the image of God.

2:7 *Yahweh*’s involvement in creation is seen in the Hebrew word *yasar* in Gen. 2:7, which is normally used of a potter forming clay into a pot (Jer. 18:2). Here, it is used of *Yahweh*’s forming the clay of the earth into a man with His own hands. Likewise, the Hebrew word *banah* in Gen. 2:18 means “to build or construct” and is used of *Yahweh* creating the woman. *Yahweh* is intimately involved, using intent, design, and His own hands in the creation of humanity.

The word for “man” is *adam*, and the word for “soil” is *adama*. There is an intentional play on words here that shows the direct connection that humanity has with the land. The *adam* is formed from the *adama* (Job 10:9; Isa. 29:16; Ps. 90:3; 104:29, etc.) and is placed in the *adama* to rule and subdue it. *Adam* is called to cultivate the *adama* (Gen. 2:5, 15), and when *adam* dies, he will return to the *adama* (Gen. 3:19). Humans are linked directly to the land that they will be called to take care of and will be dependent on for blessing. As seen in Genesis 1, wherein *Yahweh* is creator of both the land and humanity and forms one out of the other, He has every right to place humans in the land, and He will have every right to take them out of the land. This becomes the justification for everything that *Yahweh* does with humanity and the earth from this point on.

⁴⁵ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 58.

The breath of life is different from the spirit of God, but they occur sometimes in parallel (Job 27:3; Isa. 42:5), which suggests they can be used synonymously. To have breath is to be human (Josh. 11:11; Isa. 2:22), though it can be used metaphorically of Yahweh (2 Sam. 22:16). However, it is not the breath that distinguishes humanity from animals, for animals are described in the same way. It is humanity as the image of God that distinguishes them from animals.

2:8-9 The word “garden or orchard” means “to be enclosed, fenced off, protected.” The garden denotes an enclosed, protected area with flourishing trees and plants. The word Eden could be derived from the Akkadian word *edinu*, which means a plain, but this etymology is difficult. It is better to associate it with its homonym, “pleasure, delight” (2 Sam. 1:24; Jer. 521:34; Ps. 36:9). Whenever Eden is mentioned, it is described as a well-watered oasis with large trees (Isa. 51:3; Ezek. 31:9, 16, 18; 36:35).⁴⁶ Notice that the garden itself is not called Eden but that it was placed in the eastern part of the *region* called Eden. The garden being located in the “east” is significant because the sun, which represents light and life, rises in the east, as opposed to the west, which represents death. An example of this ancient Near Eastern thinking can be found in Egypt, where the gods of life are on the east bank of the Nile and the gods of death are on its west bank.

Thus, the garden with its fence served as a tabernacle -garden, where Yahweh and humans could have fellowship. The term “walking” used of Yahweh’s presence in Gen. 3:8 is used of Yahweh’s presence in the tabernacle (Lev. 26:12; Deut. 23:14; 2 Sam. 7:6-7). The Holy of Holies in the tabernacle will have the trees of the garden, and life is also protected by cherubim (Gen. 3:24; Ex. 26:1; 2 Chr. 3:7) so that sin and death are excluded (Gen. 3:23; Rev. 21:8). This garden paradise finds its fulfillment in Rev. 20-21.

The narrator makes the point that every tree, pleasing to look at and good for eating were in the garden for humanity to enjoy. The point is that nothing is lacking; all that humanity would need or want was there. This will continue to be emphasized with the mention of the rivers in the following verses. The narrator also mentions the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which become more prominent as the story continues. The tree of life is seen as symbolic of the life of Yahweh that is provided to them in the garden (Ps. 1:3; Jer. 17:8) and seems to have truly provided some kind of immortality (Gen. 3:22). Since eating of the tree of life would have led to immortality, we can say that eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil would lead to wisdom (Gen. 3:22). The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was provided to humanity as an alternative means to life and wisdom without Yahweh, which will be discussed below.

2:10-14 The narrator describes a river that flows from Eden and into the garden. In the garden, the river divides into four rivers. No one has any idea what or where the first two rivers are. It is possible that they do not exist anymore. Satellite images over the Arabian desert show that there used to be a large river that has been dried up for a long time. The second two are the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, which flow along the north of the ancient Near East and into the Arabian Sea. The garden is thus portrayed as the source of water and life. These rivers bring fertility and blessing to the lands surrounding the garden. The regions of Havilah and Cush are unknown. Though Cush typically refers to Ethiopia, here it is clear that it was located in Mesopotamia. The gold and gemstones show that it is a place of great beauty and abundance. The language of the

⁴⁶ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 61.

narrator, who lived long after Adam and Eve, tells the story as if the garden still existed during his day.

2:15 The word for “placed” has overtones of “rest,” meaning humanity was to find rest in the garden in the same way that Yahweh rested on the seventh day. As seen in Gen. 1:26-28, Adam and Eve were placed in the garden in order maintain the garden. The description of the garden in the previous verses means that humanity was to maintain the order and beauty of the garden that Yahweh had already established so that it would continue to be good and pleasing to Yahweh. The Hebrew word for “to serve, till” is used of cultivating the soil (Gen. 2:5; 3:23; 4:2, 12, etc.). The word is commonly used in the religious sense of serving God (Deut. 4:19) and the priests serving in the tabernacle (Num. 3:7-8; 4:23-24, 26, etc.). To “guard, keep” can mean guard (Gen. 4:9; 30:31) but is used more commonly of religious commands and duties (Gen. 17:9; Lev. 18:5) and the guarding of the tabernacle (Num. 1:53; 3:7-8). These are the root words for worship used throughout Scripture. Never does Scripture use the word *worship* for singing songs. This is called *praise*. Worship, as portrayed in the Bible, is dedicating one’s life to working in the garden/creation/kingdom of Yahweh in order to do His will (Rom. 12:1). Praise is what you do when you have already worshiped Yahweh throughout the week and seen Him at work in your life.

Because the origin of rivers begins in the mountains, the Garden of Eden can be seen as being on the top of a mountain. In the pagan accounts of creation, the first thing that appears out of the chaotic waters is a cosmic mountain where the gods live, above and separated from the humans. In the Biblical account, the cosmic mountain (land) is revealed by the separating of the subdued waters. Yahweh is specifically painting the picture that He had placed the Garden of Eden on His mountain so that humans could dwell with Him in an intimate relationship in contrast the pagan accounts.

Genesis 1-2 has clearly established that the focus is on the fact that Yahweh had created a tabernacle on earth so that He could dwell with humanity. Genesis 1 made the point that humanity was to rule over the garden and creation, maintaining its order and goodness. Now Genesis 2 has made the point that humanity was to be priests serving in the garden/tabernacle of Yahweh. The purpose of a priest is to mediate between Yahweh and creation. This means they link Yahweh and creation together in a covenantal relationship.

Furthermore, it is clear that the garden was a limited space on earth, for it was a fenced-in garden (Gen. 2:8), and Adam and Eve when they sinned were removed from the garden (Gen. 3:23-24). Likewise, the point seems to be that without humanity, the land would not be a garden—if humanity does not make it so (Gen. 2:5)—thus what is outside the garden is not as plentiful. It is also clear that to be outside the garden is not good (Gen. 3:23-24), yet if Adam and Eve are immortal, eating from the Tree of Life (Gen. 3:22), and are to be fruitful and multiply, then eventually they will outgrow the garden. Thus one can interpret the command to work and till the garden as a command to expand the garden. And since the garden is the tabernacle /kingdom of Yahweh on earth, then humanity’s purpose is to expand that tabernacle /kingdom across creation so that everything with be a garden of Yahweh.

Thus heaven and earth are in some way the same thing, with humanity taken from the earth and made in the image of God as the link between the two. Their purpose was to expand the kingdom of Yahweh over all creation, ordering it and creating life as they worked and tilled the land and as they served in and guarded the tabernacle from disorder. This is incredible, for although

Yahweh has clearly shown that He did not need humanity to create an orderly and good creation, He has chosen to invite humanity into a relationship with Him and has given them the power and the privilege in joining him in ruling and subduing the creation. In the same way that parents do not need their children's help creating and ordering their lives, they take great joy in their children joining them in this task because we are relational beings just like our Father in heaven.

2:16-17 Yahweh gave every tree in the garden to humanity to eat except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The title “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” is synonymous with wisdom. There was nothing wrong with the tree, and it was not evil in itself, for Yahweh had declared everything good in His creation (Gen. 1:24-25, 31). In fact, Yahweh urges humans to pursue wisdom (1 Kgs. 3:1-15; Prov. 9:10; 111:10; James 1:5), and when Adam and Eve ate from the tree, Yahweh said that they had become like Him, knowing good and evil (Gen. 3:22).

The tree represents the wisdom to discern the effects of good and evil. Only Yahweh knows everything and transcends time and space, therefore only He can truly know good and evil. Thus the tree of the knowledge of good and evil represents what belongs only to Yahweh; to desire it is to desire what belongs only to Yahweh. Humans, by contrast, must be dependent upon a revelation from Yahweh as to what is good or evil (Prov. 30:1-6).⁴⁷

Yahweh forbid the eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because He had to offer a choice in order to truly allow for free will, which provides humans with the ability to truly love Yahweh (or not). Without choice humans would love and obey Yahweh because they had been programmed to do so. Since he has the ability to disobey Yahweh, then when he chooses to obey, despite the alternative, this shows he loves Yahweh out of his own desire and ability. Thus, because Yahweh desires to have a genuine relationship with humans, He chooses to take the risk of sin entering His creation in order to have that relationship.

Thus the tree of the knowledge of good and evil belongs exclusively to Yahweh and confronts Adam and Eve with the law of Yahweh. Up to this point Yahweh was the one who was defining good and evil. With the tree in their midst, humanity now had the choice of whether they would trust Yahweh's definition of good and evil or chose autonomy and define good and evil for themselves. This is the true heart and definition of sin: when humans decide that their definition of truth or right and wrong is superior to Yahweh's and choose to become autonomous and follow their own heart. The sin was in the act of violating Yahweh's command and choosing to obtain the wisdom through their own initiative outside the will of Yahweh rather than obtaining wisdom from Yahweh in a dependent relationship with Him. The test was whether they would achieve this wisdom under Yahweh's teaching or by their own autonomous means.

The warning against eating of the tree was that they would die. The Hebrew literally says, “dying you will die.” This construction emphasizes the certainty of the death if they disobey. Though the death mentioned here includes physical death, the emphasis is on their spiritual death, which is a separation from Yahweh relationally. The basic idea of death in the Scriptures has more to do with separation rather than ceasing to be or annihilation.

2:18-20 This is the first time that Yahweh states that something is not good with His creation. Before sin came into the world, Yahweh saw that Adam was alone and said that it was not good. In response to this He created a helper for Adam. The word “helper” is not a demeaning term, for

⁴⁷ See Bruce K. Waltke. *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 86.

it is also used of Yahweh as humanity's helper in Psalm 10:14; 54:4 (Ex. 18:4; Deut. 33:7; 1 Sam. 7:12). Being alone is a negative concept in the Scriptures; a healthy life is found in the community (Ecc. 4:9-12; Jer. 16:1-9), so the word "companion" better communicates the idea the narrator intended. Likewise, the word "suitable" means "equal and adequate."

Yahweh waited until Adam was prepared to appreciate the gift of woman. If one does not find their contentment in Yahweh while they are alone, they will not find their contentment when they are joined with another. Yahweh brought before Adam all the animals that He had named so that Adam could name them. Naming the animals shows Adam's sovereignty over them and his right to rule and subdue (Gen. 1:26-28; Num. 32:38; 2 Kg. 23:34; 24:17; 2 Chr. 36:4; Dan. 1:6-7). It is interesting that this is something that Adam did without Eve. Some have stated that this shows that Adam has a headship in a way that Eve does not. The other reason the animals were brought before Adam is that it shapes his conception of reality, and shows him that he is alone and needs a companion like himself, just like each of the animals have. Adam needs a mate in order to fulfill the command to be fruitful and multiply.

2:21-25 To create woman, Yahweh put Adam into a deep sleep. Often, divinely induced sleep in the Scriptures is associated with visions from Yahweh (Gen. 15:12; 1 Sam. 26:12; Job 4:13; Isa. 29:10). This could be a vision of the significance of Eve being taken from Adam, therefore being connected to him in an intimate way rather than a literal surgery, where Yahweh pulled a rib out of Adam. Adam and Eve are portrayed as equals by the fact that a bone was taken from Adam's side and not his heel or head suggests that Eve is to stand alongside him as his counterpart. Notice that she is not created from the dirt like Adam was; rather, she was taken from him. This suggests that though they were complete in themselves as image-bearers, they find an even greater completion in their union. This is seen in Adam's praise of woman and in the fact that he named her *woman*, which mirrors his own name. Yahweh named man in his relationship to the ground, but Adam named woman in relation to himself.⁴⁸

Though all scholars see Adam and Eve as equals, there are some who see the headship of Adam being emphasized here as well. The fact that Adam is created first, that he names the animals without Eve, and that he names Eve demonstrates his headship over her. This does not make him superior, nor does he have the right to rule over her. This concept of headship within equality can be found in the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is subordinate to the Son, and the Son is subordinate to the Father, yet they are all equal. However, there are others who think these arguments do not point so clearly to headship. John Walton makes the point that Adam did not name her *Eve* until after the fall. Instead, he is merely describing or categorizing her when he calls her *woman*.

However, what is clear and dominant in this passage is their compatibility and unity. The phrase "they will become one flesh" finds its meaning in the praise of Adam in the preceding verse. Just as woman came from the same bone and flesh as Adam, so in their union they become like one person again. This suggests a union, not just of body but also of mind and spirit. It is interesting that it is stated that the man will leave his parents to unite with his wife, when all throughout the Bible the emphasis is on the fact that the wife leaves her parents and joins her husband. It could be that the latter is understood, so the narrator is making the point that the husband's obligations to his wife take precedence over other priorities.

⁴⁸ Nahum Sarna. *Understanding Genesis*, p. 23.

The fact that they are naked has more to do with their psychological and emotional vulnerability, transparency, and oneness with each other than just being physically naked. Their naked condition shows that they had no reason to be ashamed in each other's presence or in Yahweh's presence because there was no sin creating a wall between them. Their relationship with each other was good and complete because their relationship with Yahweh was good and complete. This closing statement sets the reader up for what is to follow in Genesis 3.

Though there is no explicit mention of a covenant being made, it is clear that there was a covenant that Yahweh made with humanity that scholars have named the Adamic Covenant. By placing Adam and Eve in the garden He bestowed upon them the right to dwell with Him and made them king and queen of His creation as His representatives (Gen. 1:26-31; 2:16-17; Ps. 8). The only requirement that He placed upon them was to not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. This covenant was conditional in that if they violated the command of Yahweh, then the blessings of the covenant would be lost. By making this covenant with Adam and Eve and entering into such an intimate relationship with them, Yahweh bound Himself to them in a way unlike any of the other gods. In so doing, He gave humanity great worth, elevating them to a position of authority and prominence that would ultimately be fulfilled in Christ.⁴⁹ However, in their disobedience they broke the covenant and lost their position and unity with Yahweh (Hos. 6:7). From the fall onward, every other covenant that follows will be restoration of what was lost here and a portion of the foundation for the New Covenant in Christ that will restore to humanity what was lost in the Adamic Covenant.

Genesis 1-2 are foundational to the story of Yahweh's redemption because it explains what Yahweh intended for creation and humanity. If we do not understand what we were intended to be, then we will not understand what we are meant to be redeemed back to. The imagery and meaning established here will become the dominant imagery and meaning throughout the rest of the Biblical story. Yahweh established a garden where we could dwell with Him, and we were given the purpose of expanding that garden and making sure the order, goodness, and life of creation were maintained. However, we lost that through our desire for autonomy (Genesis 3).

However, Yahweh planned to restore humanity back to Himself, beginning with Abraham's calling to be a blessing to the whole world (), the promise of a land of blessing (), and the establishment of the Mosaic Law and tabernacle, which was a recreation of the idea of the garden where Yahweh would dwell with Israel (). This finds its fulfillment when Jesus comes as the embodiment of God and humanity dwelling together as both the God-man and the one who would make it possible for the Holy Spirit to indwell humanity. We are then called to expand the garden that was established in us by making disciples of all nations () and joining Him in establishing His will on earth as it is in heaven (). We thus look forward to the day that the kingdom of Yahweh in the embodiment of the heavenly tabernacle and Yahweh Himself will come down to earth once again, where we will dwell physically in heaven and earth with Yahweh in the orderly and good garden that He has re-established (). For "it is important to understand that the hope for the future does not depend on the attempt to achieve something that has never been but to restore what has been lost."⁵⁰

⁴⁹ See John F. Walvoord. "The New Covenant," *Skillfulness of Hands*, pp. 187-88.

⁵⁰ John H. Walton. *Genesis*, pp. 65-66.

C. The Temptation and Fall of Humanity (3:1-24)

Genesis 3 records the fall of humanity, which led to the fall of creation since Adam and Eve were the rulers over the creation. The Bible never actually calls this event *the fall*. The closest idea to a “fall” is found in Rom. 5:12-21. A better understanding is to refer to it as the disobedience, defection, deviation, or transgression of humanity. This chapter explains how Yahweh’s orderly and good creation became chaotic and wicked. It was not because Yahweh failed in creating the universe and humanity but because humanity failed in obeying and representing Yahweh. Genesis 4-11 display humanity’s worsening state with their constant desire for autonomy, demonstrated in sin and rebellion.

The previous and current acts of Genesis form a chiasmic parallelism, where the events of Gen. 2:5-3:5 parallel the events of Gen. 3:9-24 yet are antithetical to the top half of the structure. These two parallels pivot on the event of the sin of humanity (Gen. 3:6-8), which is the emphasis of the story. This also shows that the narrator sees Yahweh’s creation of the garden and humanity’s good relationship with it and humanity’s sin and their expulsion from the garden as one story. The main idea, therefore, is how humanity lost their relationship with Yahweh due to sin.

A Narrative (Yahweh active, humanity passive): Creation of man and his good relationship with the land (2:5-17)

B Narrative (Yahweh active, humanity passive): Man and woman’s good relationship with each other (2:18-25)

C Dialogue: The serpent tempting the woman (3:1-5)

X Narrative (humanity active, Yahweh passive): The sin of humanity (3:6-8)

C’ Dialogue: Yahweh’s uncovering of the sin (3:9-13)

B’ Narrative (Yahweh active, humanity passive) Man and woman’s spoiled relationship with each other (3:14-21)

A’ Narrative (Yahweh active, humanity passive): Punishment of humanity and their spoiled relationship with the land (3:22-24)

3:1a There is no hint in the First Testament that the serpent was seen as Satan or inspired by Satan. Many have assumed that because the serpent acts in an evil way and is able to speak that Satan must be the power behind the serpent. But this is just that, an assumption. The Bible never explains the power behind the serpent, how the serpent became evil, how it was able to talk, and so on. It is not interested in the origin of the serpent but in the conversation it had with Eve and in how she responds. Genesis makes it clear that the serpent was one of the many wild animals that Yahweh had created (Gen. 3:1), and it is judged as an animal (Gen. 3:14); therefore, it cannot be Satan. Later, the Second Testament connects the serpent with Satan (Rev. 12:9), but it is not clear whether Revelation is saying that Satan *is* the serpent in the garden or that Satan is the power *behind* the serpent, the symbol that came to represent the evil and chaos in the world.

“Unlike Christian theology, in Israel there was no inclination to embody all evil in a central figure or trace its cause to a single historical event, such as Satan’s fall. Therefore, the Israelites were quite willing to recognize the serpent as representing an evil influence without any attempt to associate it with a being who was the ultimate source or cause of evil. In fact,

it would appear that the author of Genesis is intentionally underplaying the role or identification of the serpent.”⁵¹

The Hebrew word *'arum* means “shrewd, cleaver, or crafty” and it communicates the idea of being wise, not wicked. In a negative sense, it is understood as “cunning” (Job 5:12; 15:5), and in a positive sense, as “prudent” (Prov. 12:16, 23; 13:16; 14:8, 15, 18; 22:3; 27:12). There is a word play between the words “naked” (Gen. 2:25) and “shrewd” (Gen. 3:1). Adam and Eve are seen as vulnerable and open to the serpent’s attack. At the beginning they are naked and he is shrewd; afterward, they will be covered and he will be cursed.

The serpent is portrayed as evil by the mere fact that it encourages them to go contrary to the will of Yahweh. It is clear that the serpent is an animal created by Yahweh as good (Gen. 1:25, 31) but has been corrupted in some way. How it has become corrupted or where it has gained a greater wisdom that it now offers to Eve is not explained. Genesis does not explain the origins of evil in the universe but how it entered Yahweh’s creation and humanity.

What is clear is that Adam and Eve, as the image of God, were meant to subdue the evil that had just entered the garden. Whether this meant redeeming the serpent or driving it out of creation, they had been made rulers over Yahweh’s creation in order to maintain the order and goodness of His creation. They were to guard the garden and not allow it to be infiltrated by the serpent nor to entertain its ideas.

3:1b-3 The first thing the serpent does was question whether the command of Yahweh was heard correctly or whether it was valid. The serpent made the command seem restrictive by incorrectly emphasizing that they were not allowed to eat the fruit of *any* tree when Yahweh had stated the opposite, that they were allowed to eat from *all* the trees except one. The woman responds with her own altered understanding of the command. First, she left out the word “all,” which emphasized how great the blessing was because they could eat from *all* the trees of the garden. Second, she left out the word “freely,” which communicates the idea that they could eat from the other trees anytime they wanted and as much as they wanted. Third, she changed “surely” to “lest,” which means it might or might not happen. Fourth, she added to the command that they were not allowed even to touch the tree or they would die. These seem small until you realize that they change one’s understanding of the character of Yahweh. The serpent got her to focus on what she could not have and made the restriction sound like it was more than it was; therefore, Yahweh ceased to be the God of abundant blessing that He is. She had allowed the serpent’s understanding to replace the truth of what Yahweh commanded.

“It is interesting that three times the Word of the Lord is quoted, but never appropriately: once it is questioned in a misleading way, once it is paraphrased with major changes, and once it is flatly denied.”⁵²

3:4-5 The second thing the serpent did was deny the consequences of eating from the tree (the penalty of death). Then it attacked the character of Yahweh by suggesting that He was keeping something good from the woman by raising doubts about Yahweh’s sincerity and motives. By casting doubts on Yahweh’s integrity, her disobedience seemed justified. Finally, it told her that she could do a better job of taking care of her life and achieving happiness on her own—in essence, that she could become her own god. This theme will show up over and over throughout

⁵¹ John H. Walton. “Serpent.” In *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, p. 737.

⁵² Allen P. Ross. *Creation and Blessing*, p. 132.

the Bible. The irony is that the serpent offered Eve a means to become like God, but that is what they already were as ones made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). She would become more like Yahweh if she chose to receive greater knowledge from Him. She would become less like Yahweh when she came to know sin and became separated from Yahweh.

Notice that the name *Yahweh* had been introduced in Genesis 2, when Yahweh created and placed the man and woman in the garden, but now neither the serpent nor Eve is using this relational and covenantal name of God.

“It is because ‘Yahweh Elohim’ expresses so strongly the basic OT convictions about God’s being both creator and Israel’s covenant partner that the serpent and the woman avoid the term in their discussion. The god they are talking about is malevolent, secretive, and concerned to restrict man: his character is so different from that of Yahweh Elohim that the narrative pointedly avoids the name in the dialogue of 3:1-5.”⁵³

“The timeless lesson of these verses is that victory over temptation to violate God’s good will depends on a thorough knowledge of God’s word and unwavering confidence in God’s goodness. As Israel faced temptations to depart from God’s revealed will from the pagans she encountered, this record would have provided a resource for remaining faithful, as it does for us today. Often these temptations attract because they promise superior knowledge, even divinity. Knowing God’s word is extremely important (cf. Deut. 6:5-9, 13-25; Ps. 119:9-16). Satan tempted Jesus similarly to the way he tempted Eve. However, Jesus overcame victoriously by accurately using the word of God to remain faithful to the will of God. True wisdom comes by obeying, not disobeying, God’s word.”⁵⁴

3:6-7 The woman’s first sin was not in her action of taking and eating of the tree but in her unbelief, when she did not believe what Yahweh had said (Rom. 14:23). The heart of sin is found here, in that the woman saw, in her own eyes, that the tree was good and decided she was going to eat despite what Yahweh had commanded. In the woman’s eyes, the forbidden tree had become just like all the other trees; there was no more distinction. The woman decided that Yahweh’s definition of good and evil was false, and she seized autonomy. Whereas Yahweh had previously seen His creation as good, now she has seen what Yahweh had forbidden as good.

“Sin consists of an illicit reach of unbelief, an assertion of human autonomy to know morality apart for God. The creature must live by faith in God’s word, not by a professed self-sufficiency of knowledge (Deut. 8:3; Ps. 19:7-9; Ezek. 28:6, 15-17).”⁵⁵

The major mistake that the woman made, and then the man, was that they did not turn to Yahweh to sort out the conflict of information between what He had said and what the serpent was saying. Yahweh had already proven Himself and had given them so much, yet she took the word of the new creature that had just entered the garden and not proven himself.

The fact that she immediately gives the fruit to Adam suggests that Adam was there the entire time. He was passive during the whole conversation and merely follows the lead of the woman in eating of the fruit against Yahweh’s command. The serpent probably approached the woman, not

⁵³ Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1-15*, p. 57.

⁵⁴ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Genesis*, p. 54.

⁵⁵ Bruce Waltke. *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 87.

because she was weaker and more prone to sin but that she was not with Adam when Yahweh gave Adam the command to not eat of the tree.

The tree of the knowledge of good and evil did open their eyes to a greater knowledge, as the serpent had said it would. Knowledge in Scripture is not just informational but also experiential. Knowledge is not just knowing facts about something but living out and experiencing the nature of the truth. Like the difference between taking the written drivers test and driving a car. However, they did not obtain the wisdom in the way Yahweh wanted them to, and they now had the experiential knowledge of sin in a way that Yahweh as a loving father did not want for them. As a result, they realized that they were naked, and they were filled with shame. Now they had sinful thoughts and desires, and as they stood transparent and vulnerable before each other, they were ashamed of who they were. Adam and the woman responded by trying to cover themselves with fig leaves. As a result of sin, humans are confronted with their own dark desires and also experience a fear of rejection, so they create façades to keep others from knowing their true self and their sinful desires, thereby protecting themselves from possible rejection.

3:8-13 The narrator describes Yahweh as “walking in the garden in the cool of the day.” This is literally the “wind” or “spirit” of the day and refers to the same spirit/wind of God in Gen. 1:2. This line suggests that this was a common occurrence and that Adam and Eve had face-to-face communion with Yahweh. This relational intimacy is very different from the pagan creation views of humans as flawed, distant slaves of the gods. This is also what Adam and Eve lost due to their sin; rather than turning to Yahweh who had already proven Himself as more faithful and loving than the serpent they just obeyed, they hid from Yahweh out of fear (3:8, 10). They would now see Him as the god that the serpent had described, instead of how Yahweh had revealed Himself. Despite this, we see the unique character of Yahweh in the fact that He pursues and seeks them out after they run and hide.

So, why did Yahweh, if He knows all things, ask where Adam and Eve were? Yahweh is not to be seen as ignorant of His creation when He calls out to them. Rather, Yahweh is drawing them out—wanting them to confess their sin in order to demonstrate their desire to be in a right relationship with Him. This is similar to a father who knows his son has been out drinking, and when the son returns home, the father asks, “Where have you been?” The father already knows the answer; he wants the son to respect and love him enough to tell him the truth on his own. Notice that it is Yahweh who seeks out Adam and Eve. He takes the initiative to reestablish a relationship with them.

When questioned by Yahweh, Adam and Eve immediately pass the blame and seek to justify themselves rather than confessing and seeking forgiveness. The fact that Adam views Yahweh’s gift to him (the woman) as the source of his trouble shows how far he had fallen. He basically accuses Yahweh of causing him to fall because of Yahweh’s giving him Eve. (Yahweh does not question the serpent because Adam and Eve as the rulers over the serpent should have questioned the animal that Adam named.)

It is important to understand that Adam and Eve’s sin was not a sin against their neighbor but against Yahweh. It was not a social sin, which means, for all of history, that the core problem of sin cannot be fixed by social reform and humanitarian efforts. Even if we could make people better in this way, people and societies only seem “better” when compared to others; compared to Yahweh’s righteousness they are still wretched sinners. The only solution to sin is one that comes from Yahweh, since He is the offended, and not through humanitarian efforts.

3:14-15 Yahweh pronounces His judgment on each of the three parties for their sin against Him. The poetic form of the judgment in Gen. 3:14-20 makes this part of the narrative stand out and emphasizes the importance and life-changing nature of the judgment that was pronounced by Yahweh. Only here and Gen. 4:11 does Yahweh personally use the phrase “cursed are you.” Elsewhere in Scripture, a human is the one who pronounces curses. In the Scriptures, to curse is not some kind of magical hex but is the invoking of Yahweh’s judgment on someone or of a removal of His protection. Yahweh will no longer have a direct role in one’s life, of protecting them from harm or blessing them. The fact that Yahweh caused the serpent to crawl on his belly and eat dust is a symbol of total humiliation (Ps. 72:9; Isa. 49:23; 65:25; Mic. 7:17). The only parallel to “on your belly” is Lev. 11:42, which brands these creatures as unclean. The eating of dust is figurative of judgment of enemies (Ps. 72:9; Isa. 49:23; Mic. 7:17). How literally this can be taken and how directly it applies to the serpent is not clear.

The Hebrew word translated “offspring” is a collective singular. This does not refer to one specific offspring but to all the descendants of the woman and to all the descendants of the serpent (see Gen. 16:10; 22:17; 24:60 for other examples of singular verbs used in the collective sense). It has been understood that man’s offspring will “crush” the serpent’s head and that the serpent will “strike” or “bruise” the man’s heel. However, the Hebrew uses the same word for both of these translations, which is “attack” or “bruise” in both cases (see the NET, NASB, RSV). Both of these are fatal blows. For a man to attack a serpent’s head is fatal, and for a venomous serpent to attack a man’s heel, pre-hospitals and antibiotics, is fatal as well. The form of the verb used here communicates the idea of repeated attacks from both sides in order to kill the other.⁵⁶ There is no sense of victory of one party over the other in the grammatical structure or the context. Death will continually be dealt out and spread by both humanity and the serpent because of sin. The immediate seed of the woman is Cain, and then all humanity. Because humanity chose to obey the creation, over which they were meant to rule, they are now going to be in constant conflict with creation. Later in the Scriptures, the serpent becomes a symbol of chaos, evil, and all those who resist and rebel against Yahweh (Jn. 8:44).

Gen. 3:15 has been commonly understood as the first prophecy of Jesus Christ, where Satan would strike Jesus on the cross and Jesus would defeat Satan in His resurrection. However, there is no evidence here or in the rest of Scripture to support this, nor did any Jew throughout history see messianic connections. First, it is clear that the serpent is an animal, not Satan. Second, the conflict is between the offspring of the woman and of the serpent. Even if we see Satan as the power behind the serpent, Satan does not have offspring. Additionally, it says the offspring of the serpent/Satan would strike the woman’s offspring, which means that it would be Satan’s child who struck Christ at the cross, but he does not have a child. Third, this verse declares that humanity strikes first, not the serpent. Fourth, as already mentioned, there is no sense anywhere of one strike being greater than the other or of a sense of finality to the conflict. Fifth, the context of Gen. 3:14-19 is Yahweh’s judgment on humanity and creation, not one of hope or promises. Nowhere does Yahweh give promises of restoration in the midst of judging someone. Finally, if this were meant to be seen as messianic, then why does no Second Testament writer reference this passage in talking about Christ? The only passage that gets close to this language is Rom. 16:20. But it says that Satan will be crushed under the feet of Christians, not Christ. This idea of being crushed underfoot is common ancient language found throughout the Bible (Ps. 110:1) and

⁵⁶ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 80.

is not an automatic connection to Gen. 3:15. Likewise, the context of Romans 16 is warning against false teachers and has nothing to do with Christ or His death and resurrection.

Not until the time of the early church fathers after Christ did this passage take on a messianic interpretation. The early church fathers incorrectly interpreted everything in Scriptures as allegorical. Not only has this form of interpretation been rejected by every scholar from the late medieval period, most of the early church fathers' allegorical interpretations would be seen as farfetched by the modern everyday Christians as well.

3:16 As for the woman, Yahweh stated that her pain in childbirth would be increased tremendously. The word for “pain” entails emotional as well as physical suffering (1 Pet. 3:7). Rather than new life coming easily, it would be introduced into the world through great distress.

The sentence “your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you” (NIV, NASB, RSV) is commonly understood by scholars to be that despite the woman's pain in having children, she will still desire her husband sexually; her desire for him and for having children will be a way that he can control her. However, this interpretation makes little sense, for it implies that sexual desire was not a part of the original creation and also does not fit with the husband's response of domination. The Hebrew word *tjshuqah* (“desire”) is used later in Gen. 4:7: “Sin is crouching at the door. Its *desire* is for you, but you must overcome it.” The connection is the desire to dominate. The passage should thus be translated, “you will want to control your husband, but he will dominate you.” She would no longer be satisfied with the man being the head of the family but would seek instead to dominate the relationship. The word “desire” here should be understood as a prompting to do evil. In return, instead of being the head of the family in a sacrificial, loving sense, the husband would return with a tendency to dominate her. “The woman at her worst would be a nemesis to the man, and the man at his worst would dominate the woman.”⁵⁷ Not only had sin marred humanity's relationship with Yahweh, it had created a rift between the two who should have become as one (Gen. 2:24).

3:17-19 As for the man, the consequences are tied to the fact that he listened to and obeyed his wife. Here is found the sense that he had headship but failed to exercise it in a protective way. As a result, Yahweh cursed the ground so that it would no longer freely produce life; rather, man would now have to toil just to maintain his survival, let alone gaining anything on top of that. Adam no longer had dominion over the land; rather, it would now resist him. Man would be in conflict with nature until he died and returned to dust (Job 10:9; 34:15; Ps. 103:14; Eccl. 12:7, etc.). The point is that although humanity was taken from the dust of the earth and given life in order to rule over the land, now, because he failed to rule over creation, the land will eventually rule over him by taking him back. The land no longer carries just the idea of life and blessing but also of death and the grave. The headship of Adam is also seen in the fall, for though it was Eve who sinned first, it was Adam who is held responsible for both his and her actions (Hos. 6:7; Rom. 5:14; 1 Cor. 15:22).

3:20-21 Adam names his wife *Eve*, which means “the mother of all living.” The naming of his wife and her naming of her children (Gen. 4:1) shows an acceptance of the consequences, a renewed faith in Yahweh, and a hope for the future.

Before Yahweh expels Adam and Eve from the garden, He makes garments from animal skin. There is no indication of how this was done. Earlier, the man and woman's attempt to cover their

⁵⁷ Allen P. Ross. *Creation and Blessing*, p. 147.

nakedness with leaves communicated that they were disconnected from Yahweh and each other (Gen. 3:7). By giving them more durable and long-lasting covering, Yahweh communicates that their disconnection was greater than they realized. He is also preparing them for the more hostile land in which they would be living (Gen. 3:23). The garments would also be a reminder of their sin. At the same time, there is a positive note in that Yahweh has made provision for them.

Though many scholars do not see here any connection to animal sacrifice and blood atonement because it is not specifically mentioned, it is hard to completely rule it out. As Moses writes this to the Hebrews who had just come out of Egypt and been given the Law, the sacrificial system, and the tabernacle, it would probably be hard not to see animal sacrifice in this act—especially when the only way you can get skins is through the death of an animal and the fact that Yahweh is doing it. Similarly, Abel and Cain, portrayed later, already have a concept of animal and grain sacrifice in Gen. 4, even though it is not explained where they learned this. Through the slaughter of the animal, Yahweh not only provided forgiveness through the blood, He also provided acceptance and safety through the animal's skins. Though they would not have fully grasped its significance, this taught them that the only way back to Yahweh was through a blood sacrifice. This concept of atonement through blood sacrifice will become the major focus in the rest of the Torah after Genesis.

3:22-24 Yahweh acknowledges that Adam and Eve had become more like Him in that they had gained knowledge. Then Yahweh states that they must be expelled from the garden so that they cannot eat of the tree of life and live forever. The implication is that humanity was mortal but that by living in the garden they would have access to the tree of life and be able to live forever. Now, however, Yahweh would enforce the penalty of death for their eating of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, the penalty of which He had warned them (Gen. 2:17), by removing them from the tree of life.

The final judgment was that Adam and Eve were removed from the garden, the symbol of their intimate relationship with Yahweh. The real consequence of which the serpent never spoke was that they were now cut off from the full presence, life, and light of Yahweh. Their sense of significance, acceptance, and safety has been lost. Ironically, the fact that humans will die is both a judgment and a hope for humanity, who will not have to live in the state of sin forever—death will be a release. With the death of the corrupted spirit and body comes the potential for rebirth, which will be developed later in the Bible.

“God’s response to human grasping is exile from paradise, which is at the same time a merciful act that prevents His deluded creatures from obtaining eternal life in sin and thus joining the ranks of the devils, condemned forever. By placing the cherubim, celestial guardians, at the gate of Eden, the author makes clear that the way back to paradise is not through the heavens or the ‘sons of God’ but by the dust of the earth and the reproduction of offspring as an inheritance.”⁵⁸

Yahweh places two cherubim in front of the entrance of the garden to guard and prevent humanity’s access. Cherubim are composite (of lion, ox, eagle, and man) heavenly beings whose main task is guarding the holiness of Yahweh. Images of the cherubim were later stitched into the gate of the tabernacle (Ex. 26:1, 31) and placed on the Ark of the Covenant in the tabernacle (Ex. 25:18-22); cherubim pulled the chariot of Yahweh in the temple (Ezek. 1; 10) and surround

⁵⁸ Stephen F. Noll. *Angels of Light, Powers of Darkness: Thinking Biblically about Angels, Satan and Principalities*, p. 55.

the throne of Yahweh in heaven (Rev. 4:6-8). This adds to the garden as a tabernacle imagery. The cherubim guarded the gate to the garden with flaming, whirling swords. The whirling nature of the sword makes the point that none will be able to get through. Fire is a regular symbol of the presence of Yahweh, especially in judgment (Ex. 19:18; Ps. 104:4; Dan. 7:9-10).

Adam and Eve were created in the image of God to represent Him as regents over the creation, yet in their giving into the serpent, they surrender that authority and power to him. No longer will humanity have dominion and power over the creation; rather, conflict with Yahweh, each other, and creation will ensue. As the result, the creation suffered a curse and began to deteriorate. Having been thrice blessed by Yahweh (Gen. 1:22, 28; 2:3), the creation now experienced a triple curse (Gen. 3:14, 17; 4:11). Because there is no longer a good ruler exercising dominion over the earth, creation will now exist in chaos. The Adamic Covenant has been broken because humanity has failed to obey. The rest of Scripture will be the story of how Yahweh pursued and worked out His plan to redeem humanity back to the garden and into a face-to-face relationship with Himself.

Though humanity's image of God was corrupted and marred by sin, and though they had lost their dominion over the earth, they did not lose completely the image as God. Certain biblical texts suggest that all persons still exist in the image of God, while other texts treat the image as something that needs to be restored through salvation. Gen. 9:6 and James 3:9 show that the image is still present even in humanity's fallen state. Second Testament texts seem to treat the image of God as something that is exemplified in Christ (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15) and that needs to be restored in people (Rom. 8:2; 2 Cor. 3:18). The need for renewal implies that the image was not lost but defaced or damaged in some way through the fall.

In all of the pagan accounts, the chaos in the creation is never fully dealt with by the gods, and they themselves are chaotic and create out of chaos. Yet it is the humans that they constantly enslave, torment, and punish. In the Biblical creation account, Yahweh created an orderly and good creation that was without sin, yet it was humans that sinned and plummeted creation into chaos and evil. Thus, Yahweh justly punishes humans for their sin, yet ultimately He will send His Son, Jesus Christ to die for the sins of humanity and the chaos that humans brought into His creation.

D. The Story of Cain and Civilization (4:1-26)

The major theme of Genesis 4 is the spread of sin from the family to society. This is not how sin spread literally but is developed in the narrative this way to show its effects. Through Cain's rebellion and then his establishment of a city, which later led to the development of the nations, we can see that sin was not exclusive to just one family line or a few people but affected all humanity.

There are several parallels between the story of Cain and Abel (Gen. 4:1-16) and the story of the garden and Eden (Gen. 2-3).⁵⁹ The first is chiasmic parallelism of alternating scenes of narrative and dialogue that emphasizes the sin of Cain, as seen in the previous story.

A Narrative (Cain and Abel active, Yahweh passive): Cain and Abel as a family (4:1-5)

B Dialogue: Yahweh questioning Cain's desires (4:6-7)

X Narrative and dialogue: Cain murdering his brother (4:8)

B' Dialogue: Yahweh uncovering Cain's murder (4:9-15a)

A' Narrative (Yahweh active, Cain passive): Yahweh expelling Cain from his family (4:15b-16)

The second parallel is found in that the central scene in each story is a terse description of the sin committed (Gen. 3:6-8; 4:8), which contrasts with the long dialogues before and after. The third is in the scene that follows after the sin, wherein Yahweh investigates and condemns the sin. They very similar, with the phrases "Where are you" (Gen. 3:9; 4:9), "What have you done" (Gen. 3:13; 4:10), and "You are cursed" (Gen. 3:14, 17; 4:11, 12), along with the marking of Cain (Gen. 4:15) being similar to the covering of Adam and Eve (Gen. 3:21). In the fourth parallel, both stories end with the sinners being expelled from the presence of Yahweh and going east to live (Gen. 3:24; 4:16).

The point of the parallel of the two stories is that sin is the new nature of humanity; sin is more firmly entrenched in humanity, and humanity becomes further alienated. Humanity is not getting better.

4:1-2 Following Yahweh's command to be fruitful and multiply, Eve gives birth to Cain. The meaning of Cain's name (*qayin*) is unknown. Eve gives it a poetic meaning based on a phonetic connection by saying she had "created" or "acquired" (*qaniti*) a man. The connection between these two words is totally poetic, for there is no etymological connection between them. It is very difficult to translate and understand what is meant when Eve says that she has "created a man with Yahweh's help." Some have said that she is making herself equal with Yahweh when she claims she has created. But most likely she is expressing praise that Yahweh was with her and has helped her give birth to a child, especially in light of the previous events. Abel's name *hevel* means "vapor" or "breath" and is foreboding. Though the text reads as if Cain and Abel are the first children, it does not *specifically* state this as it does with the children in later stories in Genesis.

Abel was a shepherd, an occupation that is in line with man's original purpose of having dominion over the animals (Gen. 1:28). Cain was one who toiled the land, an occupation that resulted from the fall (Gen. 3:23). This is not to say that one occupation is good and the other evil; rather, the narrator uses it as a literary device to contrast the two sons. Abel is seen as going out of his way to worship Yahweh, whereas Cain seems to only be carrying out a required duty.

⁵⁹ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1-15*, p. 99.

In both cases, the person is mentioned before the offering, which suggests that the offering is not as important as the attitude of the person.

4:3-5 Abel's sacrifice is accepted by Yahweh, but Cain's is not. How Cain and Abel recognize divine approval is not clear. It could have been through divine fire from heaven burning up the sacrifice (Lev. 9:24; Judg. 6:21; 1 Kgs. 18:38). However, Genesis is more interested in the fact of divine approval than in how it was shown. Most likely, the acceptance of Abel's sacrifice has nothing to do with the fact that it was a blood sacrifice while Cain's was not. If an animal sacrifice were necessary for this act of worship, then the narrator would have used one of the many terms that refers to an animal sacrifice. Instead, the word *minha* is used, which means "to give" and is used in Leviticus to refer to the grain offering—for gaining favor not for making a blood atonement.⁶⁰ What the text does mention is that "Abel brought some of his firstborn flock, *even the fattest of them.*" Cain merely does what is required of him as if it is a duty, while the Abel goes out of his way to please Yahweh with the first and best of what he had. The point is not what they offered but their heart desire to worship and please Yahweh.

4:6-8 As with Adam and Eve, it is Yahweh who initiates a relationship with Cain in hopes of restoring Cain to Himself (Gen. 4:6-7). Yahweh approaches Cain because He knows what Cain is planning and does not want Cain to make that mistake. These verses show that Yahweh is involved in Cain's life even if Cain chose not to follow Him. While Eve had to be talked into her sin, even Yahweh could not talk Cain out of his intended sin, which shows the true heart of Cain and the depth of corruption with which sin had infected humanity so early in its growth. The absence of Cain's response to Yahweh shows his disregard of the warning and his lack of faith in Yahweh.

The statement "sin is crouching at the door" is an allusion to the seed of the woman and the serpent (Gen. 3:15) being in conflict. The participle "crouching" is a cognate to an Akkadian term used of a type of demon—"sin is the demon at your door." Here Yahweh reminds Cain of the fatal outcome of the earlier conflict between the serpent and Eve and that he must subdue it, whereas Eve did not. Cain's self-focus and his refusal to heed Yahweh's warning before his murder of Abel shows that he views himself as a higher authority over his life than Yahweh. Cain decided that it was he who knew better and would thus take matters into his own hands.

4:9-12 Despite Cain's horrific sin, Yahweh shows His desire for a relationship in that He seeks Cain out in order to prompt a confession, just as He did with Adam and Eve. Yet Cain shows no remorse for his brother's life when he proclaims that he is not his brother's keeper. He may not be his "brother's keeper," but he is expected to look out for him and avenge him (Num. 36:12-28). Seven times the word "brother" is used in order to communicate that Cain's sin was a breach of family loyalty. Family loyalty was considered one of the most important virtues in the ancient Near East. Likewise, the image of God is a sign of Yahweh's sovereignty ("rule and subdue"), so murder is an attack against His sovereignty.

However, Yahweh is also a God of justice and would not allow Cain to go unpunished. In Gen. 4:10, the phrase "your brother's blood is crying out *to me*" shows that the victims of the world matter to Yahweh; He is aware, whether or not anyone else is. Because Cain did not value his family, his punishment consisted of his being unable to enjoy his family's company and the fruitfulness of the land; instead, he was condemned to wander from place to place seeking food.

⁶⁰ Paul B. Overland. "Abel." In *The Dictionary of the Old Testament*, p. 4.

Whereas the land would resist Adam for his sin, Cain was now completely cut off from it as a result of his sin.

“Cain is not being condemned to a Bedouin-like existence; the terminology is too extreme to describe such a life-style. Rather it seems likely that the curse on Cain reflects the expulsion from the family that was the fate in tribal societies of those who murdered close relatives... ‘To be driven away from the land’ (Gen. 4:14) is to have all relationships, particularly with the family, broken. Moreover, it is to have one’s relationship with the LORD broken...”⁶¹

“Cain had tilled the land. He had offered the fruit of the land, and given the land his brother’s blood to drink: but from the land the blood cries against him, for which the land refuses him its fruit, so he is banned from the land.”⁶²

4:13-15 Cain responds with self-pity rather than repentance. Never does he admit his guilt or express any regret for the wrong he had done. He is more afraid of physical and social exposure than of the almighty God against whom he had rebelled. Again, whereas Eve had to be persuaded by the serpent to sin, Cain would not be dissuaded by Yahweh. Adam admitted to the sin, whereas Cain denies it in a sarcastic way. Adam and Eve accepted judgment, but Cain complains against Yahweh.

Though Cain will suffer the consequences of his sin, Yahweh makes provisions for him to be protected by marking him as untouchable (Gen. 4:15). What Cain did to Abel, Yahweh prevents from happening to Cain. The reference to “seven-fold” is not to be seen as a measure but as a metaphor that communicates complete and full divine retribution (Ps. 79:12; Prov. 6:31). It is not clear what the mark is, but in some way the sign is simply his name (*qayin*), which sounds similar to *yuqqam*, “shall be punished.” However, this mark is also a constant reminder to Cain of his sin. And the protection against death can also be seen as a punishment, for a premature death would have cut short his punishment as a wanderer.

4:16-18 There are many questions that the story does not care to answer. Where is Nod? Where did Cain get his wife? Where did all the people for a city come from? It is important to not make assumptions by coming up with answers that are not given. The authors of the Bible are not interested in giving a complete historical account of events (although everything in the stories is historically accurate) rather in communicating the character of Yahweh, the nature of humanity, and Yahweh’s intervention in history to redeem humanity.

The story transitions now as the narrator moves from Cain to his descendants who are living in the city. Now the narrator shows the fruitfulness of Cain’s character and rebellion against Yahweh. This is the beginning of humanity as a civilization that is corrupt. There is an ironic word play here—“Nod” means “fugitive.” It is interesting that the narrative begins with Eve giving birth to Cain and saying, “I have created a man with Yahweh.” However, the narrative ends with Cain’s departure from Yahweh; “Cain went away from Yahweh.”

The narrative begins with Cain’s attempts to evade the effects of the curse through his own ingenuity. Cain’s building of the city is seen as a defiant act against Yahweh since he was condemned to be a wanderer. Likewise, in Cain’s naming of the city after his son, he was

⁶¹ Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1-15*, p. 108.

⁶² Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, p. 45.

honoring humanity rather than Yahweh, for in most places in the Bible, places and people are named in some way after Yahweh or His blessings.

4:19-22 The listing of the genealogy of Cain pauses on Lamech, at which the narrator expounds in order to demonstrate the character of humanity. Lamech had two wives, which made him a polygamist. The name Adah means “pretty” or “ornament,” and the name Zillah means “tinkle” as in the sweetness of a voice. Probably the narrator wanted to communicate that Lamech was not marrying for the union of the image of God but rather had succumbed to the sensuality of women.⁶³ Though the Bible never specifically forbids or condemns polygamy, it is clearly against Yahweh’s design for marriage (Gen. 1:27; 2:24), and all throughout the Bible it is shown to never produce any good results. Yahweh often shows the consequences of sin more than He specifically states that they are sins.

“[Polygamy is] the symptom of an unbalanced view of marriage, which regards it as an institution in which the wife’s ultimate *raison d’être* [reason for being] is the production of children. Where Yahweh had created the woman first and foremost for partnership, society made her in effect a means to an end, even if a noble end, and wrote its view into its marriage contracts.”⁶⁴

Jabal was the first to keep livestock. This is different from Abel, who took care of sheep for his own livelihood. Instead, Jabal owns several different kinds of animals in order to make a profit. This is the beginning of business. His brother develops stringed instruments and flutes for the sake of music. And Tubal-Cain begins to forge farm tools out of metal. The narrator points out here that unlike the pagan accounts, where technology is a gift of the gods, here it is a human achievement. Because this is described in the middle of the Lamech story, it makes the point that technology and human culture are tainted in some way by Cain’s sin. The point is not that things are sinful in themselves, but rather they were development for the sake of humanity’s glory and to overcome the curse outside a relationship with Yahweh. This is shown by the fact that Lamech uses music to brag about murder, a contrast to Seth who begins to lead people in worship of Yahweh. Technology is not evil in itself, but most of it has been developed not for the kingdom of Yahweh, and most of the time it distracts us from a relationship with Yahweh. This is the point that is being made—that humanity is corrupt, so they will use creation and creativity in corrupt ways.

4:23-24 The poetic form of Lamech’s bragging makes this part of the narrative stand out and emphasizes his pride and the true heart of humanity. In this poetic speech, many of the words end with or include “I,” “my,” or “me,” emphasizing Lamech’s cruel egotism.⁶⁵ Lamech’s reasoning was that if Cain, who murdered out of selfishness, was to be avenged seven times (Gen. 4:15), then how much more would Lamech be avenged for being unjustly wronged. Lamech misunderstood the point of Yahweh’s treatment of Cain. Yahweh was not establishing a principle of justice that looked more like vengeance; rather, He was limiting the shedding of blood. Lamech’s comment stands in contrast to the law against retaliation (Ex. 21:25), which is about justice for a crime, not about vengeance. By placing Lamech’s comments at the end of the Cain story, the narrator suggests that all his descendants are under this judgment and hints at the disaster to come.

⁶³ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 112.

⁶⁴ Derek Kidner. *Genesis*, p. 39.

⁶⁵ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 114.

4:25-26 Eve has another son and sees him as a replacement after the death of Abel. Eve gives him the name Seth (*shet*), meaning “placed” (*shat*). There is no etymological connection here; rather, the meaning is based on a play on words or a pun. In contrast to the life of most humans at this time, Seth’s life leads to people calling on the name of Yahweh. Calling on the name of Yahweh was later used of the patriarchs (Gen. 12:8; 13:4; 21:33; 26:25) and carries the idea of worship, prayer, and sacrifice. Remember that worship has more to do with a life dedicated to Yahweh as His image bearer in service to the expansion of his kingdom rather than just singing praises. The point is not that people began to use the name Yahweh (for this is not given until Ex. 3:14) but the beginning of public worship. It is important to understand that this does not mean that everyone in Seth’s line was godly and everyone in Cain’s was ungodly (though most likely there were more godly people in Seth’s line given the kind of man of God he was, thus more likely a godly father). But the *people* who began to call upon Yahweh’s name could have been people from Cain’s line as well. But by Genesis 6 and the flood, all people from all lines, including Seth’s, were so corrupt that everyone had to be wiped off the face of the earth (Gen. 6:5).

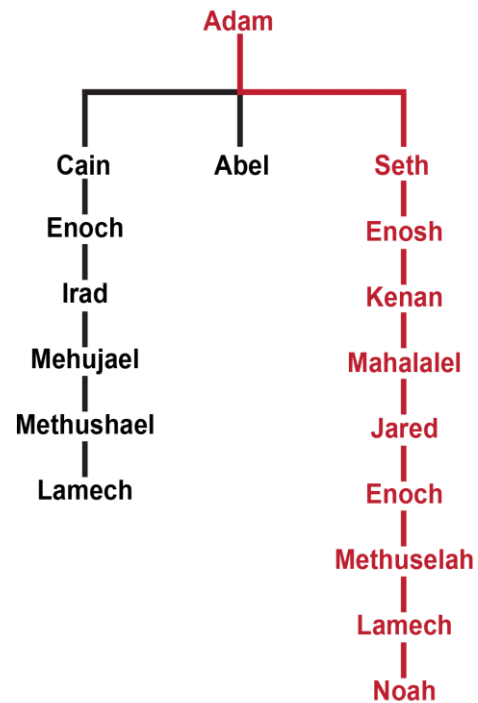
This story is about the corruption of humanity and the beginning of civilization and cities. From this point on in Scripture, the cities and nations are seen as places where humanity gathers together for their own purposes and in rebellion against Yahweh. This is epitomized at the Tower of Babel. The city is not where people are fruitful and fill the earth and expand the garden but where they are fruitful and multiply and crowd in one place for their own purposes. Ironically, although so many people are in the city, they become isolated by their technology and the need to accomplish more. This was not the intention for humanity when Yahweh said, “be fruitful and multiply.” Cain’s lineage is symbolic of human culture with great civilization and not Yahweh. Humanity uses technology and overcrowding to fill the vacuum of rejecting Yahweh.

The biblical ideal for populating the earth is a slow and balanced growth of families in a relationship with Yahweh, as seen in Seth’s line (Gen. 5) and Abraham, who remained in the countryside. The warrior society founded by Cain’s son destabilizes the ideal for familial structure and represents a threat to the society, especially for the daughters. The “city/nation” is where humanity amasses in such numbers that the idea of family and community is lost, as seen with Lot who moves toward Sodom and Gomorrah. Building great cities is more memorable than the quiet life of building godly families.

E. From Adam to Noah (5:1–6:8)

This section contains the second *toledot* in Genesis. The narrator is not concerned with Adam as much as he is with the sons of Adam, making it an account of Adam’s descendants. This genealogy makes two major points. First, that the line of humanity continues in the likeness of God shows the blessings of Yahweh on humanity. Second, the repetition of the phrase “and then he died” emphasizes the fact that humanity would certainly die as a result of sin. Though death would reign in the line of Adam, his genealogy ends with Noah, whom Yahweh would use to save humanity.

The *toledot* ends with the total corruption of all humanity, a corruption so thorough that Yahweh had to wipe them out. This continues to emphasize the negative and total effects of the sin of humanity in Genesis 3 and the inevitable pattern “and then he died.” However, the fact that this section ends with Noah finding favor in Yahweh’s sight emphasizes the grace and desire of Yahweh to redeem humanity despite their sin and deserving judgment.



The genealogical account of Genesis 5 is a linear or vertical genealogy that is meant to establish the legitimacy of the line by developing continuity over long stretches of time and to transition from one narrative to the next.

5:1-2 In these verses is a chiasmic parallelism that emphasizes the fact that Yahweh made humanity, male and female, in His likeness. This parallels Gen. 2:4 and reproduces the subject matter of Gen. 1:26-28 with some abbreviation. The point is that despite the sin of humanity, the whole genealogy of Genesis 5 illustrates the fulfillment of Yahweh’s blessing of fruitfulness.

A On the day God created

B Adam

C In the likeness of God He made him

C' Male and female He created them (He blessed them and called their name)

B' Adam

A' On the day they were created

5:3-20 After reminding the reader that humanity was made in the likeness of God (Gen. 5:1-2), the narrative makes the point that Adam fathered Seth in his likeness and image. Even though the image of God has been damaged due to sin, it has not been lost, and this is seen with Adam passing it on to Seth.

The chapter lists Adam’s descendants, and after each name it states, “and then he died.” Other than Gen. 9:28-29, this phrase is not seen connected to a genealogy anywhere else in scripture. This phrase emphasizes here the consequences of the fall on Adam’s descendants and the fact that Yahweh spoke truthfully. The main point is that despite human achievements, death reigned

from Adam on through the generations. Genesis 5 displays the reign of death in contrast to the desire of Yahweh. It also shows that though the serpent seemed to have been telling the truth when it said that Eve would not die, Genesis 5 states that humanity does die, just as Yahweh said they would. “And then he died” is not repeated in any genealogy after this point because by then everyone knows that everyone dies.

Notice that each person in the genealogy is said to have fathered other sons and daughters. This shows that the narrator is only interested in the line that takes the reader from Adam to Noah. This is not meant to be a complete genealogy nor a history of the line of Adam. It is meant to get to Noah.

5:21-24 Enoch is the seventh (completion) person in the genealogy, and his life breaks the pattern of “and then he died.” What marks Enoch as unique is that he walked with God. This is a direct connection to the phrase telling us that Yahweh walked in the garden (Gen. 3:8). The patriarchs are said to have walked with Yahweh (Gen. 17:1; 24:40; 48:15), the priest (Mal. 2:6) and all the people of Israel (Micah 6:8) were expected to walk with Yahweh, and 1 John 1:7 commands Christians to walk with God. This phrase communicates a special intimacy with Yahweh and a life of piety. The fact that Enoch is twice said to have walked with Yahweh shows that Enoch’s relationship with Yahweh was exceptional.

As a result of Enoch’s walking with Yahweh, he disappeared because Yahweh took him away. The Hebrew literally says “he was not,” which is sometimes a euphemism for death (Ps. 39:13; 103:16; Job 7:21; 8:22). However, here it stands in contrast to the repeating phrase “and then he died.” This shows that Enoch did not experience a normal death. No one has any idea what this means, but we know some things it does *not* mean. First, it does not mean that he was taken up to heaven. The Hebrew does not mean this, does not hint at this, and nowhere in the Bible is this even suggested. It is impossible for him to be taken to heaven because Jesus had not yet died for the sins of the world, an act that would make it possible for humans to get into heaven. To say he went to heaven would be to say he was perfect, or that Christ’s death was not always necessary. Second, it does not mean that he did not die. The Hebrew does not say he did not die; it says “he was not,” which is true if you have died. It is interesting that this phrase *can* be used to say someone has died; the context suggests something different, but it does not say what that difference is. This is the most mysterious passage in the Bible and has led to great speculation throughout history. All that can be known for sure is that he did not die a normal death.

5:25-27 Methuselah is the longest-living person in this genealogy, and according to the Masoretic Hebrew text (MT), he died the same year that the flood came. This poses an interesting question: did he die of natural causes in the same year of the flood *before* it came, or did he die in the flood because he was wicked? If Noah alone found favor in Yahweh’s sight 120 years (Gen. 6:3) before the flood, that would make some of the people in this genealogy, including Methuselah, wicked.

5:28-32 Though Lamech does not technically break the pattern “and then he died,” he does break the pattern in the sense that the narrator adds extra information about him and his son Noah. Noah is said to bring comfort to people from the hard labor as a result of the curse. Noah’s name is a word play with “rest, comfort.” The sound of *Noah* is similar to the sound of *comfort* (*naham*). Life was very painful for those under the curse, and Lamech saw Noah as a relief to that. And Noah would bring relief by being spared from the flood because of his righteousness.

The genealogy of Genesis 5 presents two major problems. First, all the males in the genealogy age very slowly. All were at least 65 years old when they have their first child, and most are approaching one thousand years when they die. How are these long lifespans to be explained? Second is that the three oldest textual manuscripts, the Masoretic text (MT), the Samaritan Pentateuch (SamPent), and the Greek Septuagint (LXX) disagree at many points on the ages of many of people in the genealogy.⁶⁶ The MT puts the flood at 1656 BC. Everyone died before the flood except for Methuselah who died the year of the flood. The SamPent puts the flood at 1307 BC. Everyone died before the flood except Jared, Methuselah, and Lamech, who all die in the year of the flood. The LXX puts the flood at 2242 BC. Here, Methuselah died 14 years after the flood, which does not fit the historical details of the flood story. Also in the MT, the ages are multiples of 5, with a few that add 7 or 14 years. In the SamPent, the ages are multiples of 5 with a few that add or subtract 7. In the SamPent, the ages of each generation drops steadily, whereas there are several hiccups in the MT account. Which of the chronologies is closest to the original? It appears that the LXX is secondary, but different scholars favor different accounts for very good reasons.

There are many challenges when trying to relate the genealogy to history. The ages of these men are unheard of in modern times. And the ages of the men imply that the creation of Adam was 4004 BC, a year difficult to correlate with archeological discoveries of the origins of humans and civilizations going back as early as 10,000 BC. There have been numerous attempts to recalculate the ages based on sexagesimal notations or astronomical periods.⁶⁷ All attempts to explain the numbers thus far have many problems and fail to be satisfactory. Most scholars have concluded that there are gaps in the genealogy, some names being left out, in order to have ten generations from Adam to Noah. They make the point that the Hebrew word “son” (*ben*) can mean “grandson” (Gen. 31:28, 55) or “descendant,” as in the “sons of Israel.” The division of humanity between Adam and Abraham into ten equal divisions of ten generations (Gen. 5:1-32 and 10:10-26) makes it more artistic and functionary rather than a complete numeric account.⁶⁸ For example, Ex. 6:14-25 presents four generations from Levi to Moses, but 1 Chron. 7:23-27 presents a more realistic ten generations for the same period, and Ezra 7:1-5 omits six names from the account of 1 Chron. 6. This does not make the Bible unreliable in its information; rather, each account has a different purpose.

What is interesting is that the Sumerian king list has many kings living for thousands of years, eight of which each lived to be 241,200 years old. What is clear is that the people during the narrator’s lifetime did not understand the pre-flood world any better than modern scholars do. The narrator obviously thought that people lived for a long time before the flood, as is also seen in other cultures’ genealogies, but he also knew that these unrealistic lifespans could communicate an eternal life concept that went against the point of the repetition of everyone dying. One needs to also understand that people in the ancient world were not as precise as those in the modern world. The everyday person did not have clocks or even calendars, as are so common today. They most likely did not know on what day they were born or exactly how old they were. This would make it easier to think that the pre-flood patriarchs lived a long time. The

⁶⁶ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, pp. 130-134.

⁶⁷ Sexagesimal is a system of counting with 60 as its base rather than 10. It originated with the ancient Sumerians in the third millennium BC.

⁶⁸ See Bruce K. Waltke. *Genesis: A Commentary*, pp. 105-07; and M. D. Johnson. *The Purpose of Biblical Genealogies*, pp. 77-82.

narrator shortened the numbers to make a point about humanity's mortality—that even though they lived for a long time, they still fell short of immortality and died. But the numbers are also recorded in such a way to make the point that these men were real historical figures. As discussed above, the narrator also likely skipped generations in order to have an even ten generations. The main points that the narrator is trying to make are, first, that humanity is being fruitful and multiplying as Yahweh commanded in the garden despite their sin and the curse of rebellion. Second, despite this fruitfulness, everyone dies as Yahweh said they would. The penalty for sin is death no matter how long it may take to die. Third, the narrator is not interested in recording every name but in developing a line from Adam to Noah.

“To date, then, no writer has offered an adequate explanation of these figures. If they are symbolic, it is not clear what they symbolize. If they are to be taken literally, we are left with the historical problems with which we began. The majority of commentators therefore just offer some general observations of a more theological nature. This genealogy is designed to show how the divine image in which Adam was created was passed on from generation to generation, and that divine command to be fruitful and multiply (1:28) was fulfilled. Many ancient peoples have held that that in primitive antiquity men lived much longer than at present: the Sumerians believed the pre-flood kings reigned for thousands of years, and according to the Lagash king list, babies were kept in diapers for a hundred years! (Jacobsen, *JBL* 100 [1981] 520-21). It may be that Gen. 5 is reflecting such ideas and suggesting that the history of mankind stretches back into an inconceivably distant past. Cassuto, though, sees in the ages of the patriarchs, relatively low when contrasted with the enormous reigns of Sumerian kings, another aspect of anti-Mesopotamian polemic. The Hebrew writer was intent on scaling down the alleged ages of man's earliest forebears. Though they lived a long time, none reached a thousand years, which in God's sight is but an evening gone (cf. Ps. 90:4). Gispén suggests that these figures are designed to show that though the narrative is dealing with very distant times, it is a sort of history, and that however long men lived, they were mortal.

These seem better approaches to these great ages than the attempts to find symbolic or historical truths in the precise ages of the patriarchs. Could it be that the precision of the figures conveys the notion that these patriarchs were real people, while their magnitude represents their remoteness from the author of Genesis? Even if we know that twenty centuries is really too short for the period from the creation of man to the call of Abraham, it still feels a very long time to anyone who tries to think himself back through such a period, as anyone who tries to do this for the years from the present to the time of Christ will quickly discover.”⁶⁹

These “inaccuracies” of the genealogy may bother the modern reader, but that does not make the narrator wrong or the Bible inaccurate. They did not think the same way or value the same things as the modern western reader. Nor does everyone today think and value the same things as the modern westerner. To expect everyone to think and act “our way” is cultural arrogance. These stories use literary devices and are more interested in communicating theology than in providing scientific or legal details. Even today, when most people report what is happening in their lives, they do not communicate information on the same level of legality as one expects from the Bible in order to be considered accurate or trustworthy. Yet these biblical events are continually

⁶⁹ Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 134.

validated with each new archeological discovery, and the Bible is still to this day the most accurate guide to where to dig and what will be found.

6:1-2 Gen. 6:1-8 serves as a transition from the genealogy of Genesis 5 and the flood story. The statement that humanity began to multiply on the earth (Gen. 6:1) shows the ongoing multiplication of humanity by tying into the divine command of Gen. 1:28 and the genealogy of Genesis 5. Whereas the male descendants were the focus in Genesis 5, here the daughters are highlighted. However, humanity is multiplying not in order to duplicate the image of God and expand the garden but to establish their own dominion over the earth.

A close relationship between humanity and the land is created in Genesis 1-2. This is echoed here with the mention of the “earth.” However, the relationship is destroyed with the mention of the judgement in Gen. 6:3, 7. It is clear that the wickedness of humanity pointed out in Gen. 6:5 is the union of marriage between the Sons of God and the daughters of men in Gen. 6:2. This can be seen in Yahweh’s pronouncement of His judgment on the earth (Gen. 6:3) immediately after the reference to the sons of God taking the daughters of men (Gen. 6:2). The general wickedness of humanity is not mentioned until Gen. 6:5, yet Yahweh has already pronounced His judgment on the earth. Therefore, the unholy union between the sons of God and the daughters of men shows the wickedness of humanity and the reason Yahweh had to send the flood. While humanity was following the divine decree to multiply and fill the earth, so evil was also abounding. The central theme of this passage is the wickedness of humanity. This is seen with the phrase that “the Sons of God *saw* the daughters of men,” which parallels the statement “the woman *saw* that the tree produced fruit that was good for food” (Gen. 3:6).

The question then is who these “sons of God” are, that their taking the daughters of men was evil enough to result in Yahweh’s wiping out all humanity. The best understanding of the title “sons of God” is that they are angels—specifically fallen angels since their actions are declared as wicked by Yahweh in the narrative. The major reason for this is that the phrase “sons of God” is used in the Scriptures to refer always to angels—*bene elim* (Ps. 29:1; 89:6; 103:20) and *bene elohim* (Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7).⁷⁰ This is true of extra-biblical material as well (1 Enoch 6-7). In Hebrew whenever you have the phrase “sons of x,” then the nature of the sons is whatever the “x” is. Like the TV show the “*Sons of Anarchy*,” which is not saying that the men are the biological children of anarchy but that they are anarchist. This would explain the need to wipe out the world and cleanse the human race and land of this unholy union and perversion of the blood line. The sin that Yahweh condemned in Genesis 6 was so grievous that it warranted wiping out all of humanity. And the fact that He has not wiped out humanity since says that this sin has not happened again or as universally since then. The First Testament strongly condemns cross-breeding (Lev. 19:19; 20:16; Deut. 22:9-11) and states that everything should breed according to its kind (Gen. 1:11-12, 21, 24-25).

This understanding of Genesis 6 is supported by 2 Pet. 2:4-5 and Jude 6-7. These passages describe the punishment of a certain group of angels due to a sexual sin during the time of Noah and the flood. 2 Pet. 2:4-5 puts the event in the time of Noah and the flood, and 2 Pet. 2:6 and Jude 7 show that it preceded Sodom and Gomorrah. In the context here, Peter is talking about the immoral lifestyle of the false prophets (2 Pet. 2:2, 13-14, 18). His point is that these false prophets will be judged for their misdeeds just as the demonic angels and Sodom and Gomorrah were. The implication is that these two were judged for their sexual perversions. Jude 7 says

⁷⁰ See the *Divine Council of Yahweh* at www.knowingthebible.net

explicitly that the sin of the angels was a sexual perversion just like those of Sodom and Gomorrah. Their sin is also said to be sexual in 2 Peter and Jude, where it is compared to the sexual perversion of an unholy union as in Sodom and Gomorrah (2 Pet. 2:1-3, 12-15, 18; Jude 7). The time sequence connects it to the time of the flood.

The event in 2 Peter and Jude cannot be referring to the original fall of the angels because then all the demonic angels would be imprisoned according to 2 Pet. 2:4 and Jude 6. Jude 6 also states that the angels did not keep to their own domain (*archen*, a place of assigned authority and activity), but abandoned their proper abode (*idion oiketerion*, “peculiar place of residence”). The implication is that they took on a state that they were not supposed to take. This also cannot mean that they were on earth and not in heaven because this is true of all demons—yet they have not experienced the same fate as these particular demons have. These are the angels that await the great judgment of the lake of fire (Matt. 25:41; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6; Rev. 20:10).

There is the distinction between “sons” and “daughters” in each category. The phrasing is not the “daughters of God” and the “sons of men.” The distinction here imposes a *contrast* between the types of groups: those “of God” and those “of men.” This seems to be the focus—those who belong in the category of the divine (*elohim*) and those who belong among humans (humanity). This contrast is lost with the first two views. In Gen. 6:2 the taking of wives refers to the mutual consent of both groups in the unholy union. This was not a kidnapping and raping of women; rather, humanity was a willing participant. Gen. 6:1-4 presents the angelic cause for the flood, whereas Gen. 6:5-6 presents the human cause.

Those who disagree with this view often quote Matt. 22:29-30 as a rebuttal to the idea that angels, in Genesis 6, were able to have sex. The first problem is that this is not even the point of Matt. 22:29-30 (resurrection is the point). Second, in mentioning the angels, Jesus never said that angels were sexless; he said only that they are not given in marriage. We all know that one does not have to be married in order to have sex. Additionally, Jesus said that *holy* angels were not given in marriage in *heaven*; He never mentioned what *fallen* angels are capable of doing on *earth* outside the will of Yahweh. Some say that this is physically impossible since angels are viewed as spiritual beings. No statements in the Bible make a distinction between the material substance of humans and angels. Genesis 18-19, 32 give every indication that angels are corporeal in nature. Likewise, to say that this is not possible is to forget that Yahweh was able to unite himself to a virgin woman to produce a child. It is not until Matt. 22:30 that sociological distinctions are made between humans and angels in that angels are not given in marriage.⁷¹ Beyond this we do not know enough about angels to say of what they are and are not physically capable. We are the first in history to see the material and spiritual realms as disconnected.

The Sons of God was universally understood in Judaism as angels until the mid-second century AD (1 Enoch 6-19; 21; 86-88; 106:13-15; Jub. 4:15, 22; 5:1). The earliest written interpretation seeing the Sons of God as angels is a second century BC book of 1 Enoch. 1 Enoch 6-12 tells the whole story of the angels taking women as wives and of the flood that followed. Other Jewish writings during this time also favored this view. Several Septuagint manuscripts translate this as “angels of God.” In Christianity, this understanding was not questioned until the late third century and disappeared in the fifth century. It was not until the early third century AD when the work of Julius Africanus came up with the Sethite theory (see below). This was not based on

⁷¹ John H. Walton. “Sons of God and Daughters of Man.” In *The Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, pp. 795-797.

biblical evidence but mostly because the angel view sounded mythological and impossible. In the mid-fifth century AD, Augustine promoted a variation of this view. Later, the kings theory (see below) was developed because the Sethite view was seen as not fitting the Biblical context. In the nineteenth century, the angels view (described already) made a comeback as a lot of ancient Near Eastern texts became available. The vast majority of scholars today take the angels view based on the use of the “Sons of God” title in other places in the Bible and a better understanding of the ancient Near Eastern worldview.

In the Sethite view, the “sons of God” refers to the godly line of Seth, and the “daughters of men” refer to the ungodly line of Cain. In Genesis 4, a contrast is made between Cain as an ungodly son, who begets an ungodly line, and Seth as a godly son, who came at a time when people began to call upon Yahweh. Those who take this view see that contrast being continued into Genesis 6 and believe that one of the reasons for the flood was the mixing of the godly and ungodly lines in marriage.

Unfortunately, nowhere in Genesis is there any hint that the “sons of God” are to be seen as Seth’s line and the “daughters of men” as Cain’s line. In fact, the Hebrew word “men” is not talking about a specific group within humanity but about humanity as a whole. It would also be unnatural to restrict the title “daughters of men” to just Cain’s line and ungodly women; it is better to see it instead as a designation for “womankind.” It also does not seem natural to see godly men having sexual relations with ungodly women, for would that not make those men ungodly? There is nothing in the text that states that Seth’s line was godly—only a few in his line are said to be godly. In fact, the text makes the opposite point: that all of humanity was evil and that Noah was the only righteous one Yahweh found on the whole earth (Gen. 6:5-8). Also, many godly people have married ungodly people throughout history, and Yahweh has neither emphasized His judgment of this throughout history nor wiped out humanity since Genesis 6.

In the polygamous kings view, the “sons of God” refers to tyrant kings who seize the “daughters of men” in its basic meaning. The sin here is the polygamy of the kings in order to gain power. This is based on the fact that many kings in the ancient world saw themselves as divine rulers and referred to themselves as the son of god. However, there is no precedent for a group of kings being referred to as Sons of God. There is no hint in the text to any idea of kings or political alliances. In fact, there is no mention of nations until Genesis 10, after the flood. The mention of kings does not appear until the story of Abraham. The sin of polygamy and marriage for political alliances was a common thing after the flood, even with David, a man after Yahweh’s own heart. The First Testament does not condemn polygamy, and it was a common practice among many Biblical characters. However, the text makes it clear that the evil of Genesis 6 was so exceptionally great that it deserved the earth being wiped out.

Some moved away from the idea of polygamy and refer to this as “the right of the first night,” which means that kings would force a newly married woman to sleep with him before going to her husband. However, there is no real evidence for this as a practice in the ancient Near East. Genesis 6 gives no hint of forced rape or marriage. There is no mention of the objections of the fathers. The fault in Genesis 6 is that the daughters consent to the Sons of God and marry them. And the fact that the father would have consented to this implicated them as well.

Seeing the Sons of God as angels fits the context of Genesis far better than the other views, especially with the parallels with Genesis 3. The divine-human intercourse was like eating the fruit of the forbidden tree in an attempt to gain eternal life through humanity’s own efforts. Once

again, humanity was trying to become like God through their autonomy and partaking of that which is forbidden.

If the interpretation of the “Sons of God” being fallen angels seems too far-fetched or even impossible to you, ask yourself *why*. Do you have a legitimate reason or factual knowledge to discount this view? We live in a culture that has made science the absolute authority on all things; i.e., if it cannot be measured, it is not true or valid. This way of thinking is really only found in America and Europe and only in the last couple hundred years. Compared to most of history and most of the world, the spiritual realm is very much real and is actively involved in the material realm, and most cultures have no problem accepting that spiritual beings could have done this with human beings. To say that they are wrong because it is not “scientific” or what we “civilized” people believe is arrogant and intellectual snobbery. We tend to believe that our (limited perspective, minority) beliefs are superior to most of the people in the world just because we are more technologically advanced. Science and technology are indeed very beneficial and can help make people’s lives safer or better, but science cannot speak to or answer many of the most important questions about life: Why are we here? Who are we? What is our purpose? Is there a spiritual realm, and what is it capable of doing? Deep down inside, we believe that there is a spiritual realm and that something like what we see in Genesis 6 is very much possible. This can be seen in the overwhelming number of movies that are all about the spiritual realm and the supernatural. The popularity of these movies shows that we as humans have a longing to connect to the spiritual realm that has for so long been denied to us by an obsession with science. Again, science is very good, and when the Bible touches on the scientific, it is true and accurate. But the Bible is a theological book that is interested in answering the questions that science cannot and we have not for a long time. The Bible and science are not opposed to each other; they are compatible.

6:3 The judgment for the sin of the unholy union between the sons of God and the daughters of men is that Yahweh would only remain with humanity another 120 years. This does not refer to the age limit of individuals because that would contradict the ages recorded in Gen. 11 after the flood. It refers instead to the amount of time before the judgment of the flood would come. This is supported by the fact that 120 years after this time the flood did indeed come (Gen. 5:3; 7:6). This would give humanity plenty of time to repent of their sin through the preaching of Noah (1 Pet. 3:20). “My spirit” denotes the life-giving power of God connected to the breath of life (Gen. 2:7) or the spirit of life (Gen. 6:17; 7:15), and this phrase is used again in Ezek. 37:14.⁷²

6:4 Though it is not entirely clear, the context of Genesis 6 seems to indicate that the *nephilim* and the “mighty heroes of old” are the offspring of the unholy union. The meaning of the Hebrew word *nephilim* is uncertain, though the context suggests an understanding of great and mighty warriors who were famous throughout the world. The Greek equivalent in the LXX *gigantes* does not refer to monstrous size; rather, it means “fallen ones” and refers to the unusual offspring of an unholy union. This word was also used of the Titans, who were the offspring of male gods and human women.⁷³

The difficulty is with Gen. 6:4, which states that the *nephilim* were on the earth *after* this event as well. If all humanity (except for Noah and his family) died in the flood, it is difficult to understand how the post-flood *nephilim* could be related to the pre-flood *nephilim* or how the

⁷² See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 141.

⁷³ See C. Fred Dickason. *Angels: Elect and Evil*, pp. 244-45 and Merrill F. Unger. *Biblical Demonology*, pp. 45-52.

Anakites of Canaan could be their descendants (Num. 13:33). This is a problem no matter which view one holds. A possible understanding is that in Num. 13:33 it is not the narrator who connects the Anakites to the *nephilim* but a misconception circulated by the people of Israel. Just because the people *believed* the Anakites to be *nephilim* does not mean they were actual *nephilim*. We should not trust the opinions of those who are not divinely inspired. However, the text does not specifically mention that the *nephilim* are the offspring. It could be that the narrator is simply saying that they were also there. At this point we do not fully understand who these *Nephilim* are.

6:5-7 The passage follows two parallel developments that are indicated by “the sons of God saw” in Gen. 6:2 and “Yahweh saw” in Gen. 6:5. The sons of God saw that the daughters of men were good, and they took. The wording also reflects back to Yahweh’s creating the world and how he saw that it was good. Now after looking at His creation, He sees only wickedness due to the hearts of humanity. Yahweh saw that humanity was evil, and He grieved and decided to blot them out. Humans had become so evil that there was literally nothing good about them, and they could not even comprehend a righteous thought or deed. The phrasing of “every inclination” is the same used to describe the end of history before the coming of Christ (Luke 17:26-27; 2 Tim. 3:1-5; Rev. 20:7-10). The heart refers to the center of all thought, volition, will, desire, and morality.

The phrase “Yahweh regretted” (NET) or “Yahweh was grieved/sorry” (NIV, NASB) does not refer to the fact that Yahweh felt like He had made a mistake; instead, what His creation had become caused Him great emotional pain. The word “pain” (NIV) or “grieved” (NASB, ESV) that follows this carries the idea of an offense that leads to anger and feelings of regret and alludes to the judgment oracles in Gen 3:16-19. The word is used of God’s feelings in only two other passages (Ps. 78:40; Isa. 63:10).

The judgment for humanity was complete annihilation and is a more detailed account of what was mentioned in Gen. 6:3. The repetition emphasizes the gravity and surety of the judgment. Yahweh was so horrified by their evil that He was willing to rid the earth of them all. This shows how great their evil was, for other than the judgment found in Revelation, Yahweh has never brought such a judgment on the earth since the flood. Yahweh will bury humanity under the sea just as He buried Adam under the dust.

6:8 Despite the wickedness of the world, there was one who was righteous in his thoughts and deeds. “Found favor” here suggests grace, which carries the idea that Yahweh would have been justified in including Noah and his family in the punishment. The righteousness of Noah is not found in his works, earning his reprieve, but in his heart for Yahweh and in his faith. The narrator leaves it to the reader to realize that it is not Noah’s own righteousness but a gift from Yahweh.

“It is not that Noah’s works of righteousness gains him salvation, for none is cited. Rather, his upright character is noted to condemn his generation, which merits death.”⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Kenneth A. Matthews. *Genesis 1-11:26*, p. 371.

F. Noah and the Flood (6:9–9:29)

This section is the third *toledot* of Genesis and includes the account of both Noah and his family. The point of these chapters is that humanity has become so wicked that everything they do violates the good and just nature of Yahweh. Yahweh's justice would not allow the sin of humanity to go unpunished. However, Yahweh's goodness caused him to choose Noah and his family in order to save humanity from themselves. Gen. 6:9-9:19 forms a chiasmic parallel with Yahweh's remembering Noah (Gen. 8:1a) as the emphasis in the story.

A Transitional introduction (6:9a)

B Noah and his world at the time of the flood (6:9b-12)

C Provision for the flood with a divine monologue establishing Yahweh's covenant to preserve Noah, with reflections on Noah and human behavior (6:12-22)

D Embarkation (7:1-5)

E Beginning of the flood with Noah and the animals (7:6-16)

F The triumphant flood (7:17-24)

X Yahweh remembers Noah (8:1a)

F' The waning Flood (8:1b-5)

E' Ending of the flood with Noah and the birds (8:6-14)

D' Disembarkation (8:15-19)

C' Provision for the post-flood world with a divine monologue to preserve the earth, with reflections on human behavior (8:20-22)

B' Noah and the world conditions after the flood (9:1-17)

A' Transitional introduction (9:18-19)

Likewise, there is an alternating parallel formed by Genesis 6-9.

A Genealogical introduction (6:9-10)

B Setting (6:11)

C Narrative (6:12-8:21)

D Poem (8:22)

E Epilogue (9:1-17)

A Genealogical introduction (9:18-19)

B Setting (9:20)

C Narrative (9:20-24)

D Poem (9:25-27)

E Epilogue (9:28-29)

Due to so many scientific questions that are left unanswered in this account, it is clear that the narrator is more interested in the moral aspects of the flood than in its physical details.

6:9-10 This is the first time the words *righteousness* and *blameless* are used in the Bible. "Righteousness" is one's rightness before and in the eyes of Yahweh, or innocent and acquitted (Ex. 23:7-8; Deut. 25:1). The righteous person keeps the moral law (Ezek. 18:5-9). The righteous are characterized by their lack of selfishness and by their willingness to disadvantage themselves

for the advantage of others. “Blameless” means “whole, complete,” signifying a wholehearted commitment to and wholeness of relationship with Yahweh. Blameless is rarely applied to people and most frequently describes blemish-free sacrificial animals (Lev. 1:3, 10, etc.). They abstain from iniquity (2 Sam. 22:24; Ezek. 28:15) and walk in the law of Yahweh (Ps. 119:1).⁷⁵ It does not mean that one is perfect but that he seeks to not sin against Yahweh; when he does sin, he deals with his sin quickly. The phrase “walked with God” links Noah to Enoch (Gen. 5:22, 24). Just as Enoch was spared a natural death, so Noah was saved from the judgment of Yahweh. That Noah has three sons links him with Adam and Terah (Gen. 4:1-2, 25; 11:27). These three descriptions presented together emphasize how unique Noah was in the dark, bleak world that surrounded him. The sons of Noah are presumed to be righteous as well since they are mentioned before the corruption of the world. This may be the understanding for Ezek. 14:14-20.

“The same explanation for Enoch’s rescue from death (‘he walked with God’) is made the basis for Noah’s rescue from death in the Flood: ‘he walked with God’ (6:9). Thus in the story of Noah and the Flood, the author is able to repeat the lesson of Enoch: life comes through ‘walking with God.’”⁷⁶

6:11-13 Notice that the earth and the animals suffer because of human sin (Gen. 3:17-19; Rom. 8:20-21). Since moral corruption is in view here, most modern western interpreters understand the referent to be humanity. However, the phrase “all flesh” is used consistently of humanity and the animals in Gen. 6-9 (Gen. 6:17, 19; 7:15-16, 21; 8:17; 9:11, 15-17), suggesting that the narrator intends to picture all living creatures, humanity and animals, as guilty of moral failure. This would explain why the animals, not just humanity, are victims of the ensuing divine judgment. The First Testament sometimes views animals as morally culpable (Gen. 9:5; Ex. 21:28-29; Jonah 3:7-8), like the serpent that became corrupt (Gen. 3:1-5, 14-15). The First Testament also teaches that a person’s sin can contaminate others (people and animals) in the sinful person’s sphere (see the story of Achan, especially Josh. 7:24-25). So, the animals could be viewed here as morally contaminated because of their association with sinful humanity. Also, Yahweh made a covenant with humans and animals (Gen. 9:9-16). If the entire earth has been ruined, then the entire earth must be cleansed. The punishment must fit the crime (Gen. 9:6; Ex. 21:23-25), for sin is awful and so is judgment.

Since Yahweh is the creator of the land, humanity, and all creatures, He has absolute authority over them. He has the authority and right to place humanity and creatures in the land, and He has the right to remove them from the land. This is one of the major points that the First Testament makes as it deals with humanity on earth and, later, with the Canaanites and Israel in the Promised Land. As humans who owe our existence to this absolute and divine authority, we cannot question His righteousness in His judgments over sin, especially since the very moral reasoning that we would use comes from Him. Likewise, as sinners we can never appreciate the vileness of sin and the need for justice in the same way that Yahweh as a righteous and holy God does.

6:14-16 Yahweh commands Noah to build the ark for a couple of reasons. First, it is Yahweh who initiates the plan of redemption and seeks out humanity for its redemption. Second, this is Yahweh’s plan—not humanity’s plan—for redemption, thus all the specifications come from

⁷⁵ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 170.

⁷⁶ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 119.

Yahweh and must be followed exactly for it to work. “God must be obeyed in all his instructions if his people expect to enjoy the fruit of life and blessing (e.g., Deut 26:16-19; 28:1-14).”⁷⁷

The word *ark* is used again later in Ex. 2:3, 5 of the basket made for Moses as a baby. As the chaotic waters threaten to kill all of humanity, and later Moses, Yahweh uses an ark to deliver these chosen servants. Most translations use the word “cypress” to describe the wood for the ark. A transliteration of the Hebrew word is “gopher wood”; however, the exact nature of the wood is uncertain. The Hebrew word *kafar* means “to cover, to smear.” The Piel form of the word in Hebrew (*kipper*) has the metaphorical meaning “to atone, to expiate, to pacify,” and it is used in Leviticus of the animal sacrifices for atonement. Notice that there is no rudder on this boat, signifying that it will be steered by the hand or wind of Yahweh. In the pagan accounts of the flood, the boat is steered by the hero of the story who overcomes the flood through his own ingenuity. Likewise, that boat is unstable, being four times longer and heavier than the ark of Yahweh.

The dimensions of the ark are multiples of 10 or 60—the same as the ages of the patriarchs. The dimensions of the ark are given according to the standard construction formula found in Ex. 25:10, 17, 23, etc.). The ark and the tabernacle are the only structures described in the Torah. There are three decks—like the three divisions of the creation (sky, earth, and water). If each deck were divided into three sections, each one would be the height of the tabernacle and the size of the tabernacle courtyard.

“The place where God allows his glory to appear is the place whence the life of the people is preserved. The ark corresponds to this in the primeval event where the concern is for the preservation of humanity... Such is the significance of the construction of the ark because by means of it God preserved humanity from destruction. The parallel between the ark and the tabernacle has a profound meaning. The people of Israel, which alone has in its midst the place where God reveals his glory, is part of the human race which exists now because it has been preserved by this same God.”⁷⁸

6:17-18 In the pagan accounts of the flood, the gods are seen as keeping from humanity their decision to flood the earth so all will be killed. Their reason for destroying the world is because humanity was multiplying too much and making too much noise. In the Sumerian Gilgamesh myth, Ea and Enki (two lesser gods) warned the hero because they were sympathetic to him. And Enlil, the high god who commands the flood, is surprised to find survivors afterward. In contrast, Yahweh destroyed the world for the great sin of humanity and for what they were doing to creation. Noah is saved not because Yahweh is sympathetic and feels bad for him but because of Noah’s righteousness. And Yahweh shares His plans with Noah so that he and all who repent may be saved.

The contrast here is that Yahweh in His justice will wipe out humanity, but, out of the same justice that requires Him to punish the sin of the world, He will save Noah and establish a covenant with him. To confirm a covenant means to ratify an already existing covenant (Deut. 9:5). The only other covenant that exists is the Adamic Covenant in the garden. Though humanity lost its right to rule and subdue and to dwell with Yahweh, He still promises to bless

⁷⁷ Kenneth A. Matthews. *Genesis 1-11:26*, p. 363.

⁷⁸ Clause Westermann. *Genesis 1-11*, p. 421.

them with life, and He commands humanity to be fruitful and multiply. Here we see that Yahweh shows great grace and love for humanity along with His justice, in contrast to the pagan gods.

6:19-21 The use of the phrase “every kind” is an echo of Gen. 1:20-23. This shows Yahweh’s desire to preserve His creation despite His devastating judgment that was to come. Yahweh states that two of every kind of animal will come to Noah. The “two of every kind” ensures that the population of the animals continues after the flood. The list of animals begins generally and becomes more specific, just like the creation account. The list of animals is also in the same sequence (Gen. 1:20-24). The fact that Yahweh would bring the animals to Noah puts the emphasis on His salvific work and not on Noah’s efforts.

6:22 The statement “and Noah did all that Yahweh commanded him” in Gen. 6:22 and in Gen. 7:5 makes the point that Noah’s righteousness was found in his obedience to Yahweh. This is an incredible act of persevering faith, for if Yahweh does not send the rains, Noah will have wasted 120 years of his life and be the joke of history. Note that 120 years (Gen. 6:3) is multiple of three, a number symbolic of redemption. Not only was this time a countdown to judgment but also a time that the world could find redemption through the preaching of Noah (1 Pet. 3:20; 2 Pet. 2:5).

In the Gilgamesh myth Utnapishtim, the hero of the story is the focus of the story. Utnapishtim means “finder of eternal life,” and there is great space and detail given to the active and skillful efforts of Utnapishtim, of his building a ship and his gathering of everything he needs and that he shut the door himself. Utnapishtim was a king, and after the flood, he joined the ranks of the gods by becoming immortal. In contrast, the building of the ark in Genesis 6 is not as important as the actions of Yahweh after the ark is sealed. Noah’s efforts are downplayed, and only his obedience is mentioned.

“Human greatness is to be found neither in heroic feats nor in an exalted social station but in faithfully obeying God’s word.”⁷⁹

7:1-5 Now Yahweh adds to His original command of two of every kind and tells Noah to take seven of every clean animal, the male and its mate (fourteen of each kind), and two of every unclean. Though Yahweh does not reveal the basis for His distinction between clean and unclean animals here, this concept was not unknown in the ancient Near East. Pagan cultures also observed clean and unclean distinctions among animals, though they varied from nation to nation. In the Mosaic Law, Yahweh further distinguished between foods (Lev. 11). The clean animals were the only animals allowed to be sacrificed and, later, eaten (Gen. 9:3; Lev. 11). Yahweh probably required more of the clean animals to board the ark since they would be needed for both sacrificing and eating and also for repopulating the earth. The idea of taking seven clean animals also shows that His salvation for the animal world was complete. And once again, the faithfulness of Noah is affirmed.

7:6-16 One hundred and twenty years exactly after Yahweh pronounced His judgment on the earth and gave Noah the command to build the ark, the flood came, just as He had said it would. The word “great deep” is the same Hebrew word used in Gen. 1:2 to describe the watery deep that covered the earth before the Spirit of God hovered over it and changed it. Yahweh unleashed the chaotic waters of the earth to cause the previously separated waters (Ps. 104:6-9) to return to a state of formlessness and emptiness, darkness, and chaotic watery deep as a judgment against

⁷⁹ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 166.

sin. There would no longer be land, and so there could not be life and blessing because of the sin of humanity. However, Yahweh does not allow it to remain in this state, and so He subdues the sea once again, reestablishing its boundaries in order to reveal His “new” creation and to start over with Noah as the “new Adam” (Gen. 8:11).

In Gen. 7:11 the “floodgates of the heavens” (NIV, ESV) should be translated “floodgates of the sky” (NASB) since it is the plural form of *shamayim*, which denotes the sky as in Gen. 1:8. This prescientific view of the sky refers to the celestial waters above the sky, which we now know as the rain clouds. The water bursting forth from the great deep are poetic phrases used in the prophets to refer to the judgment of Yahweh (Amos 7:4; Ps. 78:15; Isa. 24:18; Mal. 3:10).

The repetitious nature of these verses emphasizes that Yahweh was in control and faithful, just as He promised, to punish humanity and purge the world of its sin and wickedness. In the Babylonian account, the flood got out of control and frightened the gods who “cowered like dogs” because they could not stop it.

7:17-24 Several times the waters are said to have “engulfed the earth” and “completely overwhelmed the earth,” so that “everything” was covered. The “earth” and “waters” is mentioned six times, connecting back to the creation account. The waters multiplied, putting creation into reverse. They “triumph” (Gen. 7:17, 18, 19, 24), a military word for triumphing in battle (Ex. 17:11). The repetition shows that this was a worldwide flood. The narrator also points out that every living thing died. Here, the narrator shows that Yahweh’s judgment was complete and thorough, not lacking or failing in any way. The number 40 can be used to communicate a long period of time (previously Gen. 7:17), is symbolic of testing and trials, and represents the introduction to a new age. The number 150 is a multiple of 3, which is symbolic of redemption. Yahweh used the waters to cleanse the earth of its corruption and thus redeem it.

8:1-5 “God remembered” does not mean that Yahweh had forgotten Noah and his family; rather, the Hebrew term means to act upon a previous commitment to a covenant promise (Gen. 9:14-15; 19:29; 30:22; Ex. 2:24; 6:5; 32:13; 1 Sam. 1:19; Judg. 16:28; Ps. 8:4; 9:12; 74:1-3; 98:3; 105:8; 106:45; 111:5; Jer. 15:15). We are also called to remember the future (Isa. 47:7; Eccl. 11:8), a usage that shows remembering to be more than just recall. Yahweh’s remembering always implies His movement toward the object or person. By Yahweh’s acting upon his promises to Noah, He shows Himself trustworthy in His word.

The word “wind” comes from the Hebrew word *ruach*, which means “wind, spirit.” Once again (Gen. 1:2), Yahweh is subduing the chaotic waters through His spirit to bring order to His creation. This is the turning point of the story, wherein Yahweh causes the waters to retreat, revealing the land again so that He could place Noah, the new Adam, in the land to be fruitful and multiply. The waters retreating is the exact description seen later of the waters of the Red Sea and of the Jordan returning to their place (Ex. 14:26, 28; Josh. 4:18). Thus, the creation, the flood, and the exodus out of Egypt are all tied together as great acts of redemption. Yahweh uses waters of chaos to eliminate social chaos and then overcomes the cosmic chaos of the flood waters and brings a new creation out of them. The waters return to their boundaries, and Yahweh brings equilibrium and a new permanence to the creation (Gen. 8:22).

The day the ark comes to rest on dry land in the “new” creation is the seventeenth of day of the seventh month (Nisan)—the same day as the festival of firstfruits, which Yahweh would later command the Jews to celebrate (Lev. 23:9-14). This festival foreshadowed the resurrection of Jesus Christ on the same day, which made the believers into a “new” creation.

The ark coming to rest upon Ararat does not mean it landed on *a mountain* called Ararat but on the mountains in the area of Ararat. Ararat is the Hebrew term for Urartu, a kingdom north of Assyria (2 Kgs. 19:37; Isa. 37:38; Jer. 51:27) Later called Armenia, it is now a part of eastern Turkey, southern Russia, and northwestern Iraq.⁸⁰

8:6-12 The sending out of the raven *before* the dove shows the accuracy of the Biblical account. Ravens are stronger birds than doves and can fly longer—even through storms—and feed off carrion.⁸¹ The dove needs trees and ground because it cannot fly as long. Literally, the dove finds no *manoah* (“resting place”). The dove looks for “another Noah” outside the ark, but when it does not find one, it returns to the Noah it knows. The statement “he put out his hand, took it, and brought it into him” is without parallel in the writings of the ancient Near East. “The description of the return and admission of the dove is unsurpassed even in the Yahwistic document for the tenderness and beauty of imagination.”⁸² This shows the kind of relationship that should be between a human and animal (Gen. 1:26-28; 2:19-20; Ex. 23:4-5; Deut. 25:4; Prov. 12:10). The olive tree is a symbol of beauty and fertility and symbolized Israel (Jer. 11:16). At the end of the forty days, Yahweh is ready to reveal His “new” and redeemed creation.

The number of days within the flood account reveals concentric parallelism. The 150 days of the water covering the earth are viewed from two different perspectives and shows that the focus of the story is Yahweh’s controlling the waters with their triumph and waning.

A 7 days of waiting for the flood (7:4)

B 7 days of waiting for the flood (7:10)

C 40 days of flooding (7:17a)

D 150 days of water triumphing (7:24)

D’ 150 days of water waning (8:12)

C’ 40 days of waiting (8:6)

B’ 7 days of waiting (8:10)

A 7 days of waiting (8:12)

8:13-19 Even though the ground is dry enough for Noah to leave the ark, he still waits almost two months before he leaves because he is waiting for the word of Yahweh. Noah’s first response after he gets off the ark is building an altar and worshiping Yahweh.

Notice that the patterns of the receding floodwaters are parallel to the creation account in relation to the forming and filling of the earth. Now that the world was a watery mass, Yahweh must “re-create” His creation, redeeming it to its original state. The rain stopping and the water drying up are symbolic of the vertical and horizontal separations of the water (Gen. 1:6-10). The dove finding the olive branch is like the creation of vegetation (Gen. 1:11-12), and the clearing of the storm clouds is the revealing of the sky and the sun, moon, and stars (Gen. 1:6-8, 14-17). The opening of the ark reveals the animals and humanity upon the earth (Gen. 1:20-26). Thus, Yahweh is seen as redeeming His creation for a new Adam found in Noah.

8:20-22 Noah builds an altar and sacrifices to Yahweh, which becomes a pleasing aroma to Him. Gen. 8:20-22 explains Yahweh’s change of heart. This is the only time in the Scriptures that it is

⁸⁰ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 185.

⁸¹ See Bruce K. Waltke. *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 141.

⁸² See John Skinner. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*, p. 156.

recorded that Yahweh smells (accepted) the sacrifice. David prays that Yahweh would (1 Sam. 26:19). Later in Scripture Yahweh says He will not smell the sacrifice of the disobedient (Lev. 26:31; Amos 5:21-22). Yahweh's heart has changed, the slate is cleaned, and the covenant at creation is renewed. Yahweh did not need the sacrifice for food; rather, humanity needed it to show dependency on Yahweh. Yahweh smelling the aroma is contrasted with the pagan gods, who crowded greedily around the sacrifice like flies desperate for food.

Yahweh promises to never again destroy the earth even though the hearts (wills) of humanity are still as evil as they were before the flood and will continue to deserve His judgment. However, Yahweh is not lifting the curse of Gen. 3:17. The flood had not altered the condition of humanity, but it and the sacrifice of Noah had pacified Yahweh's righteous anger against the sin. The phrase "as long as the earth endures" qualifies the phrase "never again." Yahweh would preserve humanity and earth until the final judgment (1 Pet. 3:20-21; 2 Pet. 2:5-12). Yahweh is not lifting the curse on the land (Gen. 3:17) but is promising to not add to it.

"The striking similarity between the flood and Sinai, between Noah and Moses, is of great theological significance for the interpretation of each story... The world, while still in its infancy, has sinned and brought upon itself Yahweh's wrath and judgment. Israel has only just been constituted a people, God's chosen people, yet directly it has sinned and incurred Yahweh's wrath and judgment. Each time the same question is raised. How, before God, can a sinful world (in general) or a sinful people, even God's chosen people (in particular), exist without being destroyed? Each time the answer is given that if the sin is answered solely by the judgment it deserves, then there is no hope. But in addition to the judgment there is also mercy, a mercy which depends entirely on the character of God and is given to an unchangingly sinful people."⁸³

9:1-7 Yahweh's blessing here is almost identical to His blessing at creation (Gen. 1:28), modifying the food laws and reasserting the sanctity of life. This is the third time He has blessed humanity (Gen. 1:28; 5:2; 9:1). Yahweh repeats the command to be fruitful and multiply three different times (Gen. 8:17; 9:1, 7). It is still His desire for humanity to fill the earth and spread His glory throughout it. The command "to swarm, be fruitful and multiply" originally given to the birds and fish (Gen. 1:20, 22) is now given to all animals, showing that this is truly a new creation. The desire of Yahweh to have life abundantly stands in stark contrast to the pagan gods. After the flood in the Babylonian Atrahasis myth, the gods, fearing overpopulation, decreed that certain women be celibate, others be infertile, and that some infants should die at birth.

Yahweh states that humanity is allowed to eat all plants and animals, whereas before only plants had been specifically mentioned. Once again, the allowance to eat animals may not have been a new thing here. That Yahweh provided Adam and Eve with garments from animal skins (Gen. 3:21), that Abel sacrificed animals (Gen. 4:2-4), and that Noah could distinguish clean from unclean animals (Gen. 7:2) suggest that the command in Gen. 9:2 is ratifying post-fall eating of meat rather than inaugurating it.⁸⁴ This allowance to eat animals implies that humanity has the power of life and death over the animals (Deut. 19:12; 20:13). It is interesting that there is no threat attached to eating unclean animals.

⁸³ R. W. L. Moberly. "At the Mountain of God." In *JSOTSS* 22 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1983] pp. 113-115.

⁸⁴ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1-15*, p. 34.

The only criteria given for eating animals is that one is not allowed to consume the blood; the blood should be drained out of the animals before they are eaten (Lev. 3:17; 7:26-27; 19:26; Deut. 12:16-24; 1 Sam. 14:32-34). This restriction is given for a few reasons. First, blood can carry a lot of diseases, and so it is not safe. Second, the life of the animal is in the blood and is given for the atonement of sin (Lev. 17:11). Blood is symbolic of life because it is the most essential thing for life and is the most physically visual representation of life. It was used for the atonement of sins in that an innocent life was offered in place of a sinful life to cancel the debt of sin that leads to death. Thus, the blood is sacred and should not be used for something common because the powerful meaning of blood as atonement is lost when it is mixed with what is common. Third, because blood was associated with life, many tribes would drink the blood in order to gain the power or life of the animal. The reason humans need atonement is their desire to be in control and to gain life and blessing outside the will of Yahweh. In consuming the blood, one would be using what is meant for atonement to instead gain more power outside the will of Yahweh.

There is a chiasmic parallelism in the covenant that Yahweh makes with Noah that shows the importance of the blood.

A Yahweh's resolution to never again destroy the earth or humanity (8:20-22)

B Command to be fruitful (9:1)

X Legislation regarding blood (9:2-6)

B' Command to be fruitful (9:7)

A' Yahweh's covenant and sign to never again destroy all flesh (9:8-17)

The next command is the prohibition against murder because humanity is made in the image of God. The poetic nature of this command emphasizes the value of human life because of the image of God. As the sovereign creator and author of life, only Yahweh has the right to place humanity in the land or to remove them. To murder someone is to put oneself in the place of Yahweh. Also, to murder someone is to attack the image of God that is meant to expand the kingdom of Yahweh. The death of Yahweh's image demands divine retribution on humans or animals that kill humans. The fact that Yahweh would command the death penalty for murder shows how much He values human life and humanity's purpose on this earth.

“A community is only justified in executing the death penalty in so far as it respects the unique right of God over life and death and in so far it respects the inviolability of human life that follows therefrom. Every single violation of this limit, be it based on national, racial, or ideological grounds is here condemned.”⁸⁵

Notice that the command to rule and subdue is not repeated. The animals are still subject to humanity but now out of fear rather than respect. The phrase “fear of you” is a military term of hostility suggesting that there will not be peace between the two; Gen. 9:6 suggests the same for humans.

9:8-11 Yahweh states that He is making a covenant with all humanity. The Noachic Covenant is the second covenant that Yahweh makes with humanity. The blessing of Yahweh is that He will never again destroy the earth, but there are no requirements for humanity in order to keep the

⁸⁵ See Clause Westermann. *Genesis 1-11*, p 469.

covenant alive (the ones listed above pertain to His moral will not the covenant itself). Yahweh states in Gen. 9:12 that the covenant is unconditional for “all successive generations.”

“This covenant does not depend on human obedience to the laws given to Noah; rather, men’s and women’s compliance with the laws allow them to live and enjoy this covenant.”⁸⁶

9:12-17 The sign of this covenant is the rainbow. In Gen. 9:13 the word for “rainbow” is simply “bow” in the Hebrew and refers to a battle bow used in hunting or battles. Yahweh hangs His battle bow in the sky, pointed away from the earth as a sign of His peace with humanity.

A “confirm the covenant” (9:9-11)

B “sign of the covenant” (9:12a)

C covenant “for farthest generations” (9:12b)

X “my bow” (9:13-16)

C’ “eternal covenant” (9:16)

B’ “sign of the covenant” (9:17a)

A’ “confirm” the covenant (9:17b)

9:18-19 The main purpose here is to portray the characteristics of the three main branches of the human race in relation to the blessing and cursing of Noah. The most significant element in this section is the blessing and cursing motif that will occur repeatedly throughout Genesis. The narrator reveals the spiritual degradation of the Canaanites by exposing the character of the father (Ham). Noah is portrayed as the second Adam in that he was blessed as Yahweh’s image bearer (Gen. 9:6) and was given the same commandments that were given to Adam (Gen. 9:1). This passage alludes to the covenant in the Garden of Eden with the words “be fruitful,” “multiply,” and “fill the earth.”

“Noah is depicted as Adam *redivivus* (revived). He is the sole survivor and successor to Adam; both ‘walk’ with God; both are the recipients of the promissory blessing; both are caretakers of the lower creatures; both father three sons; both are workers of the soil; both sin through the fruit of a tree; and both father a wicked son who is under a curse.”⁸⁷

9:20-21 Noah is described as a “man of the soil,” which shows not only that he was a part of the soil due to the curse but also that he was a subduer of the soil through his creation of wine. In the Hebrew, Gen. 9:20 carries the idea that he was the inventor of wine, which cheers, gladdens, and comforts the heart (Judg. 9:13; Ps. 104:15). Wine was Yahweh’s gift to humanity (Ps. 104:15), every burnt or peace offering was to be accompanied with a wine offering (Num. 15:5-10), and wine was the symbol of Israel (Isa. 5:1-7; Mark 12:1-11). However, there is also the warning against the dangers of wine. Priests were not allowed to drink before entering the sanctuary (Lev. 10:9), and the nation was warned against drinking too much (Isa. 5:22; Prov. 21:17; 23:20-21, 29-35). Wine confuses (Isa. 28:7) and leads to self-exposure (Hab. 2:15; Lam. 4:21). Wine was also used of the judgment of Yahweh (Isa. 63:6; Jer. 51:57). The brief mention of Noah’s actions is common when Scripture disapproves of behavior. To uncover oneself was not just publicly

⁸⁶ Allen P. Ross. *Creation and Blessing*, p. 206.

⁸⁷ Kenneth A. Matthews, *Genesis 1-11:26*, p. 351, 359.

demeaning (2 Sam. 6:14-16, 20) but incompatible with living in the presence of Yahweh (Ex. 20:26; Deut. 23:12-14).

Though alcohol is not forbidden by Yahweh, Noah's nakedness in combination with his drunkenness suggest that the narrator is condemning his actions. It is not clear why Noah gets drunk or why such a great man of faith would fall so hard. Perhaps after the intense and lengthy stress he experienced, and now that resolution has finally come, he lowers all his defenses and crashes. Or, perhaps being the first to drink wine, he has newly discovered the pitfalls of alcohol. Noah's nakedness is seen as a second fall with a curse.

9:22-23 Ham's sin is not that he saw his father naked but that he gazed upon him searchingly. This is amplified in that he invaded his father's privacy by entering his tent and dishonored him by his outspoken delight of his father's condition, rather than honoring him. Honoring one's parents was one's most sacred duty (Ex. 21:15, 17; Deut. 21:18-21; Mark 7:10). His sin is even more emphasized by the contrasting actions of his brothers. Some have suggested that Ham somehow sexually violated his father. However, if the covering of Noah was all that was needed to remedy the situation, then this suggests the offense was merely in Ham seeing Noah naked and mocking him. It also shows that all Ham had to do was cover his father and walk away.

9:24-29 The seriousness of Ham's sin is emphasized by Noah's cursing him when he awoke and by the poetic nature of the curse. Ham and Cain are cursed because they did not show family loyalty—one of the most important relationships in the Bible. This is the first time that a human is recorded pronouncing a curse. A later generation may be judged for the sin of their ancestors if they are like-minded in their deeds. Otherwise, they may bear the fruit of their ancestors' sins (Josh. 9:27). By the nature of Noah's cursing, Noah may have anticipated evil traits that would then mark his descendants. It is the Canaanite people that are in view here, thus this becomes an explanation for the debauchery of the people as a whole and Yahweh's reason for the later genocide of the nation. These people are not cursed because of what Ham did but because they acted as their ancestor had. The constant reference to "nakedness" and "uncovering" carried out in the sin of Ham gives way to the people of Canaan as a people enslaved sexually.

Unlike Utnapishtim of the Sumerian Gilgamesh myth, who was granted eternal life, Noah died like his ancestors before him. In the flood generation and in the righteous life of Noah, humanity is always portrayed as sinful and doomed to die under the curse. Only Yahweh is the true righteous character who is worthy of honor and glory.

G. The Tower of Babel and the Scattered Nations (10:1–11:26)

This is the final section that emphasizes the wickedness of humanity before the narrator introduces Yahweh's choosing of Abraham. The point is to show that the true heart of humanity is to unite in rebellion against Yahweh. The Hebrew word for flood (*mbl*) in Gen. 10:1 and *babel* in Gen. 11:9 are close phonetically. This links these two acts of wickedness and judgment together.

Genesis 11 happens chronologically *before* the events of Genesis 10. In Genesis 10, the narrator reveals the scattered and separated nations by the fact that they speak different languages. Humanity is portrayed as lost with no sense of connection to a land, and so they establish their own cultures rather than the kingdom of Yahweh. In Genesis 11, the narrator explains *how* the world had become scattered and confused nations. This scattering was the consequence of their unified rebellion against Yahweh in attempt to establish their own kingdom and become like gods. The point is to show that despite the judgment of the flood, not only did humanity still become wicked, but they also wanted to unite in rebellion against Yahweh's nature and desire for their lives. This then sets the reader up for the need for Yahweh to choose Abraham and form a new nation that will bear Yahweh's name and bring all the scattered nations into this new nation so that the nations can be reconnected to Yahweh, the land, and blessings.

The genealogy of Genesis 10 is primarily interested in two things. First, it moves quickly through the first two brothers to get to Shem. Notice that Israel is not mentioned specifically because from Shem would come Abraham, who would become the father of Israel. Abraham's lines growing into Israel is developed in the rest of the Torah. Second, the genealogy focuses on Canaan, who will become a great obstacle to Israel's finding blessing in the land that Yahweh provides them. The end of the Noah story and this genealogy explains why Canaan had to be removed from the land.

The genealogy of Genesis 10 is different from the previous genealogy in several ways. First, no ages are mentioned. Second, although some names are personal—like Japhet and Nimrod—most are the name of the nation, like Cush and Mizaim. Third, the terms to describe the relationship between those listed is more flexible. “The sons of...were...” alternates with “X fathered...” Fourth, sonship and brotherhood could be used in the ancient Near East to refer to a treaty as well as blood relationships. However, the terms “son of” and “fathered” do express the idea that all of humanity descended from a common ancestor. All people are children of Noah and Adam.⁸⁸ This points to the fact that the “one people” (*am*) of Gen. 11:6 are actually the nations (*goyim*) of the earth (Gen. 10:5, 20, 31, 32). The human family has become the competing nations of the world.

The genealogy here is a selective account in that it is only interested in presenting the nations known to Israel. Ten is symbolic of nations, and seven is symbolic of completeness. Thus, 70 communicates the idea that the foundation for the nations of the world is complete.

“Evidently 70 nations descended from Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Seventy became a traditional round number for a large group of descendants. Jacob's family also comprised 70 people (Gen. 46:27), which may indicate that Moses viewed Israel as a microcosm of humanity as he presented it here.”⁸⁹

⁸⁸ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 1–15*, p. 215.

⁸⁹ Thomas Constable. *Notes on Genesis*, p. 92.

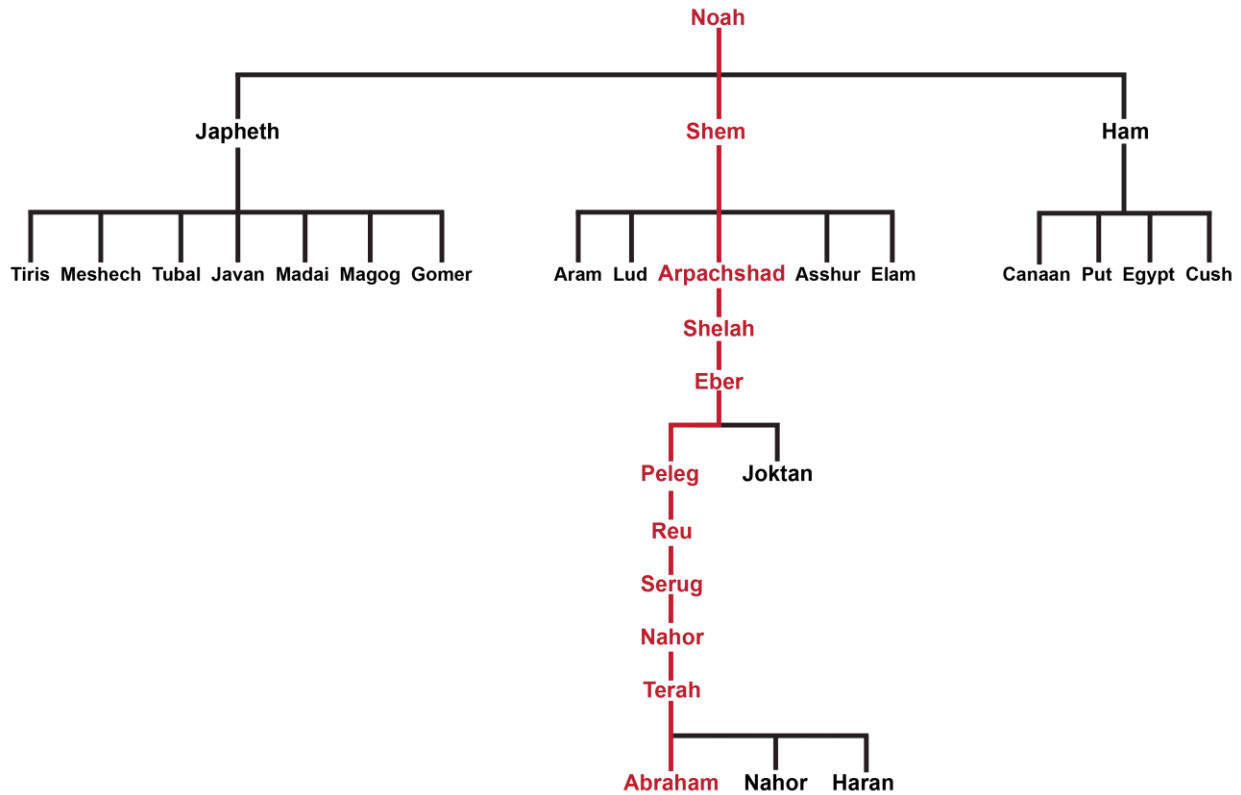


10:1-5 Japheth’s descendants settled north, east, and west of Ararat. They settled the areas and the northern Mediterranean coastlands on the European shore from Turkey to Spain. From Japheth came nations like Gomer and Magog, which would become distant and future enemies of Israel.

10:6-21 Ham’s family moved east and south into Mesopotamia, Egypt, and Africa. From Ham came mostly the nations that would become Israel’s enemies, like Egypt (Mirzraim), Canaan, Philistines, Assyria, and Babylon (Shinar). However, these nations influenced Israel more than any of the other nations. Gen. 10:15-20 gives more attention to those living in the land of Canaan in order to communicate which people groups have to be removed by Israel when they are ready to enter the Promised land.

10:8-12 Nimrod means “we shall rebel,” and he is described as a “warrior in the earth,” meaning “tyrant,” linking him to the tyrants of Gen. 6:4. He is also described as a hunter rather than a shepherd. The kings of the Ancient Near East prided themselves in being hunters and warriors, not attached to anyone—rather than shepherd kings that Yahweh will desire of His people. Nimrod is the founder of Babel and is responsible for the first organized rebellion against Yahweh in Genesis 11. Scholars have struggled to determine, with no success, which king in human history matches the Nimrod of the Bible. The point may not be that Nimrod is a single person but an archetype of the Mesopotamian ideals of kingship. Thus, it is not a specific person that Yahweh is condemning but the idea of what a king is to humanity.

10:22-32 From Shem came mostly nomadic tribes that would be lost in the other nations and the historical records. Continuing the theme that gathering together and living in the city leads to overcrowding, corruption, and ultimately isolation, the narrator shows that the other brothers gave birth to the nations, whereas Shem’s descendants lived outside of the city. Terah, a descendant of Shem, was a nomad who lived in the countryside. This is not to say they were expanding the garden, but they were outside the center of corruption.



11:1-9 These verses appear to be a testimony to the divine commission to fill the earth (Gen. 9:1), but the account tells how the nations were dispersed after the tower of Babel. This section ends with the people scattered across the earth, divided from one another and from Yahweh. It is the climax of the primeval events and transitions into the patriarchal narratives. It is also the explanation for the development of the nations in Genesis 10, since this event precedes Genesis 10 chronologically. Gen. 10:1-32 and Gen. 11:1-9 are linked by several key words: “scatter,” “spread out,” “country of Shinar,” and “build.” These phrases show that the two events are directly connected and that the former was a result of the latter. The Tower of Babel becomes the ultimate example of humanity gathering together in the city to build a monument to themselves with the newest technological advancement.

There is a chiasmic parallel in these verses, which reveals the theme of reversal around the pivot, “Yahweh came down.” The plot moves the story from the unified construction of a city to Yahweh’s destruction of their unified rebellion.

- A All the earth one language
- B People settle together there
- C Said to each other
- D Come let us make bricks
- E A city and tower
- X And Yahweh came down
- E' The city and tower
- D' Come now... let us confuse
- C' Not understanding each other
- B' People disperse from there
- A' Language of the whole earth

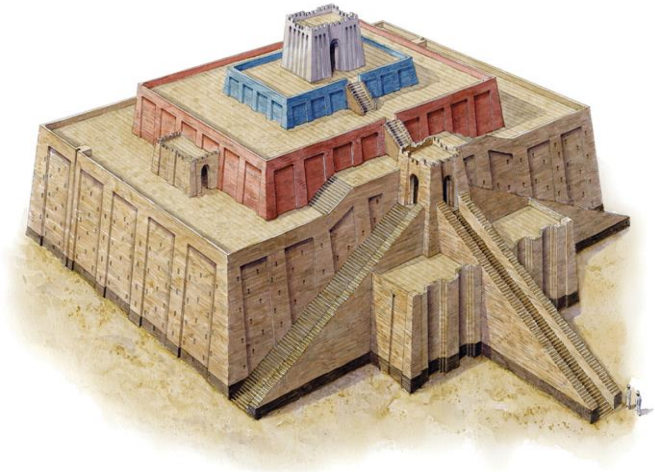
11:1-2 The story begins with the reminder that everyone spoke the same language and had come from the same place—where the ark had settled after the flood. The parallel with Gen. 13:11 suggests that “eastward” would be an appropriate translation. However, being used as a verb it could mean “in the east” (Gen. 2:8; 12:8; Isa. 9:12), which means it could be a reminder of humanity’s earlier judgments in Adam and Eve and Cain. The plain of Shinar is at the top of the Persian Gulf, into which the Tigris and Euphrates rivers flow.



11:3-4 The people's desire to be like the gods (Gen. 3:5) is reflected in the statement of Gen. 11:3, "Come, let us make bricks," which is an allusion to Yahweh's statement "let us make man" (Gen. 1:26). Through this act of building, they desire to make a name for themselves and ascend to the position of the gods by their own resources and skills. It is Yahweh alone who makes a name for Himself (Isa. 63:12, 14; Jer. 32:20; Neh. 9:10).

The people desire to make a name for themselves and to ascend to the position of the gods by their own resources and skills. As seen in the statement in Gen. 11:3 they desired to become like the gods.

In the Ancient Near East, people built ziggurats as temples that linked heaven with earth. They believed that this would not only get them closer to the gods but also give them the ability to ascend to the heavens and possibly become gods themselves. The people of Mesopotamia often portrayed their temples as having roots in the underworld and tops that reached the heavens.



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The fact that they do not want to be scattered across the earth is a second sin they were committing since this was exactly what Yahweh had commanded humanity to do (Gen. 1:28; 9:1). Not only do they desire to elevate themselves to a position of deity, but they are also directly disobeying the foremost command of Yahweh.

11:5-8 Yahweh having to come down demonstrates the irony in their futility to reach heaven on their own, for Yahweh is so far above them (Isa. 40:22). Yahweh's coming to see the city also demonstrates His interest and involvement in human history. It also implies prior knowledge. In calling them "sons of man," He shows them to be mere humans.

Their major errors are in trying to unite and live in one place and in trying to gain access to Yahweh through their own ingenuity, in opposition to the kingdom of Yahweh, rather than filling the earth in obedience to Yahweh. This is what had potential for the greatest evil. The judgment is on the fact that they used the city to rebel against Yahweh. Nationalism can thus be seen as a restraint on sin. Sin will come to its climax in the one-world government spoken of in Revelation. Yahweh is the only one who can unify the nations (Zep. 3:9-11). The irony is that this was exactly the judgment that Yahweh brings upon them. Yahweh's judgment is to alter their language and scatter them so that they cannot unite and accomplish such a task again. What they feared the most, being scattered, came to fruition because they tried to resolve this fear through their own evil desires and resources and not through a dependence on Yahweh. The language barrier brings sudden fear and prevents unification.

Gen. 11:6 does not mean that there is nothing that humanity cannot accomplish; rather, it implies that humans had never before built anything for their own glory and that this was evidence of their disobedience. The idea is that there is no limit to what they can accomplish in their disobedience and rebellion against Yahweh.

11:9 The narrator explains that *Babel* means “confusion.” The irony here is that the Babylonian word for *Babel* means “gate of the gods.” The word they chose to portray their intended achievement now identifies their utter failure.

Ancient Mesopotamia saw humanity as improving and praises the achievements and development of the Sumerian culture. The Bible sees the condition of humanity deteriorating. Unlike the previous judgments, there is no gracious provision from Yahweh in the midst of the judgment. From here on, the nations will develop in utter futility and confusion until Yahweh makes a great nation through a man who himself would be scattered. Abraham thus becomes the hope in the midst of the judgment. Throughout history, humanity will continue trying to recreate the tower of Babel. Each new empire will become bigger and encompass more people than the previous, and all will bring destruction on humanity. Yet Acts 2 shows humanity being united with one language through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Joel 2:28; Zeph. 3:9) but to build the kingdom of Yahweh, not their own kingdom.

At this point Yahweh disinherited the nations because they had continually shown themselves to be in rebellion against functioning as His image bearers and expanding His kingdom. This does not mean that He was abandoning them or that they could never repent and come back to Him and be redeemed. Rather it meant that humanity as a whole would no longer be the chosen people of Yahweh that He would use to expand His kingdom and redeem the world. As a result of this disinheritance, Yahweh assigned the sons of God (angel) to rule over each of the different nations (Deut. 32:8-9). However, over time these sons of the God went rogue and rebelled against Yahweh (Ps. 82; Dan. 10:12-13, 20), set themselves up as false gods (Deut. 32:16-17; 1 Cor. 10:19-20), and began to further mislead the nations.⁹⁰ Yahweh then choose Abraham, through whom He would directly rule over and develop Abraham’s descendants into the chosen people of Yahweh, so that He could use them to bless the world (Gen. 12:1-3). This is seen in the fact that Israel is not listed in the table of nations in Gen. 10 and that Abraham is called by Yahweh to leave his people and nation immediately after the Tower of Babylon story. Yahweh made Israel His inheritance so that they could draw the people of the world out of their disinherited nations and into the Abrahamic Covenant blessings and Israel and thus be inherited into the kingdom of Yahweh once again.

11:10-26 The genealogy of Shem forms the fifth *toledot* and stresses the movement from death (Gen. 5) and confusion and scattering (Gen. 10; 11:1-9) to life through the realization of the promises of Yahweh found in the line of Shem, which leads to Abraham.

⁹⁰ See the *Divine Council of Yahweh* at www.knowingthebible.net

II. The Life of Abraham (11:27–25:18)

This division begins the sixth *toledot*. Although it says it is “the account of Terah,” it is really the narrative of Abraham’s life and faith in Yahweh. The story of Abraham focuses on Yahweh’s covenantal promises to Abraham to make him into a great nation, yet Abraham has no son. This covenant builds on the one Yahweh made with Noah in Gen. 9:1-17, but whereas it focused on universal benefits for all, this covenant focused on the blessings for the family of Abraham, who would then bless the rest of the world. It is through the life of Abraham that Yahweh will undo the rebellion and the judgment of the scattering at the Tower of Babel.

However, there are many obstacles to the promises of Yahweh, like Sarai’s barrenness, Abraham’s repeated lack of obedience, the Canaanites in the land, and even Abraham’s death, slowing the fulfillment of the promises. Despite this, Yahweh faithfully continued to walk with and honor His promises to Abraham.

The two main focuses of the story are the faithfulness of Yahweh to His covenant promises and the faith of Abraham. The narrator will develop the idea of Abraham as a man of faith even though he was not obedient at the time. The point is that he was considered righteous because of his faith and not because of his obedience to the law, which he violated. This point is introduced in Genesis and is developed more in the rest of the Torah.

The story reaches its climax when Abraham finally fathers Isaac but Yahweh then tells him to sacrifice Isaac (Gen. 22). The resolution comes when Yahweh stops Abraham from completing the sacrifice and provides a substitutionary sacrifice.

Even though the death of Abraham—the judgment that all humans face for their sin—slows the fulfillment of the promises in Abraham’s life, Yahweh overcomes all these obstacles by providing descendants in order to fulfill the promises. The conclusion is seen when Isaac marries Rebekah and has children of his own.

Gen. 11:27-22:24 forms a concentric parallel, emphasizing the fact that Yahweh honored His covenant promises with both Isaac, the chosen son, and Ishmael, the result of a lack of faith on Abram’s part. The point is that Yahweh is true to His promises and gracious in that both sons receive the blessing as descendants under the Abrahamic Covenant. This also shows the tension between the two sons as heirs of the promises is a major part of the story.

A Genealogy of Terah (11:27-32)

B Promise of a son and start of Abraham’s spiritual journey (12:1-9)

C Abraham lies about Sarah; Yahweh protects her in a foreign palace (12:10-20)

D Lot settles in Sodom (13:1-18)

E Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Lot militarily (14:1-24)

F Covenant with Abraham; annunciation of Ishmael (15:1-16:16)

F’ Covenant with Abraham; annunciation of Isaac (17:1-18:15)

E’ Abraham intercedes for Sodom and Lot in prayer (18:16-33)

D’ Lot flees doomed Sodom and settles in Moab (19:1-38)

C’ Abraham lies about Sarah; Yahweh protects her in foreign palace (20:1-18)

B’ Birth of son and climax of Abraham’s spiritual journey (21:1-22:19)

A’ Genealogy of Nahor (22:20-24)

A. The Promises to Abram (11:27–12:20)

This first part of this section (Gen. 11:27-12:9) begins with Yahweh’s self-revelation to Abram and His promises to give him land, make him into a great nation, and bless him personally, all so that the whole world would be blessed. Though Abram responds in faith by going, there are immediate threats the promises. First is the barrenness of his wife Sarai, which is emphasized in a chiasitic parallelism.

A Terah and his family (11:17)

B The family lives in Ur; Haran dies (11:28)

C Abram takes Sarai; Nahor takes Milcah (son of Haran) (11:29)

X Sarai is barren; she has no children (11:30)

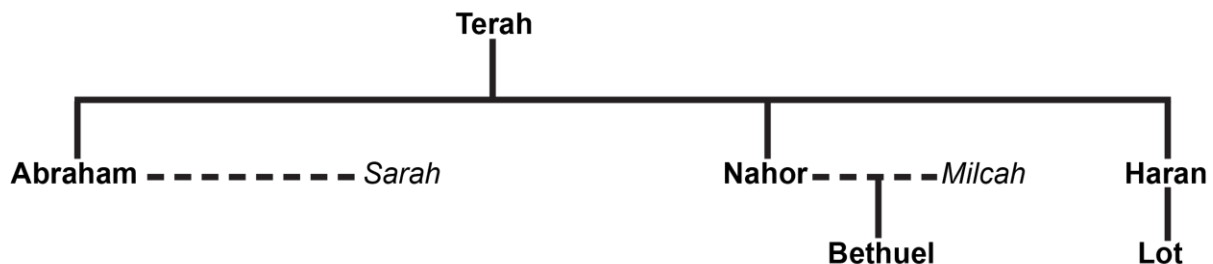
C’ Terah takes Abram, Sarai, and Lot (son of Haran) (11:31a)

B’ The family leaves Ur and settles in Haran (11:31b)

A’ Summary of Terah’s life; he dies (11:32)

Second is that the land is already occupied by a larger and morally corrupt Canaanite culture. And third, which is the focus of the second part of this section (Gen. 12:10-20), is the fact that Abram’s own lack of trust in Yahweh during the famine in Canaan and in Egypt causes the loss of his wife Sarai to Pharaoh. It is only through the intervention of Yahweh and His faithfulness to His promises that Abram and Sarai are saved, restored, and brought back to the land of Canaan.

11:27-30 The name Terah may be related to the Hebrew word *yerah* meaning “moon,” which would connect him to the Mesopotamian moon god Sin, who was the principal deity of Ur. The name Abram means “exalted father,” most likely referring to his father. Abram was born around 2100 BC. The name Sarai means “princess” (or “lady”). Sarai was the daughter of Terah by a different woman. The law did not prohibit the marrying of one’s half-sister. The meaning of the names of the others in the family are unknown. Though we are not told much about this family, we do know that according to Josh. 24:2, 14, before Yahweh came to Abram, he and his family were worshipping the pagan gods of their ancestors.



Ur was an important city state in the land of Sumer, which reached its height of influence under the kings of the third dynasty of Ur (2060-1950 BC) and revived for the last time the ancient cultural traditions of the Sumerians. The phrase “of the Chaldeans” is a later editorial addition for later readers designating the location of Ur. The Chaldeans were the ruling class in the neo-Babylonian empire in the first millennium BC.

The narrator states that Sarai was barren, which communicates a bitterness that comes with childlessness and the lack of significance in the culture (Jud. 13:2-3; 1 Sam. 1:2-8; Isa. 54:1),

especially for the woman who had no alternate career than motherhood. Without children, a couple had no purpose, no one to continue the man's name and line, no one to take care of them in their old age, and no one to bury them. In a culture that worshiped the fertility gods of children, crops, and rain, there would be a sense that the couple was cursed with barrenness by the gods. It was Sarai's barrenness that would test Abram's faith, be the greatest obstacle to the promises of Yahweh, and drive the whole story.

11:31-32 The fact that Terah is the one who moved the family up the Euphrates river from Ur to Haran shows that even at Abram's old age, his father is the patriarch in the family. Abram, Sarai, and Lot are the only ones mentioned with Terah, showing that these are the main characters in the story and may mean that Nahor and Haran does not go with Terah. The death of Terah brings an end to the genealogy account and transitions into the story of Abram.

12:1-3 The poetic nature of these verses emphasizes the importance of Yahweh's promises to Abram. Yahweh tells Abram to leave his father's house and go to a completely different land. Yahweh is calling Abram out of his pagan family and into a new life (Gen. 2:24). As a nomad in a patriarchal society, Abram, having walked away from his family and settled in a new land where he was not born, would have no land rights. He would not support the local king, so the king would not care about his rights. The only thing that would protect one's civil rights is his family, but Abram has just been told to leave them. As the firstborn in the family, Abram would be giving up becoming the head of the tribe and receiving the inheritance at his father's death. Yahweh was asking Abram to give up everything and follow Him into the unknown.

As a result of Abram's trusting Yahweh, Yahweh promises him four things. First, Yahweh would take him to a new land, which would become Abram's inheritance. The subjugation of the earth motif seen in Genesis 1-11 has been transformed into the promise of land possession. Yahweh does not immediately tell Abram where he was going; rather, it would be after he got to the land of Canaan that he would be told that this was the land Yahweh was giving him. As seen in Genesis 1-2, land is the source of life and blessing and becomes the place that one can walk with Yahweh. But land is also an inheritance to one's descendants, and at Abram's age, with no children, land means nothing with no children to leave it to as an inheritance.

Second, Yahweh promises Abram that he would become a great nation, be blessed by Yahweh, and be given a great name. The multiplication motif seen in Genesis 1-11 is now transformed into the promise of nationhood. The only way that Abram could become a great nation is if he were to have children and descendants. Thus, Yahweh is promising him a child and great number of descendants, something that that pagan gods never provided him. The contrast is that whereas the people at the Tower of Babel tried to make their own name great (Gen. 11:4), Yahweh said that He would make Abram's name great. "Make your name great" has its closest parallel in the promise to David in 2 Sam. 7:9. Other than that, only the name of Yahweh is described as "great" (Josh. 7:9; 1 Sam. 12:22; Ps. 76:1; Mal. 1:11). The implication, therefore, is that Abram's name will be great only as he obeys Yahweh and lives as His image. Yahweh would do this so that Abram would become an example of divine blessing. In light of Isa. 19:24 and Zech. 8:13 (the only other two times this phrase is used), this means that Israel would be transformed into a prime example of a blessed people. Yahweh would bless Abram so greatly that the other nations would hear of his fame and hold him up as the ultimate idea of divine blessing.

Third, Yahweh promises to bless those who bless Abram and curse those who disdain him. On those who treat Abram well Yahweh would pour out His blessings just as He did for Abram.

“Disdain” refers to illegitimate verbal assaults on Yahweh or one’s superiors (Ex. 21:17; Lev. 24:11; 2 Sam. 16:5-13). “Curse” is a judicial judgment pronounced on evildoers (Gen. 3:14, 17; 9:25; Deut. 27:15-26) and a withdrawal of Yahweh’s blessing and protection. To be cursed is graver than to be disdained. Normally with Yahweh, the punishment would fit the crime (Ex. 21:24; Lev. 24:20), but here the punishment is heightened for those who disdain His people. The idea is that justice is not left to fate or chance, rather Yahweh would intervene directly. The pronouns in “those who bless” and “he who disdains” communicate the idea that those who disdain will be fewer than those who bless. Yahweh will bless the family of Abram to such an extent that few will fail to recognize that Yahweh is on their side.

Fourth is that Abram would be a blessing to all the other nations. The “so that” communicates that the whole purpose of what Yahweh would do for Abram was to show that he could do the same for all the other nations. Abram and Israel would not become the chosen people of Yahweh because they are special or His favorites but so that Yahweh could use Israel to bless all the nations. As Israel obeys Yahweh, they would come to know Him better and become His image and be blessed like no other nation. Thus, all the other nations would see Israel as the greatest nation and want to become a part of Israel and their God. Through Israel, Yahweh would then de-scatter the world, from the judgment at the Tower of Babel, into one people group who bore His name and not their own. Thus they would once again be able to walk in the presence of Yahweh and receive the blessing of life from the land that Yahweh would give to Israel. These promises become foundational to the book of Genesis and the rest of the Scriptures; they link together the sin and rebellion of the primeval history and the growth of the family of Abraham, which will become the plan of redemption throughout the rest of Scripture. It is here that Yahweh begins to reestablish the garden/tabernacle of Yahweh on earth so that humanity can walk with Him. This is the first recorded appearance of Yahweh to a patriarch, which foreshadows His appearances at Sinai and the tabernacle. The text gives the impression that Yahweh’s calling of Abram was the first time He spoke to Abram and was the beginning of their relationship.

12:4-5 These verses make it sound like Abram did not leave Haran until after his father died (Gen. 11:31-32). However, Terah was 70 years old when he had Abram (Gen. 11:26), and Abram was 75 when Yahweh called him to leave his family in Haran (Gen. 12:4). Terah was 145 years old when Abram left Haran. That means that Abram obeyed Yahweh and left his father’s household 60 years before Terah died, at the age of 205. This shows that He put Yahweh before family loyalty and sacrificed everything to follow Him. However, the mention of Lot means that he did not leave everything from his father’s household behind. Perhaps the reason that Abram was so willing to leave everything behind and follow this new God was because the pagan gods had never spoken to him or made promises to him. In fact, he would have been seen as cursed by the gods since he had no children. The gods were selfish, immoral gods who used people for their own gain. The humans worshiped them because their lives depended on the blessing of the gods, and they hoped that their worship and sacrifices would win the approval of the gods. The gods blessed the humans because they needed the food that the humans provided for them in the sacrifices. In contrast, Yahweh speaks and promises blessing with only the command to follow Him. No other god had spoken before.

The mention of Lot foreshadows the obstacle he would become to the promises of Yahweh. First, he is a member of Abram’s father’s household who should have been left behind. Second, it becomes clear in Genesis 13-14 that Abram probably sees Lot as his heir to the promises of

Yahweh. Lot would have been the most likely candidate since Sarai was barren and Lot is a blood relative (nephew). Notice that though Yahweh has promised Abram biological descendants, He has not specifically mentioned working through Sarai. This shows that Abram does not fully understand how Yahweh is going to overcome Sarai's barrenness. Third, Lot would later reject the promises of Yahweh and put Abram and the promises in jeopardy because of his actions. The parenthetical comment about Abram's age makes the point that Abram's age is also an obstacle to the promises.

12:6-9 Yahweh brings Abram to the land of Canaan, which would have been a people with a similar culture, gods, and worldview as Mesopotamia but a far more immoral people. Canaan was the ancient region lying between the Jordan, the Dead Sea, and the Mediterranean and was known as the Levant. During the Early Bronze Period III (2700-2300 BC), Canaan was made up of flourishing city-states or many different people groups (Gen. 15:19-21). Around 2300 BC (about 200 years before Abraham), the cultures of Canaan, as well as Mesopotamia and Egypt, collapsed for unknown reasons. During the Early Bronze IV (2300-2000 BC), few sites in Canaan show permanent occupation, and some of the city states of Mesopotamia seemed to have a great influence in this region (Gen. 14:1-12). It is during the middle of the Late Bronze IV that Abram entered into Canaan. The term "Canaanites" refers to a small group of people living in the northern part of Canaan and also refers to all the groups of people living there. The Canaanites worshiped a pantheon of fertility gods with Ba'al as the head deity.

Abram travels all the way into the center of Canaan. Moreh means "teacher," and Shechem was a city that lay in the heart of Canaan. Yahweh appears to Abram a second time to specifically promise him the land of Canaan. Here, Yahweh links the promise of descendants and land together in succinct promise: the promise of seed and land. In the garden, seed (be fruitful and multiply) and land (the garden) were both present. However, in Genesis 3-11 the land is lost, yet the seed through the genealogies continues to develop. But here, the seed and land are brought back together, except now it is only for a specific people group.

By Abram building an altar separate from the pagan ones, he separates himself from them and dedicates the land to Yahweh. As the creator of both land and humanity, Yahweh has every right to transfer the land rights from the Canaanites to Abram. The land is now legally his, but he does not obtain it yet. The parenthetical comment about the Canaanites living the land reveals them as a third obstacle to the promises of Yahweh. They were far more numerous and stronger than Abram, and his small group and had been occupying the land longer. Also, their immorality presented a threat and temptation to compromise of the family of Abram as the image of God.

Next, Abram moves farther south to set up camp between Bethel and Ai. Notice that he stays out of the cities; first, because they are already occupied, and second, the city is a place of moral compromise, rebellion, and the breakdown of the family. Abram builds another altar to Yahweh and worships Him. The deliberate mention of calling on the name of Yahweh implies more than prayer. It suggests that Abram worships Yahweh in a formal way on a regular basis (Gen. 4:26; 21:33; 26:25; Zeph. 3:9). Abram continues to the Negev, the most southern part of Canaan. Abram's journey from the northern tip the southern tip was his claiming the land.

"These words of promise and acts of faith set the tone for the whole Abraham story... that is, they reveal, the divine plan for Abraham. He is to father children, inherit a land, enjoy, divine protection, and be a source of blessing to the world. This story is typological in that it is the first in a series of episodes in which God speaks and the patriarch usually responds in faithful

obedience, a pattern repeated many times in Genesis, not just in the Abraham cycle but also in the Isaac and Jacob cycles as well.”⁹¹

“This narrative thus looks forward to the conquest of the land, and beyond that, to the establishment of the Davidic empire. David himself was promised “a great name” (2 Sam 7:9), and he made Israel “a great nation.” But that did not exhaust the scope of these promises. Ps 47:9 encourages all the princes of the peoples to acknowledge the God of Abraham. The prophets, of course, look forward to a day when all men will recognize God’s presence in Israel (e.g., Isa 2:2-4), when the curse of Babel will be reversed so that “all of them may call upon the name of the LORD” (Zeph. 3:9). But most interesting are the specific allusions to Gen 12 in Isa 19:24, where Israel is going to be a blessing in the midst of the earth alongside her archenemies Egypt and Assyria. Jer. 4:2 also makes reference to these promises. If Israel repents, he says, “then nations shall bless themselves in him, and in him shall they glory.” The NT looks on the advent of Christ as ushering in the age in which all the nations will be blessed through Abraham (Acts 3:25; Gal 3:8). And his faith is held up as a model of God’s dealings with all men (Rom 4; Gal 3); in particular his willingness to forsake his homeland is an example to us who should look for “the city... whose builder and maker is God” (Heb. 11:8-10).”⁹²

⁹¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 282.

⁹² Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 283.



12:10-16 Unlike Egypt, which had the ever-flowing Nile as a source of water, the land of Canaan was very hilly and dependent upon rain for life. A famine could be devastating to Abram's herds; however, he was never told to leave Canaan. This could have been an opportunity for Yahweh to demonstrate His power and provision, but because of Abram's lack of faith, he seeks Egypt for refuge instead of seeking Yahweh.

Sarai at the age of 65 (Gen. 12:4; 17:17) is considered so beautiful that Abram fears that he will be killed and she will be taken. Her beauty is affirmed by the fact that Pharaoh does take her. Abram's fear suggests that Pharaoh was known for taking whatever women he chose and probably killing the husband to remove any threat of competition. Abram might have felt secure in Canaan but feels threatened in Egypt because of the different language and culture; indeed, the Egyptians would have accepted him less than those in Canaan would have. And without a tribal family, no one could protect his civil rights. Rather than trusting Yahweh to take care of him, Abram chooses to handle the situation himself.

By claiming he is Sarai's brother—and technically she was his half-sister—Abram would not be seen as a threat. There has been much discussion that this wife-sister marriage, according to the Nuzi tablets⁹³, would have afforded their marriage greater protection. However, recently many scholars have rejected that this status can be found in the Nuzi tablets. Regardless of whether there is truth to the wife-sister marriage, Abram's actions are not as selfish as they seem. Abram thought that he could protect his wife better as her brother, with promises of suitors, than as her husband (Gen. 24:55; 34:13-17). He presumes, as was the cultural custom, that there would be negotiations (as Laban does later for his sister Rebekah; Gen. 24:29-33, 50-60), giving him time to react and get away with her. The fact that Sarai is silent (as with Adam in the garden with Eve while being tempted by the serpent; Gen. 3:6) shows that she is a willing participant in the plan.

However, the plan backfires when Pharaoh does not think that that he has to negotiate and simply takes her to be his own wife. The Hebrew word "taken" can be used to describe all aspects of marriage (Gen. 25:1; 34:9, 16; Lev. 21:7, 13; Deut. 20:7). Both Sarai and the trees of the garden are described as beautiful and pleasant in appearance (Gen. 2:9; 12:11). Thus there is a seeing and a taking of the desirable person or fruit (Gen. 3:6-7; 12:15-16). Pharaoh sets his own price by providing Abram with a lot of livestock and servants. The fact that Yahweh sends plagues suggests that Pharaoh actually did sleep with Sarai. This is a serious threat to the promises of Yahweh, for now Abram has no wife to provide him with children. She has been defiled, and if she becomes pregnant, Pharaoh could lay claim to the child and the promises.

12:17-20 The Hebrew word *nega* often refers to "skin diseases" (Lev. 13-14; 2 Kgs. 15:5), seen as the consequence of serious sin; note that a healed leper had to offer a guilt offering (Lev. 14:2). This sacrifice was also required after adultery with a slave girl (Lev. 19:20-22). As common in the First Testament, Yahweh's lack of direct interaction and vocal silence shows His disapproval. Yahweh honors His promise of cursing those who disdained Abram, and His striking of Pharaoh's household with a disease shows His disapproval of Pharaoh's reputation and actions as well.

Pharaoh is extremely upset with Abram because of his dishonesty. Pharaoh had committed adultery. Adultery was considered a great sin, regardless of social status, deserving of the death penalty all throughout the ancient Near East. "What have you done?" was asked by Yahweh of

⁹³ Nuzi was a Mesopotamian city halfway up the Tigris River (in modern-day Iraq) during the third millennium BC. The Nuzi tablets are Cuneiform writing found from this time period.

Eve (Gen. 3:13) and of Cain (Gen. 4:10). The leniency of Pharaoh is remarkable and shows the protection of Yahweh over Abram. The last word belongs to Pharaoh, showing Abram's acknowledged guilt.

All three wife-sister stories (Gen. 12, 20, 26) have in common the fact that the foreign monarchs show more concern for morality than did the patriarchs. Abram did not show faith in Yahweh, but the Pharaoh did. Abram failed to be a blessing to the world as he was told he would be (Gen. 12:2-3). He could not find security through his own intelligence or wit; only Yahweh could keep him safe and provide for him.

Abram's entrance into Egypt and the plagues that result in his exit out of Egypt foreshadow Israel's times in Egypt and the plagues that result in their exodus.

“Abram, like Jacob, was driven into Egypt because of famine. There Abram feared that he would be killed but that his wife would be spared. The policy of a later Pharaoh involved killing boy babies but sparing the girls (Exod. 1:16). The Israelites were given gold and jewelry on leaving Egypt (Exod. 12:35), and Abram too was enriched by his stay there. In both cases a heaven sent plague prompted the release of the Israelites, and similar instructions were given by the Pharaohs for both departures (Exod. 11:1; 12:32) and the same verb describes the expulsion. These parallels show that “Scripture wished to foreshadow in the tales of the patriarchs the history of their descendants... In the account of how Abram went down to Egypt, what befell him there and how he went forth from there, the Torah presages as it were, the migration of the Israelites to Egypt after they had settled in the land of Canaan, their servitude and their liberation” (Cassuto, 2:336). This interpretation of Abram's experiences in Egypt as prefiguring those of Israel seems to be confirmed by 15: 13-16, where the Egyptian bondage is specifically prophesied.”⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 291.

B. The Blessings of Victory (13:1–14:24)

In this section, the narrator develops the faith of Abram as he learned and responded in the previous chapters to the revelation of who Yahweh is. Abram begins to respond in faith and reap great blessings, whereas Lot will choose to walk away and will reap calamity. The events of Genesis 13 form a chiasmic parallel emphasizing Lot's choice of Sodom over the promises of Yahweh. It is in this section that Abram comes to the realization that Lot is not his heir to the promises.

A Abram at altar in Bethel with contentious Lot (13:3-7)

B Abram's speech: his offer of the land (13:8-9)

X Lot's choice of Sodom (13:10-13)

B' Yahweh's speech: His offer of the land (13:14-17)

A' Abram at his Hebron altar alone (13:18)

The motif of nationhood is also very important in these chapters with the disputes over the land and then Abram acting as a military nation when he battles the four nations of Mesopotamia and then receives blessings from Melchizedek, who is a king.

13:1-4 Abram returns to Bethel in Canaan (Gen. 13:1-4), where he should have been in the first place (this is implied by Gen 13:3 as well). Notice that the text never mentions whether the famine had ended. The parenthetical statement reminds the reader that the wealth that Abram has just gained is the result of Yahweh's faithfulness to His promises. The return to the altar shows that Abram is trying to recapture his previous experience with Yahweh. The difference is that he does not have to rebuild the altar, implying that promises still stand.⁹⁵ Abram demonstrates his faith by once again worshiping Yahweh there.

13:5-9 Abram and Lot's livestock have become so numerous that their men are not getting along over whose animals get to graze where and when. The Canaanites are mentioned again as a threat to the promises but also as a revealing of the people to whom Lot would be moving closer. The Perizzites were a social class of Canaan's descendants driven from the cities and living in the open country.

Abram solves the problem by giving up his rights and desires and allowing Lot to choose which land he desires. Abram had learned in Egypt that Yahweh was extremely generous in His blessing even when Abram did not deserve it. Abram's faith in Yahweh allows him to act as the image of God here and to be generous with what he has and with what would be given to him. When peaceful community is not possible, Yahweh prefers mutual separation (Acts 15:39; 1 Cor. 7:12-15).

13:10-13 Lot sees, desires, and chooses the region of the Jordan River north of the Dead Sea. This territory was well watered due to the natural river that flowed through it. The narrator alludes to the garden of Eden and to the land of Egypt for comparison. Just as Eve desired the tree in the garden of Eden, so Lot desires the fertile valley. Later, memories of Egypt with its water will cause the Israelites to want to leave the wilderness and turn back to Egypt, abandoning the covenant and the Promised land. In contrast, the land that is left for Abram is dependent on the rains, which only Yahweh can bring (Deut. 11:10-12). Lot's choice of the better land shows that he is willing to promote himself at the disadvantage of his uncle. The parenthetical statement

⁹⁵ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 296.

“before Yahweh destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah” shows that things are not as good as they appear to Lot. Apart from Gen. 38:9, the Hebrew word “destroyed” or “obliterated” is used only of the destruction of the flood and cities.

Notice that Abram gives Lot a choice between the north and the south in the land that Yahweh promised. Lot chooses instead a third option, in the east outside of the land that Yahweh promised. Num. 34:2-12 states that the eastern border of the Promised land is marked by the Dead Sea. This means that Lot was choosing to live on the edge of Canaan, if not beyond it (Gen. 10:19). Though offered to share in the promises of the land of Canaan, he chooses to reject it. His traveling eastward may echo Adam and Eve and Cain, who went eastward after sinning (Gen. 3:24; 4:16).⁹⁶ It is in this region beyond Canaan that Lot’s descendants, the Ammonites and Moabites, would live. In the spirit of Cain, Lot chooses to move toward the city, and like Adam, Eve, and Cain after their judgment, he moves eastward. Now that Lot has made his choice, the narrator mentions again Sodom but now adds that they were “great sinners,” which is used only here. The rare phrase stresses the severity of Sodom and Gomorrah’s sin. Sinners in the Torah face sudden death (Num. 16:38).

13:14-18 Yahweh affirms Abram’s willingness to give up his rights in order to make peace with Lot by reaffirming His promises of land. The promise of the land is repeated here but with greater emphasis. First, the land is more precisely defined. Second, it is given to Abram as well as to his descendants. Third, it is given to them forever. Yahweh’s allusion to “dust” suggests physical seed. The “stars,” given later (Gen. 15:5), are an allusion to the heavenly or spiritual seed, in addition to physical seed. The walking of the land symbolizes Abram’s legal right to own the land. Ancient kings would assert their right to rule their territory by walking its borders. In contrast to Lot, Abram remains in the countryside connected to the land, where the family can prosper, and not in the city.

14:1-12 The narrator lists four nations from Mesopotamia who went to war against five nations from around the Dead Sea in Canaan. In the north, the first king was from Shinar, which was the region of Babylonia. The kings from Shinar, Elam, and Ellasar are all from regions located in Mesopotamia (the land of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers), whereas Tidal is a Hittite royal name from Anatolia, region (modern-day Turkey). In the south (Gen. 14:2), the kings mentioned were from the peninsula of land that juts into the eastern side of the Dead Sea. The kings of Sodom and Gomorrah have names compounded with “evil” and “wicked.”

For twelve years, the kings in the southeastern part of Canaan had served and paid a tax to the kings of Mesopotamia. Most likely, the kings of the north did not want to expend the resources to rule over Canaan, but they wanted control over the trade routes. They were powerful enough to force a tax from the kings in the south, probably for the right to use the trade routes. In the thirteenth year, the kings of the south decided that they were strong enough to break free from the kings of the north. The kings of the north, wanting to keep the trade routes between Mesopotamia and Egypt under their control, came down and defeated the kings of the south and then conquered even more of the surrounding territories. They also took many possessions and people as slaves. The significance of this battle becomes clear when the narrator states that Lot and his family were among the captives. The narrator also states that Lot had now moved into the

⁹⁶ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 297.

city of Sodom. Thus, Lot had reaped the consequence of the corruption and rebellion that comes with the city and the desire for control.

Though many of these names seem insignificant to the modern-day reader and one may ask why so much space is dedicated to them, they do serve a purpose even for readers today. These names root the Biblical stories in history and validate the authenticity of Scripture. The fact that archeologists and historians can validate most of these names and battles (there are always more excavations yet to dig up) gives credence to the trustworthiness of Scriptures and its other stories. Out of the 27 religious books in the world, the Bible is the only one rooted in history, mentioning names of people, places, and empires that have been validated by historians.

14:13-16 Abram is called “the Hebrew,” a meaning difficult to determine. This was not a term that Israelites used of themselves but what non-Israelites called the Israelites (Gen. 39:14; 41:12). The Habiru/Apiru were well known in the ancient Near East and are referred to in a lot of texts from the late third millennium and on. It seems to be more of a social characterization than an ethnic. The Habiru were usually seen on the outskirts of society, as foreign slaves, mercenaries, or marauders.⁹⁷

The narrator informs the reader that by this time, Abram has formed alliances with some of the surrounding people. It is significant that people of Canaan want to ally themselves with Abram, a foreigner. This means that Abram has become so blessed by Yahweh that others are seeing this and wanting to become a part of it in fulfillment of the promises (Gen. 12:1-3).

Abram takes 318 trained men and pursues the four allied armies that had taken Lot. If Abram had that many *young men*, then his group must have totaled over a thousand people. The El-Amarna tablets⁹⁸ show that a fighting force of three hundred men was a sizable army for Canaan.⁹⁹ Trained men would not be a professionally trained standing army but herdsmen who knew how to fight to protect their families and herds. Abram pursues Lot not only because family loyalty was important in the ancient Near East, but also he probably saw Lot as his heir to the promises of Yahweh. The fact that he divides his men and attacks at night in order to flank the enemy shows that Abram is strategic about how he fights the enemy. The fact that he is able to defeat and drive away four allied armies shows that Yahweh is the source of his victory (Gen. 15:1).

So far in Abram’s journey of faith, Yahweh had shown himself to be a God whose power transcends regions. First, in the land of Mesopotamia, where the high god Marduke was the patron deity and ruled the land, it was Yahweh who spoke to Abram and promised to protect and provide for him. Second, in the land of Egypt, where Ra was the high god, Yahweh protected Abram and blessed him, despite his lack of faith, showing Himself to be superior to the Egyptian gods and Pharaoh himself. And now in the land of Canaan, where Ba’al was high god, Yahweh showed that He was able to defeat the people of another god in the land of another god. Unlike the pagan gods, Yahweh is not limited in power or by geography.

14:17-20 When Abram returns from battle, he is greeted by the king of Sodom and by Melchizedek, the king of Salem. Melchizedek can be translated “My king is Sedeq,” Milku is righteous,” or “my king is righteous/legitimate” according to Heb. 7:2. The city name Salem

⁹⁷ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 313.

⁹⁸ The El-Amarna tablets are a collection of clay tablets from Egypt. They are written in the cuneiform from the time of Amenophis III and Amenophis I, kings of the XVIIIth Egyptian Dynasty (1480-1460 BC).

⁹⁹ ANET, p. 485.

means “peace.” The Jebusites occupied Salem, and by the time of Joshua’s conquest, it would be called Jerusalem (Josh. 10:1). Melchizedek was both king and priest, a combination not found in later Judaism. Melchizedek is the first priest mentioned in Scriptures. He is an enigma in his origins and identity, yet in this mystery, he was still merely a man who worshiped the same God as Abram. We know that he was not the pre-incarnate Christ because the author of Hebrews compares the resurrected Christ to Melchizedek (Heb. 7), and it would not make sense to compare someone to himself in order to prove his superiority. Neither was he an angel, for Christ is shown to be superior to the angels in the book of Hebrews (Heb. 1-2) and then is shown to be similar to Melchizedek.

Melchizedek brings out bread and wine to Abram and blesses him. Bread and wine were the royal food and drink of the day. They were also seen as a priestly gift that accompanied animal sacrifices (Num. 15:2-10; 1 Sam. 1:24; 10:3). They were often used in covenant making. Many writers have commented on their symbolic significance (Gen. 27:28; Deut. 7:12-14; 33:26-29; 2 Kgs. 18:32; Ps. 104:13-15; Prov. 3:9-10).¹⁰⁰ These are also symbols of the New Covenant that Jesus made with humanity (Gen. 49:10-11; grain: Matt. 14:13-21; 26:26; Jn. 6:25-59; wine: Jn. 2:1-11; 6:53-59; 18:1-8; Matt. 26:27-29). This is significant in the light that Hebrews 7 compares Melchizedek to Jesus.

Three times Melchizedek blesses Abram, which looks back to Gen. 12:1-3. The phrase “creator of sky and land” is a metonymy for Yahweh as the source of all life, joy, and preservation in the midst of the everyday trials of life. This speaks of Yahweh as not just Creator but as one who is intimately involved in the present reality as humanity’s helper (Ps. 115:15; 121:2; 124:8; 134:3; 146:6). Abram then pays a tribute to him as a first fruits offering to Yahweh for the victory that he had received. Through this, Abram acknowledges that it was not by his might but by the power of Yahweh that he had been victorious.

14:21-24 The king of Sodom asks for his possessions back and then offers Abram a reward. He mentions giving before taking, revealing his desire for his possessions over the desire to reward Abram for his rescue of his people. Abram does not accept the gifts of the king of Sodom because he wants it to be clear that whatever blessings or success he has come from Yahweh and not through the means of those who represent pagan gods. Through his actions, Abram testifies to Yahweh as the only true God. “Solemnly swear” is literally “I have raised my hand,” which emphasizes the solemnity.

Melchizedek is portrayed as more generous than the king of Sodom. Melchizedek gives Abram bread and wine, but the king of Sodom gives him nothing. Melchizedek begins by blessing Abram, whereas the king of Sodom starts by saying nothing, and when he does speak, it is very grudging. Melchizedek is a reminder that Israel would find faith in the land. The king of Sodom could have found blessing in Abram, but his decision to reject the ministry of Abram puts him on the path to doom (Gen. 19).

The demonstration of Yahweh’s power and faithful support is the clearest emphasis of this story. Yahweh reveals Himself as one who continues to bless Abram and protect Him from military threats despite his failure in Egypt. The narrator develops two responses to the character and promise of Yahweh: Lot, who rejects the promises and chooses the attractiveness of the city, and Abram, who demonstrates faith and clings to the promises. The narrator shows that Abram’s

¹⁰⁰ See Donald J. Wiseman, “Abraham in History and Tradition. Part II: Abraham the Prince,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 134:535 (July-September 1977), p. 236.

faith in Yahweh is growing as he sees Yahweh as the sole provider for him both in blessings and in victory in the face of opposition. Even so Abram did not sit back and expect Yahweh to hand everything to him; rather, he joined Yahweh in the obtaining of the promises and victories of life, just as Yahweh intended with Adam and Eve as His image bearers. With Abram, the narrator has begun to develop what it means to walk with Yahweh.

C. The Cutting of the Covenant (15:1-21)

This is one of the most central passages in the Abraham story, for here Abram is declared righteous by his faith, and Yahweh binds Himself to Abram in a covenant. Abraham becomes a model to his descendants. Whatever the circumstances, they are to have faith in Yahweh. This is a crucial point for it demonstrates that faith is not based on obedience to the requirements of the law but on a trust relationship with Yahweh that results in obedience.

In making a covenant with Abram, Yahweh made Himself accountable to Abram in His willingness to lower Himself into a contractual agreement. This shows how important it was to the God of creation that humanity have a relationship with Himself. Genesis 15 uses an alternating parallel to tie the request of Abram to the response of Yahweh.

A Yahweh makes a promise to Abram, referring to Himself as “Yahweh” (15:1)

B Abram questions Yahweh, addressing Him as “sovereign Yahweh” (15:2-3)

C Yahweh reassures him by a symbolic act of the display of the stars as reference to the seed (15:4-6)

A’ Yahweh makes a promise to Abram, referring to Himself as “Yahweh” (15:7)

B’ Abram questions Yahweh, addressing Him as “sovereign Yahweh” (15:8)

C’ Yahweh reassures him by a symbolic act of the display of the torch and smoking pot (15:9-21)

15:1 “The word of Yahweh came” is a phrase used to introduce a revelation to a prophet (1 Sam. 15:10; Hos 1:1). But in Genesis it is found only here and in Gen. 15:4. Abraham is actually called a prophet in Gen. 20:7. The word “vision” is rare in the Bible and is used of Balaam (Num. 24:4, 16) and contemporaries of Ezekiel (Ezek. 13:7). Second and third millennium Akkadian text show that prophetic visions were a recognized form of revelation. “Do not be afraid” is a common phrase used to introduce an oracle of salvation (Gen. 21:17; 26:24; 35:17; 43:23; 46:3; 50:19, 20; Isa. 7:4; 10:24).¹⁰¹ This prepares the way for the prophecy of the Egyptian bondage of Israel in Gen. 15:13-16. The Hebrew word “shield” (*magen*) is a military metaphor, referencing Yahweh as a shield who protects His warrior (2 Sam. 22:3, 31; Ps. 3:3; 115:9-11). This is a pun with the Hebrew word “delivered” (*miggen*) in Gen. 14:20, connecting Yahweh to a specific event and showing that He approved of Abram’s actions in his battle against the four allied nations of Mesopotamia.

15:2-3 “Sovereign Yahweh” is found only here and Gen. 15:8. Sovereign is used to address Yahweh in intercessory prayer (Gen. 18:3, 27, 30-32; 19:8; 20:4). It is not found outside the Abraham story.¹⁰² The fact that Abram addresses Yahweh in this way shows that even though he is struggling to see the fulfillment of the promises, he does not doubt Yahweh in His ability or faithfulness. Three times Abram has been promised a multitude of descendants (Gen. 12:2, 7; 13:16). Childlessness appears in Lev. 20:20-21 and Jer. 22:30 as divine judgment. Abram’s situation contradicts the general view in Genesis that divine blessing involves being fruitful and multiplying (Gen. 1:28; 9:1; 26:24; 35:11), as well as the specific promises of Yahweh made to Abram.¹⁰³ Because of his age and the time that has passed since Yahweh first came to him,

¹⁰¹ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 327.

¹⁰² See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 327.

¹⁰³ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 328.

Abram can only see the fulfillment in his servant Eliezar or in Lot. The Hebrew word *ben-mesheq*, translated “Damascus,” is used only here, so it is very difficult to know the exact meaning and how it is being used with the name Eliezar. Lawrence A. Turner has proposed that the name “Eliezar” may also be a title or position and that the heir in Gen. 15:2 may be Lot. Abram specifically mentions that this heir is one born of his household (father’s family), which would only include Lot. Abram may still have seen Lot as the heir to the promise because he could not have a child of his own. Lot as the heir would fit better with the context since Lot is an ever-present character (Gen. 12-14, 18-19) and because of the cultural and emotional connection Lot has to Abram. Eliezar does not appear any other time in the story, so it would be odd that he would be mentioned as an heir. Thus, Abram’s concern is not in that Yahweh will not provide him with a great nation but that Lot has shown himself to not be a man of moral character and has not shown faith in Yahweh or His promises.

15:4-5 Yahweh makes the point that this man would not be the heir, referring to him as “this man” rather than mentioning his name. This is significant, for often in ancient Near East the use of the name would bring legitimacy to inheritance and adoption cases. For the first time, Yahweh specifically mentions that the fulfillment would come through a child from Abram’s own body. This is significant because Abram’s age would push his faith to a whole new level. It is also important to observe, in light of the next chapter, that Yahweh does not mention the child coming from Sarai as well. Yahweh then emphasizes with a visual from the sky how great the fulfillment of the promise would be. The distinction between the “dust of the earth” (Gen. 13:16) and “the stars” here is a distinction between physical descendants of birth and spiritual descendants of faith, as mentioned above.

15:6 Abram responds to this revelation by believing the words of Yahweh. The word for “believe” has the idea of considering something dependable and acting on it. The fact that Abram believes is an expression of faith, and so Yahweh declares him as righteous. Righteousness in the Torah always applies to humans. In legal contexts, the righteous are those who should be acquitted by the judge (Deut. 25:1). Thus, in the spiritual realm, the righteous are those who are acquitted by Yahweh and are thus saved (Ps. 1:6; 75:10). It is behavior pleasing to Yahweh (Gen. 18:19; 30:33; 38:26). However, Abram is not described as *doing* righteousness but that his *faith* is credited to him as righteousness. Faith is the right response to Yahweh and is evidence of steadfast commitment or loyalty. Even though Abram will not always be obedient, there is a clear demonstration of a faith in the character of Yahweh that leads him to trust in the promises of Yahweh. The more he comes to know Yahweh, the more likely he is to obey him. Faith leads to righteous actions.

What does faith look like in the Bible? Faith is not something that you wish for or believe will happen because you want it to. Humans do not have the power to bring things about just because they believe in it. Faith is based on the revealed promises of Yahweh. For example, you cannot have faith that someone will be healed of cancer if Yahweh has not specifically promised that. You can only know for certain that which He has revealed and promised, thus you can have faith only in His promises. Faith is then rooted in the past but oriented toward the future. You can only know the promises of Yahweh and trust Him if there is a past relationship where you have come to know Him and see Him as trustworthy. In this way you are then able look toward the future fulfillment of the promises based on His revealed character.

So, faith is, first, based on a knowledge of the nature, character, and will of Yahweh. Abram had been following Yahweh long enough to see Yahweh at work and thus come to know who He is.

Likewise, Yahweh had revealed His will and plan for Abram's life. Second, in faith one then agrees with the character and plan of Yahweh. Plenty of people know who Yahweh is in the Bible but do not agree with this revelation or accept Him as God. Abram demonstrated his agreement by continuing to follow Yahweh over the years and his expressed belief in this chapter. Third, faith involves a love commitment. This means that one has to take risks and trust in character of Yahweh, which will then lead to changed behavior as one continues to experience the faithfulness of Yahweh. This changed behavior is what leads to doing righteousness. Fourth, true faith leads to hope in that the promises of Yahweh will come about. Hope is not wishing something will happen; rather, it is a desire plus expectancy, based on the character of Yahweh that one has come to know and depend on. Therefore, one can be confident and expect that what Yahweh says will come to pass for the one who trusts Him and has faith in Him.

15:7-8 This is one of four passages in Genesis where God refers to Himself as Yahweh. The use of the name here helps enhance the analogy between Yahweh's call of Abram and His later redemption of Israel from Egypt, which is prefigured in Gen. 15:11-18.¹⁰⁴ Yahweh reminds Abram that He was the only one who had brought Abram out of his past life and into this new land where He has been providing for him.

Abram's asking for a sign does not signal unbelief (Jud. 6:36-40; 2 Kgs. 20:8-11), but not asking for a sign can demonstrate a lack of faith (Isa. 7:10-14). The narrator makes it clear that Abram's faith is not in question here because of the statement in Gen. 15:6. Abram as a physical person in a physical world seeks a tangible sign of his hope in Yahweh. Yahweh responds by making a covenant with him based on the promises of Gen. 12:1-3. "Complaint and faith are not antithetical; complaint is based on taking God seriously."¹⁰⁵

15:9-11 The act of cutting animals in half was a common way in the ancient Near East for two kings to make a covenant with each other. Both kings would contribute animals of their own and then cut them in half, laying them on both sides of the path (Jer. 34:18). By both kings walking between the pieces together, they were saying, in essence, "May this happen to me if I do not honor the covenant." Covenants were only valued upon the shedding of blood. What is interesting is that all the animals listed are sacrificial animals. These animals would then represent Israel or priests, who are only able to come into covenant relationship with Yahweh through the sacrificial system.

The "birds of prey" are seen as unclean (Lev. 11:13-19; Deut. 14:12-18) and represent foreign nations of the Gentiles (Ezek. 17:3, 7; Zech. 5:9), most likely Egypt. By driving them away, Abram symbolically defends his inheritance from foreign enemies. Gen. 22:16-18 and 26:5 state that Abram's faithful obedience to the covenant is what guaranteed the blessings for his descendants. Ex. 2:24 and Deut. 9:5 state that the exodus is grounded in the promises to the patriarchs. Abram is not just the archetype patriarch who has faith in Yahweh, but he is also the conquering king who has been promised a great victory over his enemies.

15:12-16 A "deep sleep," "fear," and "darkness" are used of receiving a vision or revelation from Yahweh and all suggest awe-inspiring divine activity (Gen. 2:21; Ex. 10:21, 22; 14:20; 15:16; 23:27; Deut. 4:11; Josh. 2:9; Isa. 29:10). Abram's falling asleep is symbolic of his death, which is followed by the prophecy of Abram's descendants going into Egypt after his death.

¹⁰⁴ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, p. 231.

¹⁰⁵ Bruce K. Waltke. *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 243.

The significance of Yahweh's statement here is that not only does He tell Abram that his descendants would go through a period of trial, but He also lets them know that the enslavement would not be a threat to the fulfillment of the promises; it is part of Yahweh's divine plan. In accordance with His promises, He would deliver Israel. He promised that they would come out of the land with great wealth (Ex. 3:22; 12:36). Yahweh assures Abram that he will be buried in the land with his fathers in peace.

The reason Yahweh gives for Abram's descendants having to wait so long to occupy the land of Canaan is that the sin of the Amorites was not yet ripe. The name Amorite is sometimes used as a term to refer to all the earlier inhabitants of Palestine (Gen. 48:22; Deut. 1:44; Jos. 2:10). Here it is used as a synecdoche for the ten nations listed in Gen. 15:19-21. The Ugaritic texts (from an ancient Syrian port city on the coast of the Mediterranean Sea ca. 1400 BC) document the sins of the Amorites. They make mention of the gods that they worshiped degrading themselves in violent acts and deviant sexual behavior. The Bible makes it clear that the Amorites deserved this fate (Lev. 18:24-27; Deut. 9:4-5; Amos 2:9).

As a holy and just God, Yahweh would not punish the sins of the Amorites until their sins were full. Knowing all things, He knew when that time would come, and He ties together the time of Israel's enslavement with His divine longsuffering for the Amorites. It is not until the nations are completely consumed with wickedness that Yahweh would dispose of them (Lev. 18:24-28; 20:23). This can be seen with the flood (Gen. 6:5, 12) and the exile of the Jews (Deut. 28:36-37; 2 Kgs. 24:14; 25:7).

15:17-18a The term "smoking firepot" is used of a large earthenware jar. The dough was stuck to the side of the jar and then baked by putting charcoal inside the jar or putting the jar near the fire. The smoking firepot and flaming torch were the same implements used in Mesopotamian rituals designed to ward off evil. The smoke and fire are symbolic of the presence of Yahweh (Ex. 13:21; 19:18; 20:18). These symbols will appear again in the burning bush (Ex. 3:1; Deut. 33:16) and the shekinah glory of Yahweh that will lead Israel out of Egypt (Ex. 13:21-22; 14:24; 33:9-10; Deut. 31:15).

This makes the promises of Gen. 12:1-3 an official covenant—the third covenant Yahweh has made with humanity. Here Yahweh not only binds himself to Abram and his descendants to honor His promises, but His walking between the animals, which represent Israel, also demonstrates His desire to live among Israel and to have a relationship with them. The rest of the Torah insists that the Abrahamic Covenant is the foundation to the exodus (Ex. 2:24; Deut. 9:5). Yahweh is thus walking among Israel; "I will walk among you and be your God" (Lev. 26:12; Deut. 23:15). This covenant makes Yahweh unique to all other gods. This is by far the most important and foundational covenant, for it is upon this covenant that Yahweh will build all the others that will lead to the coming and fulfillment of the messiah. Whereas the Sinaitic and Deuteronomistic covenants were agreements imposing obligations on both Yahweh and Israel, the Abrahamic Covenant is based on promises made by Yahweh alone.

Though there are no official obligations placed on Abram, this does not mean that Yahweh is not holding Abram to obedience. The later command to obey, in Gen. 17:1-2, 9, makes it clear that Abram has a responsibility in maintaining the covenant. Yahweh wants to have a relationship with Abram; however, Abram is responsible as well. This covenant will become unconditional with the faith of Abraham in his willingness to sacrifice his son (Gen. 22).

15:18b-21 In this covenant, Yahweh promises Abram and his descendants all the land between the Euphrates River in Mesopotamia and the Wadi El 'Arish, which is the geographical boundary between Canaan and Egypt. Yahweh later specifies this detail in Num. 34:5 and Josh. 15:4, 47. Never has Israel obtained all this land, so the promises are yet to be fulfilled for Israel. This means Israel still has a role to play in the kingdom of Yahweh.



D. The Birth of Ishmael (16:1-16)

The birth of Ishmael not only showed Abram’s attempt to get the promises of Yahweh through his own works, but it also revealed Yahweh’s ability and desire to bring something good out of Abram’s lack of faith. The first scene (Gen. 16:1-6) and the second scene (Gen. 16:7-14) are tied together with the use of the verb “fled” and the titles “mistress” and “maidservant.” The first scene (Gen. 16:1-6) is an alternating parallel.

A Sarai proposes (16:1-2a)

B Abram agrees (16:2b)

C Sarai’s actions (16:3)

D Hagar’s reaction (16:4)

A’ Sarai proposes (16:5)

B’ Abram agrees (16:6a)

C’ Sarai’s actions (16:6b)

D’ Hagar’s reaction (16:6c)

The second scene (Gen. 16:7-14) follows a concentric parallel, emphasizing the angel’s prophecies to take care of Ishmael as a child of the promises.

A The angel finds Hagar by the spring (16:7)

B Dialogue between the angel and Hagar (16:8-9)

C The angel’s first prophecy (16:10)

C’ The angel’s second prophecy (16:11-12)

B’ Hagar’s worshiping response (16:13)

A’ Hagar names the spring (16:14)

16:1-2 The story begins with the fact that after ten years since the promise of Yahweh Sarai still has no children contrasted with the fact that she had an Egyptian maidservant by the name of Hagar who could have children. The word “maidservant” refers to a personal female servant owned by a rich woman, not a slave girl answerable to the male. The practice of surrogate motherhood for an infertile wife through her maidservant was an acceptable practice during this time, as evidenced by Gen. 30:3-12 and the law codes of the time. This introduces a temptation to not trust in Yahweh and to appeal to the laws and customs of the culture to bring about the fulfillment of Yahweh’s promises. Hagar’s name seems to be of Semitic rather than Egyptian origin and may mean “flight,” pointing to her eventually running away from the family.

Not only has Sarai not had any children since Yahweh first came to Abram, but Sarai had already been carrying for years the burden of being a failure as a woman. Having lots of children was the sign of being a successful woman in the ancient Near East. Sarai fears that Yahweh’s promises would not be fulfilled, so she decides that she needs to take matters into her own hands.

Technically, using Hagar would work because Abram would still be the father and because Hagar legally belongs to Sarai. However, even though using a maidservant was the custom of the ancient Near East, this was never Yahweh’s desire (Gen. 2:24; Matt. 19:4-5).

16:3-5 Abram takes matters into his own hands rather than depending on Yahweh to produce an heir. However, if this were what Yahweh had meant when He said He would make Abram into a great nation, then He would have had Abram do this a long time ago. In fact, Abram did not need

Yahweh in order to carry out his plan. Yahweh, on the other hand, had planned to do the impossible—to give him a son through Sarai at a very old age. Yahweh also wanted a man who had walked with Him for a long time and thus would raise the boy with the wisdom of Yahweh and not of the world. There is a parallel here with Eve’s taking the fruit of the tree and giving it to her husband Adam in Gen. 3:6. “Sarai, Abram’s wife, *took* Hagar, her Egyptian maid, and *gave* her to Abram, her husband, as a wife.” This shows that the narrator sees this as an act of autonomy against Yahweh’s will.

Most likely, Hagar now views herself as an equal to Sarai since she has borne Abram a son. Sarai makes this clear by pleading her case before Abram that she has been “wronged,” and the Hebrew implies a blatant violation of the law. The fact that the narrator confirms Sarai’s evaluation of the situation in Gen. 16:4 shows that his sympathy is with Sarai. Likewise, Yahweh in Gen. 16:9 will send Hagar back to Sarai to submit to her authority as a maidservant.

16:6 Abram gives Sarai permission to treat Hagar however she deems right, since she has authority over Hagar. Sarai begins to mistreat Hagar as if she were a slave. The Code of Ur-Nammu gave a woman a right to mark a rebellious maidservant as one who should be treated like all the other slave girls. Once people abandon faith, they begin to reason and make decisions based on their own understanding, and concepts of right and wrong get entangled with human desire and the rationalization of actions. Life then quickly becomes very complicated and messy. The events of Abram and Sarai’s choice make it clear why Yahweh forbade multiple wives. The cost of Sarai’s decision is that she would have to watch Hagar give birth to her husband’s child (Gen. 16:15).

“A thousand volumes written against polygamy would not lead to a clearer fuller conviction of the evils of that practice than the story under review.”¹⁰⁶

16:7-9 Yahweh sends His angel to Hagar to comfort and bless her. Notice once again that it is Yahweh who pursues humanity. Yahweh shows that He cares for the mistreated and rejected and desires to bless them. However, He does not allow Hagar’s actions to be excused, sending her back to submit to the authority of Sarai (Gen. 16:9). For the first time, Hagar is addressed by name, showing that Yahweh sees her as a woman of value compared to her masters. This is also the first time since Genesis 4 that Yahweh has asked of someone’s whereabouts.

This is the first time in Scriptures that an angel has appeared. The word “angel” comes from the Hebrew word *mal’ak* and simply means “messenger.” There are times where humans are called *mal’ak* (Job 1:14; Isa. 42:19; Mal. 2:7; 3:1). When supernatural angels appear, they look like and are often seen as human men by those to whom the angels appear. “The angel of Yahweh” or “the angel of God” appears 33 times in the Bible.¹⁰⁷ There is nothing in the Bible that suggests that this is the same angel every time. The phrase merely states that this was an angel who belonged to or represented Yahweh. In fact, in the Hebrew, it is indefinite and should be translated as “an angel of Yahweh.” See the analogous expression “the servant of Yahweh,” which refers to various individuals in the First Testament. Sometimes the angel is clearly distinct from Yahweh when he appears, and sometimes it seems as if Yahweh is the one speaking. However, this could merely be because the angel is speaking on Yahweh’s behalf, in the way the

¹⁰⁶ George Bush. *Notes on Genesis*, 1:259.

¹⁰⁷ Gen. 16:7-11; 21:17; 22:11-15; 31:11; Ex. 3:2; 14:9; Num. 22:22-35; Judg. 2:1-4; 5:23; 6:11-22; 13:3-21; 1 Sam. 29:9; 2 Sam. 14:17-20; 19:27; 24:16; 1 Kgs. 19:7; 2 Kgs. 1:3, 15; 2 Kgs. 19:35; 1 Chr. 21:12-30; Zech. 1:11-12; 3:1-6; 12:8; Matt. 1:20-24; 2:13-19; 28:2; Lk. 1:11; 2:9; Acts. 5:19; 8:26; 10:3; 12:7; 12:23.

prophets speak as if they are Yahweh. Some see the angel of Yahweh as the preincarnate Christ, but this is not likely. First, Jesus Christ is never called an angel in the Bible. Second, Hebrews 1-2 makes the argument that Christ is superior to the angels. Third, no Second Testament author ever connects the angel of Yahweh with Jesus Christ.

16:10-12 Yahweh makes a promise to Hagar that her son's descendants would be numerous and great, just as Abram. Hagar was to name her son Ishmael, which means "God hears," for Yahweh heard even the cries of an Egyptian slave girl. Ishmael would be a "wild donkey of a man." This does not communicate rebellion; a wild donkey looks more like a horse than a donkey. The donkey can be used as a symbol of an individualistic lifestyle not confined by social convention (Jer. 2:24; Hos. 8:9). It is this lifestyle that would put him in conflict with those who follow social conventions. This hostility would be more characteristic of friction because of his opposition to their way of life rather than wars or outright rebellion. The freedom that Hagar sought would one day be her son's.

Even though Ishmael was conceived out of a lack of faith in Yahweh, Yahweh still blesses him as a child of Abram since He made a covenant promise to Abram to bless all his descendants. Yahweh is a God of His word and is faithful to His promises even in the midst of a lack of faith. However, Yahweh would make it clear that although He would bless Ishmael, it was not through Ishmael that He would continue the line of Abram.

16:13-15 Hagar names God *El-Roi*, a pun that can mean either "the God who sees me" or "the God that I see." The first fits her context, and the second fits her explanation. This is the only instance in the Bible where a human gives Yahweh a name. So, Hagar returns to her masters and gives birth to Abram's son. The absence of Sarai is significant. Three times the text says, "Hagar gave birth to a son of Abram." The story ends not with the joy of a newborn son but with the tension in the family and the absence of Sarai in the birth of Abram's son due to a lack of faith. But despite all of this. Yahweh was still faithful to them.

E. The Sign of the Covenant (17:1-27)

In this section, Yahweh changes Abram's name to reflect His promises and provides Abraham and his descendants with a sign to mark them as belonging to Him through the Abrahamic Covenant. This is a significant event in the Abraham story. The promises to Abraham have become more detailed up to this event, unfolding in a crescendo-like moment wherein Yahweh gives five speeches to Abraham laying out the significance of His covenant promises with Abraham. From this point on, Yahweh's speeches become fewer and fewer, but the fulfillment of the promises become more visible and evident.¹⁰⁸

The sign of circumcision becomes an important sign that will shape the identity of Israel for generations. It also becomes the basis for the work of the Holy Spirit in the Second Testament. This chapter forms a chiasmic structure that emphasizes circumcision as the sign of the covenant.

A Abraham is 99 years old (17:1a)

B Yahweh appears (17:1b)

C God speaks (17:1c)

D First speech: Yahweh confirms His covenant with Abraham (17:1d-2)

E Abraham falls on his face (17:3)

F Second speech: Abraham's name change (17:4-8)

X Third speech: Circumcision as the sign of the covenant (17:9-14)

F' Fourth speech: Sarah's name change (17:15-16)

E' Abraham falls on his face (17:17)

D' Fifth speech: Yahweh confirms His covenant with Abraham's descendants (17:19-21)

C' God ceases speaking (17:22a)

B' God goes up from him (17:22b)

A' Abraham is 99 and Ishmael is 13 (17:24-25)

Genesis 17 also follows an alternating parallel.

A Yahweh's intention to make an oath about descendants (17:1-2)

B Abraham falls on his face (17:3)

C Abraham the father of nations (17:4-6)

D Yahweh will carry out His oath forever (17:7)

E The sign of the oath (17:9-14)

A' Yahweh's intention to bless Abraham with descendants (17:16)

B' Abraham falls on his face (17:17-18)

C' Sarah the mother of a son (17:19)

D' Yahweh will carry out His oath forever (17:19b-22)

E' The sign of the oath (17:23-24)

¹⁰⁸ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 16.

17:1-2 It has been 24 years since Yahweh first appeared to Abram and promised that He would make him into a great nation. Yahweh comes to Abram and reveals Himself as *El Shaddai*. The name *El Shaddai* occurs 48 times in the Bible, mostly in Genesis and Job.¹⁰⁹ *El* is the generic name for god; it is used of Yahweh as well as the other pagan gods of the culture. It is the equivalent to the English lower case *god*. *El* and *Shaddai* thus form a compound name for God. *Shaddai* is often translated as “God Almighty;” however, this does not seem to be the best translation of the name. The focus does not seem to be so much on power and might (although that is implied) but more on sovereignty and kingship. The most likely proposal is that the name *Shaddai* means “God, the one of the mountain.” The closest association of *Shaddai* is to the Akkadian word *Shadu*, which means “mountain,” although the connection is still uncertain.

Though the origin and meaning of the name are uncertain, it is clear from its context that it carries the idea of Yahweh being the source of fertility and life (Gen. 17:1-8; 29:31; 30:22-24; 35:11, 16-18; 43:14). In Genesis 17, when Yahweh reveals Himself as *El Shaddai*, He states that if Abram is obedient to His commands then He would confirm His covenant with Abram of multiple descendants (Gen. 17:2, 5). In Jacob’s farewell address in Gen. 49:25, Jacob makes a connection between the title of *El Shaddai* and the promises of the blessings of the breast and womb, a word play between *shadu* (mountain) and *shad* (breast).

Throughout the rest of the Bible, the title *El Shaddai* is used in the context of the sovereign God of blessing, and it will bring with it the promises of multiple descendants as developed in Genesis. Now that Yahweh is ready to bless Abram with a child, He refers to Himself as the sovereign God over all creation who honors His promises of blessing. He will bring to Abram and his barren wife the fertility that they so desire, for He is a good, faithful, and sufficient God.

Abram is commanded by Yahweh to walk before Him and be blameless. To walk before Yahweh is to live more openly before Him in such a way as to deserve and enjoy His approval and favor. This involves orienting Abram’s entire life to Yahweh’s presence, demands, and promises. “Blameless” does not mean perfect, rather a desire to know Yahweh and to do His will and, when one has failed, to immediately reorient (repent) oneself back to Him. Whereas previously the imperatives were “go” and “be a blessing,” here they are “walk” and “pursue perfection.” Yahweh is requiring more from Abram now that he has come to understand more about Yahweh since leaving Ur.

Notice in Gen. 17:2, Yahweh states that *if* Abram does this, “then” and only then will He confirm His end of the deal (the *if* is implied by the mention of the *then*). Yahweh repeats all his previous promises (Gen. 12:1-3) and states that He will make it a “perpetual” or “eternal” covenant in Gen. 17:7. Notice the future tense of “will,” implying that it has not already been made an eternal or unconditional covenant. The expectations of Abram are restated again in Gen. 17:9.

17:3-8 Abram responds to Yahweh by falling on his face in total submission, whereas before his response was doing only what Yahweh commanded. Yahweh changed Abram’s name, “exalted father,” to Abraham, “the father of a multitude.” Because a name was a person’s identity and communicated who they were, Yahweh made the promises of the covenant a part of Abraham’s identity. Yahweh was showing that His nature and the nature of His promises had changed and would continue to change who Abraham is. Whereas before Yahweh had only made these promises to Abraham, He is now extending the promises to all of Abraham’s descendants as a

¹⁰⁹ Out of the 48 occurrences it appears 42 times in the patriarchal period: 9 times in the Pentateuch, 2 times in Ruth and 31 times in Job. It occurs only 6 times outside of this period: 4 times in the prophets and 2 times in the Psalms.

perpetual covenant. It is through Abraham's descendants that Yahweh will bless humanity again, as was first seen in the garden of Eden.

“The choice of the word *be fruitful* in verse 6 and *multiply* in verse 2 seems intended to recall the blessing of all humankind in Gen. 1:29: ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land,’ and its reiteration in Gen. 9:1: ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the land.’ Thus the covenant with Abraham was the means through which God’s original blessing would again be channeled to all humankind.”¹¹⁰

17:9-14 Yahweh reminds Abraham that in order to maintain the covenant, he must keep the commands of Yahweh. Then He specifically states the requirement of circumcision that would be the sign of the covenant (Gen. 17:11, 13). Yahweh wants Abraham’s entire household to be part of and be marked by this covenant, whether they were biological descendants or slaves. This is extremely significant because covenants in the ancient Near East were not made available to slaves. Yahweh states that any male who refuses to do so would himself be cut off (Gen. 17:14). This means excommunication from the community and the covenant blessings and may have even implied physical death.

Circumcision was not a new rite in the ancient Near East. The priests in Egypt practiced it, but in Mesopotamia and Canaan, it was not customary. Later, the Edomites, Moabites, and Ammonites practiced it, but the Philistines did not. Normally, it was practiced on young adults (Gen. 34), whereas circumcising infants was something new here. In the ancient Near East, it seems to be a rite of passage for a male who had come of age, for preparation for marriage, or as an offering to a deity.¹¹¹ It also had hygienic value since penile cancer has a higher rate of occurrence in uncircumcised males.¹¹²

Though these same ideas are found here in Genesis 17, far more meaning is attached to it. First, the sign is a reminder of Yahweh’s promise of fertility to Abraham. It is from the male reproductive organ that this seed of life will come, which will multiply into a great nation. This is significant in a book of genealogies where the seed of the land and the seed of humanity have already been directly linked as life and blessing. The marking of this organ, responsible for children, will be a reminder of Yahweh’s promises. At the very heart of the promises of Yahweh to Abraham is the promise of the seed that will be a great nation and ultimately bless the whole world. Thus, the organ responsible for the procreation of the seed must be consecrated to Yahweh (Deut. 30:6; Jer. 4:4).

Second, the male and female genitalia are the only organs in the human body that produce both life (seed/egg) and death (urine). The idea is that if one is not marked by Yahweh, then the flesh can only produce death. But if one is marked by Yahweh, then one can produce life and blessings. Yahweh commands Abraham and his descendants to cut off this part of their flesh, or they would be cut off from the covenant blessings. They would be without life. Spiritually, it would have been a frequent reminder to every circumcised male of Yahweh’s promises involving seed and a symbol that they had repudiated “the flesh” in favor of trust in Yahweh and

¹¹⁰ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 157.

¹¹¹ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 23. Also Derek Kidner, *Genesis*, p. 174.

¹¹² Jay D. Fawver and R. Larry Overstreet, “Moses and Preventive Medicine,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:587 (July-September 1990):276.

His spiritual promises. It is possible, since Yahweh does not require child sacrifice, that this is a substitutionary sacrifice of the body to Yahweh.

This idea will be developed further when Yahweh makes the point that humanity is incapable of producing life and blessing and so must be circumcised of the heart (Deut. 10:10-16; 30:6; Ps. 51:10-12; Jer. 9:25; 31:31-34; Ezek. 11:17-19). Metaphorically, the heart is also an organ that can produce life or death. Humanity's heart is corrupt and evil (Ecc. 9:3; Jer. 17:9). This corruption must be cut away from the heart so that humanity will both desire and be capable of obedience to Yahweh. This is made possible through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit after Christ offered up His flesh to death on our behalf, so that we could produce life (Rom. 2:29).

In Gen. 17:12, the requirement of circumcision being on the eighth day shows that Yahweh is truly the creator and sustainer of the human body. Before birth, a baby's nutrients and antibodies comes from the mother's blood, including her blood-clotting ability, made possible by the protein prothrombin. Prothrombin is dependent on vitamin K for its production. At birth, the baby is unable to produce vitamin K. After birth, prothrombin decreases so that by the third day it is only at 30 percent of normal; hemorrhaging would result if this skin were cut. Gradually, the body begins to produce vitamin K, and by the eighth day, production is at 110 percent; it then levels off to 100 percent for the remainder of one's life. Therefore, the eighth day was the safest of all days for circumcision to be performed. Today, vitamin K is routinely administered to newborns shortly after their delivery, which eliminates the clotting problem. However, before the days of vitamin K injections, a 1953 pediatrics textbook recommended that the best day to circumcise a newborn was the eighth day of life.¹¹³

17:15-16 Yahweh changes Sarai's name, "my princess," to Sarah, "royal princess from whom kings would come." Abraham's new name emphasizes the multitude of the seed, while Sarah's new name emphasizes the royal nature of the line. By referring to the old age of Sarai, the narrator had led the reader to assume that she would be the mother of Abram's descendants, but this has not been specifically stated by Yahweh until now.

17:17-18 There is uncertainty in Abraham's response of laughter. Though he has seen Yahweh do many amazing things, resurrecting a dead womb is something completely different. The fact that Yahweh did not rebuke Abraham in the next verse but confirms the reality of His promise shows that Abraham's laughter should not be seen as a total lack of faith.

17:19-22 The name Isaac, meaning "he laughs," could be a shortened form of Isaac-el meaning "may God laugh," signifying divine approval. The irony is that it would be Yahweh laughing with joy when He fulfills His promise despite the impossibilities of the physical realm. Yahweh states specifically that through Isaac He would continue His covenant with Abraham and make him into a great nation. Yahweh promises Abraham that Isaac would be born within the year.

Even though Yahweh chose to bring about His chosen nation through Isaac, He had not forsaken Ishmael. The fact is that Yahweh had promised to bless all of Abraham's descendants, and Ishmael was a descendant of Abraham. Though Ishmael did not fit into Yahweh's greater plan to bring about the redemption of the world, Ishmael was a part of the world that Yahweh wanted to redeem.

¹¹³ See L. Holt, Jr. and R. McIntosh, *Holt Pediatrics*, pp. 125-26.

Usually when Yahweh is done speaking, the Scriptures just move on to the next event. Here the reader is told “God went up from him,” which draws attention to Yahweh’s dramatic exit and thus brings full closure to the scene.

17:23-27 Abraham responds to Yahweh through faithful obedience by circumcising every male connected to him on the very same day that Yahweh had spoken to him. The brevity of these verses compared to the length of the previous events covers both the urgency of Abraham’s obedience to Yahweh and his desire to move on and have the child. The repetition of “on that very day” (Gen. 17:23, 26) shows that this was a significant turning point in Abraham’s family, like Noah’s entry into the ark and the later exodus (Gen. 7:13; Ex. 12:17, 41, 51).

F. The Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (18:1–19:38)

The point of this passage is to give insight into the justice of Yahweh as sovereign king over His creation. This can be seen in Abraham’s comment in Gen. 18:25: “Will not the judge of the whole earth do what is right?” By inviting Abraham into His plans to destroy Sodom and Gomorrah, Yahweh reveals His justice. Abraham’s dialogue with Yahweh reveals the mercy of Yahweh in the midst of judgment. Thus, Yahweh is judging Sodom and Gomorrah because He is just. Yahweh also shows that He is just and faithful (Gen. 18) in saving Lot, who shows that he is righteous by his willingness to repent and to leave the ways of the city. At the same time, the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah would become a warning to all the other Canaanite cities that they, too, would be judged if they followed in the way of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 15:13-16). There is a chiasmic parallelism that emphasizes a just destruction of Sodom that Yahweh announced to Abraham.

A Abraham’s visitors look toward Sodom (18:16)

B Divine reflections on Abraham and Sodom (18:17-21)

C Abraham pleads for Sodom (18:22-33)

D Angels arrive in Sodom (19:1-3)

E Assault on Lot and his visitors (19:4-11)

X Destruction of Sodom announced (19:12-13)

E’ Lot’s sons-in-law reject his appeal (19:14)

D’ Departure from Sodom (19:15-16)

C’ Lot pleads to go to Zoar (19:17-22)

B’ Sodom and Gomorrah destroyed (19:23-26)

A’ Abraham looks toward Sodom (19:27-28)

There is also an emphasis on the hospitality of Abraham and Lot in contrast to the lack of hospitality of Sodom. Love for Yahweh and for one’s neighbor (Deut. 6:4; Lev. 19:18) is at the heart of the Law. The real virtue of Abraham is his generous hospitality, and the real sin of Sodom is their gross lack of hospitality. This is emphasized with the doublet parallels between Abraham and Lot’s demonstration of hospitality towards the visitors.

he was sitting in the doorway (18:1)	Lot was standing in the gateway (19:1)
seeing them he ran towards them (18:2)	Seeing them Lot stood to greet them (19:1)
and bowed himself to the ground (18:3)	Then bowed to the ground (19:1)
He said, sir (18:3)	He said... sirs (19:2)
please do not leave your servant (18:3)	please come to your servant’s house (19:2)
wash your feet and rest (18:4)	stay, wash your feet (19:2)
afterwards you can go on (18:5)	tomorrow, go on your way (19:2)
for this is why you have come (18:5)	for they have come under my roof (19:8)

he took the yogurt... etc. (18:8)	he prepared a feast (19:3)
they ate (18:8)	they ate (19:3)
where is your wife (18:9)	Where are the men (19:5)
Sarah laughed (18:12, 13, 15)	His sons-in laws thought he was joking (19:14)
The outcry of Sodom is great (18:20-21)	their outcry is great (19:13)
Abraham's plea for Sodom (18:23-32)	Lot's plea for Zoar (19:18-22)
sweep away (18:23, 24)	sweep away (19:17)
put to death (18:25)	die (19:19)
spare the whole place (18:26)	granted your request (19:21)
do = destroy (18:25, 29, 30)	do = destroy (19:22)

This story stands in stark contrast to that of Abraham's faith. Whereas Abraham can invite Yahweh and the angels into his home without the repercussions of a badly chosen neighborhood, Lot cannot offer this same security to his guests. Abraham, through faith, will become a great nation, whereas, through their lack of faith, Lot loses his family, and his daughters will beget ungodly nations.

18:1-2 The narrator begins by informing the reader that Yahweh appears to Abraham, which Abraham does not realize until later in the visit. This shows that Abraham's hospitality toward the three men is not because he knows who they are but because he is the kind of man who shows hospitality toward strangers. This is important when this scene is contrasted with the absence of hospitality toward the angels in Sodom and Gomorrah.

Though the narrator makes it clear that the one visitor is Yahweh, the two visitors with Yahweh are referred to as men all throughout Genesis 18. It is not until Gen. 19:1 that they are referred to as angels. The word "angels" is the Hebrew word *malakh*, which means "messenger" and can be used of humans. It is clear that these messengers were angels, seen in their close connection to Yahweh in Gen. 18 and in the way they rescued Lot in Gen. 19:11. Yet throughout Genesis 18-19, they are portrayed as men and are seen as men by the others in the story. Some have said that these are the trinity, but that is reading too much into the story. First, they are called angels, and nowhere in the Bible are Jesus and the Holy Spirit referred to as angels. In fact, Hebrews 1-2 makes the argument that Jesus is superior to the angels. Second, the Holy Spirit is never referred to as or portrayed as a man. Third, no Second Testament author ever uses this story to make a connection to Christ or the Holy Spirit.

18:3-8 From Abraham's perspective, he looks up and sees three men outside his camp whom he had not noticed. Did they appear suddenly, as angels do (Judg. 6:11-21), or had he been dozing or engrossed in what he was doing? Abraham, not knowing who they are, rushes to them to not offend, and he quickly invites them to stay with him. Abraham's eloquent and verbose words show his desire for them to stay. He only offered them bread but ended up bringing them a feast. If he had offered them the feast to begin with, they might have felt like they were imposing on him and moved on. So, Abraham understated the nature of the meal, which is characteristic of generous people in the Bible.

Despite the heat, Abraham makes three seahs (24 quarts) of flour and kills a cow for the men. This was a feast for royalty and way more than three men needed or could eat. As a good host, Abraham stands in the background waiting on them and allows them to enjoy their meal. He does not realize he has just shown great and fitting generosity to Yahweh Himself.

18:9-15 It is about this time that Abraham begins to realize that these men were so much more than he had originally perceived. They ask about his wife by name, whom they had never met. Yahweh speaks directly to Sarah, announcing her pregnancy, even though she has remained in the tent out of sight. Sarah responds in disbelief and laughs. The narrator mentions that she is past menopause, helping the reader understand her laughter. Also, since she has yet to fully grasp who was offering her such unusual promises, one cannot blame her for her laughter.

It is not clear why Sarah lies about laughing, but Yahweh's response shows that He has declared it so, and so it is final; it will happen. Yahweh's rhetorical question, "Is anything impossible for Yahweh?" declares Himself to be omniscient as well as omnipotent. Though these truths are seen clearly throughout the Biblical narrative, rarely are they stated so explicitly.¹¹⁴

Between the two statements of Sarah being past menopause and Yahweh declaring nothing is impossible for Him, it is revealed to the reader the reason Yahweh had waited 25 years to fulfill His promise of a son. With the impossibility of Sarah becoming pregnant, Yahweh will resurrect her dead womb and bring life from it. To all who witness this, it would be obvious that Isaac is a miracle and the true fulfillment of the promises of Yahweh.

18:16-19 As the three men leave, Yahweh addresses the angels with Him and discusses the matter of bringing Abraham into His divine council. The divine council of Yahweh is a council of angels and sometimes the prophets who discuss matters relating to humanity and make decisions (Jer. 23:18). This does not mean that Yahweh needs a council or advice but rather that He chooses to invite others to join Him. Similarly, Yahweh does not need humanity to expand His kingdom (Gen. 1:26-28) or to share the gospel and make disciples (Matt. 28:18-20), yet He desires humanity to join Him in this endeavor. Yahweh's desire for relationship and willingness to allow others to join Him in the ruling and subduing of creation is what makes Him unique in contrast with all the other gods. Yahweh is inviting Abraham to join His divine council as a prophet and to determine the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Gen. 18:21 hints at the fact that Yahweh wants intercession on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah, and Abraham is invited to be that. This makes Abraham unique compared to the prophets who come after, for he intercedes not on behalf of his own people but a people to whom he has no connection. Yahweh's reason is that Abraham is the father of what would be a great nation, one who would be responsible for blessing the other nations. This shows that this is one of the roles that Yahweh desires for Israel to be for the rest of the nations—a nation belonging to Yahweh who would intercede on behalf of the nations and bring blessing to them. Abraham is to train his descendants to be, as Yahweh's image, just and merciful concerning the nations.

18:20-21 Though Yahweh is a merciful God who wants intercession for the nations, He is also a just God who cannot tolerate evil and needs to punish the wicked. The justice and mercy of Yahweh is an incredibly difficult tension for humanity to grasp (Ps. 146:8-9). Sodom and Gomorrah have become so evil that Yahweh has decided they must be cleansed from the face of the earth so that they cannot corrupt or hurt those who surround them. Yet Yahweh is calling

¹¹⁴ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 48.

Abraham to intercede on behalf of the righteous in order to reveal Yahweh and Abraham's desire that the righteous would not be swept away with the wicked.

18:23-25 At this point, the two men with Yahweh depart and Abraham begins to take the role of a prophet, interceding on behalf of the righteous. Abraham shows that he understands that the righteous should not be swept away with the wicked. The principle of reward for righteous behavior has just been established in Gen. 18:19, and it is on this basis that Abraham makes his argument. Three times he points out the inappropriateness of treating the righteous and the wicked alike. This is how Israel's judges were supposed to conduct themselves (Ex. 23:6-7; Deut. 25:1; Prov. 17:15). He is posing this point: that if he as a human understands this, then should not the God of the universe understand this? Should He not do what is right? The tone of Abraham's submission and humility before Yahweh in this exchange shows that one should not interpret an arrogant or accusing tone. Yahweh accepts Abraham's logic and states that if He finds 50 righteous people in the city, He will spare the whole city.

18:26-33 Abraham continues to make his case, eventually bringing the number of righteous people down to ten. Though Abraham has learned a lot about Yahweh, he has never been brought this close to Yahweh's justice and mercy. Yahweh's entering the negotiations (for lack of a better word) with Abraham shows that Yahweh is willing to allow Abraham to affect Him and His final choice. One must not make the mistake of thinking that Yahweh was doing this just for show, for Abraham's sake, or, at the other extreme, that He was not sure what to do without Abraham's input. Yahweh did not need Abraham's input, nor was He required to listen to him. Instead, by His sheer desire to be in a relationship with humanity and to allow them to represent Him, He chooses to allow Abraham to affect His choice —because a true relationship is reciprocal.

In Gen. 18:31, at 20 righteous people, Yahweh introduces the word "ruin," hinting that Abraham should go no further. Abraham presses on one more time to ten, to which Yahweh agrees. The narrator shows that it is Yahweh who brings the conversation to an end by speaking last and then walking away. However, Abraham has made a strong case, and this leaves the reader with the question of what Yahweh will do with the city, especially if fewer than ten righteous people are found in the city. Genesis 19 will reveal that Lot is the only righteous person, and he is not even a citizen of the city but a foreigner.¹¹⁵

19:1-3 The angels come to Sodom and Gomorrah and find Lot sitting at the city gate. The city gate was where city authorities and judges would sit (2 Sam. 19:8; Jer. 26:10; 38:7; 39:3). During the day, officials would sit in chambers off the passageway through the city wall in order to control the trade going in and out and to hear the cases of people coming into the city. The fact that Lot has gone from living *near* Sodom (Gen. 13:12) to dwelling *in* it (Gen. 14:12) to now being one of the city officials (Gen. 19:1) shows his progressive compromise over time.

Lot is the only elder who gets up and invites the angels to stay with him. Because there were no hotels or inns in most cities, visitors depended on being invited into a person's house for the night. This was not uncommon since hospitality was considered one of the highest virtues in the ancient Near East. The fact that no other elder is mentioned could communicate that Lot is sitting by himself, not accepted by the others (Gen. 19:9), or that no other elder cared to show hospitality. Most likely it was both, in light how they later treat the visitors and speak to Lot

¹¹⁵ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 53.

(Gen. 19:5, 9). The close parallel between Abraham's hospitality and Lot's hospitality with the two men shows that he should be seen as a righteous man (2 Pet. 2:7-8). The difference is that Lot offers the men a bed for the night. Lot is insisting that they stay the night, fearing what would happen to them if they did not. Yet just as one was expected to offer hospitality, the other was expected to accept it (Gen. 24:23, 54; Judg. 18:2; 19:4-20). The question, then, is why are the visitors hesitating to accept his offer, and why has the third visitor (Yahweh) not come at all? The reader is left to reflect. Perhaps it is because they know what happens in the city.

Although the men of the town would later come seeking sex with the visitors, the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah is, in the Bible and Jewish tradition, rarely seen as homosexual sin but as a violation of hospitality (Wis. 19:14-15; Josephus, Ant. 1:194), as selfishness (Gen. 13:13; 18:20; Ezek. 16:49-50; 3 Macc. 2:5), or as sexual immorality in general (Jub. 16:5-6; 20:5; T. Levi 14:6; T. Benj. 9:1). This fits the emphasis on hospitality in Genesis 18 and in these verses.

19:4-5 The locals' desire to have sex with the two visitors was not just a sin of homosexuality but, worse, the desire to humiliate and subjugate another. In the ancient Near East, it was not uncommon for high-ranking men to demonstrate their dominance by raping other men. To be the active homosexual was a sign of masculinity and power, while being the passive homosexual was a sign of weakness. This mentality of homosexual gang rape is not much different from prison rape today. The goal of such an action is to dominate and humiliate the new person in the most degrading way possible in order to demonstrate absolute authority over the person. If it were merely about fulfilling a homosexual sexual desire, the whole city would not have come and forced themselves into the house to take the visitors. But the fact that every man has come to do this shows how wicked they really are, for they even consider this righteousness. Even today, this kind of practice would not be accepted in our culture.

19:6-9 Lot is now experiencing the true consequences of his willingness to compromise and become a part of this wicked city. The fact that Lot goes out to meet the threat and shuts the door behind him shows that he has cut off his escape and has sought to protect his guests. In the ancient Near East, protecting your guest was a sacred duty. First, he tries to reason with them, which fails. Then, in desperation, he offers up his daughters. This would have been as shocking to the narrator and the original readers as it would be today. But he states that the visitors are under his roof and protection. Offering his daughters up is certainly questionable and not right, but it shows how committed he is to protecting his guests and how flustered and desperate he is. The men of the city slander him for being a foreigner and, ironically, see him as arrogant. They throw him to the side and begin to batter their way in.

19:10-14 That the angels wait until the last minute to intervene shows that they are waiting to see how he will respond to the situation. The angels move into action and pull Lot into the house. This is an allusion to Noah, the only righteous man pulled into the ark to escape the judgement of Yahweh. They then strike the men of the city with blindness, symbolic of spiritual blindness (Isa. 6:10; John 9). The fact that the men could not find the door handle, which even blind men can do, shows the divine intervention. But what is odd is that despite such a sudden and devastating act of blindness falling upon them, they do not go home. The fact that they still try to get at the visitors to the point of wearing themselves out shows the depth of their moral wickedness. Humans are supposed to repent in the face of divine judgment (Amos 4:6-12).¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 56.

The angels then command Lot to take his family, sons-in-law, and relatives out, for they were going to destroy the city. Only Lot's wife and daughters would have been under his patriarchal headship, so it is odd that the angels would have included the sons-in-law. When Lot goes to them, they laugh as if he is joking or looking for an excuse to cancel the weddings. This further reinforces the wickedness of the city and Yahweh's justice in destroying it.

19:15-22 The angels then proceed to lead Lot and his family out of the city and command him to go to the mountains and not to look back. The fact that the angels mention "the daughters who are *here*" (Gen. 19:15) implies that Lot had others who chose to stay behind. Lot fears that he will not be able to make it all the way to the mountains, so he asks to go to a nearby city. Unlike Abraham, Lot does not immediately obey but questions Yahweh's ability to save him. He hopes that the nearby city will not be destroyed because it is small, not because it is full of righteous people. Once again, Lot seeks the city rather than his righteous family (Abraham) in the countryside. He is selfish and faithless. However, Yahweh grants his request, revealing that He shows mercy even to those who are not fully righteous or who lack faith.

19:23-26 Yahweh judges the two cities with fire from the sky. This is the same way He will judge Egypt in the exodus and the world at the end of time. Lot's wife is condemned because she directly disobeys the command of Yahweh, and by looking back she demonstrates her longing for what she had left behind. Repentance in the Scriptures carries the idea of turning away from one's sin, whereas here she refuses to turn away from the wicked city. Her identity was found in the city and not in Yahweh who was rescuing her.

19:27-29 In Gen. 18:17-19, Yahweh decides to let Abraham in on what He is about to do, placing him in the role of prophet. In Gen. 18:25, Abraham asked, concerning the fate of Sodom, "Will not the judge of the whole earth do what is right?" Gen. 19:29 states that Yahweh "remembered" or "honored" Abraham by not destroying Lot. Now Abraham goes back to the place where he had talked with Yahweh and watches the city burn. Not yet knowing the fate of Lot, he might have been wondering if Yahweh did not honor their conversation. Yet the narrator goes on to show that Yahweh truly allowed Abraham to play a role as judge over the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah and that Yahweh was truly just in His judgments. Though Yahweh did not spare the city for the sake of the righteous, He did extract the righteous from the city. In this He demonstrates His justice and mercy simultaneously.

19:30-35 Eventually Lot obeys the command of Yahweh and leaves the city for the mountains. However, he does not do it in obedience but out of fear of living in the city. He also shows once again that he does not trust Yahweh's assurance that he would be safe in the city. He is reduced to a wandering man of fear who lives in the caves. And he still does not return to Abraham and the covenant promises.

The thinking and the actions of Lot's daughters show that they have been influenced by the ways of Sodom and are like their mother, who preferred the ways of the city. As the oldest daughter, she should be concerned for the welfare of her father in his old age but instead she can think only of herself. She is afraid that her father is too old to find her a husband. The fact that she thinks there are no eligible men shows her desperation to get married. And the fact that she emphasizes having children shows that she really wants children, not a husband, thus her willingness to sleep with her father. The death of Lot's wife, and maybe of some of his daughters, explains his willingness to get drunk, which does not make it right but creates some understanding and sympathy.

The passivity of Lot and the fact that the second girl succeeds shows his ignorance of what happened and releases him from guilt of participation. Though Lot may have been rescued by Yahweh, his choice to live in Sodom for so long has cost him his family.

“But there is a pathetic irony. The angels have rescued Lot and his virgin daughters from the Sodom mob; now they sacrifice their virginity and their father’s honor when there is no actual danger.”¹¹⁷

“In tragic irony, a drunk Lot carried out the very act which he himself had suggested to the men of Sodom (19:8)—he lay with his own daughters.”¹¹⁸

“The impact of the unit focuses more directly on a characterization of the father. The one who offered his daughters for the sexual gratification of his wicked neighbors now becomes the object of his daughters’ incestuous relationship... To be seduced by one’s own daughters into an incestuous relationship with pregnancy following is bad enough. Not to know that the seduction had occurred is worse. To fall prey to the whole plot a second time is worse than ever.”¹¹⁹

19:36-38 The Moabites (Gen. 19:37-38) were a nation that dwelled south of the Dead Sea, and the Ammonites dwelled east of the Jordan River. These two nations were later rejected by Yahweh because of their mistreatment of Israel (Deut. 23:3-6).

“The account is remarkably similar to the story of the last days of Noah after his rescue from the Flood (9:20-27). There, as here, the patriarch became drunk with wine and uncovered himself in the presence of his children. In both narratives, the act had grave consequences. Thus at the close of the two great narratives of divine judgment, the Flood and the destruction of Sodom, those who were saved from God’s wrath subsequently fell into a form of sin reminiscent of those who died in the judgment. This is a common theme in the prophetic literature (e.g., Isa 56-66; Mal 1).”¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 61.

¹¹⁸ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 174.

¹¹⁹ George W. Coats, *Genesis, with an Introduction to Narrative Literature*, p. 147.

¹²⁰ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 174.

G. Abraham and Abimelech (20:1-18)

This section records Abraham's second journey south of Canaan and the lack of faith that he demonstrates with foreign kings. Though Abraham may have been acting out of ignorance in the first event (Gen. 12:10-20), it is clear here that he has not learned from his mistakes. The point of the story is to reveal the humanity and flawed nature of Abraham. Even though he is a righteous man, he is still human and makes mistakes over and over again, like many flawed humans do. However, because of his lack of faith, he fails to truly be a blessing to the world. Instead, Abimelech comes under the judgment of Yahweh and is filled with great fear as a result of Abraham's deception. There is a chiasmic parallelism that emphasizes the fear of Abimelech.

A Abimelech takes Sarah into his harem (20:1-2)

B Yahweh rebukes Abimelech (20:3-7)

X Abimelech and his officials become afraid (20:8)

B' Abimelech rebukes Abraham (20:9-13)

A' Abimelech blesses Abraham, and Abraham prays for Abimelech (20:14-18)

But what stands out even more in this story is the continued faithfulness of Yahweh and His covenant promise to curse those who curse Abraham even when Abraham is not trusting in Yahweh.

20:1-2 Abraham moves to Gerar, which is in the southwest region of Canaan. Unlike the previous story, Abraham does not go as far south into Egypt but stays closer to Canaan. And the ruler is a local king over a city rather than Pharaoh over a nation. Also, Sarah does not get as tangled in the harem as before. "Abimelech" means "my father is king" and is, as with Pharaoh, most likely a title of a ruler rather than a personal name. There are many rulers in the Bible with the name Abimelech. The narrator skips most of the details about Abraham passing his wife off as his sister and Sarah getting taken into the ruler's harem because the reader already knows this from the previous event. Instead, the narrator focuses on how Abimelech is different from Pharaoh, starting with his dream from Yahweh.

20:3-7 Despite the lack of faith Abraham demonstrates again, Yahweh steps in, protects, and delivers Abraham from the hands of Abimelech. Unlike with Pharaoh, Yahweh speaks directly to Abimelech in a dream, and Abimelech speaks back to Yahweh. Yahweh tells Abimelech that he is going to die because he has taken a married woman, specifically a woman of the Abrahamic Covenant. Just as Abraham talked with Yahweh about not punishing righteous men in Genesis 18, so does Abimelech and declares his innocence due to the fact that he had been deceived.

Yahweh acknowledges the truth of this statement and said that He why he had prevented him from sleeping with Sarah. Twice the narrator states that Abimelech has not slept with Sarah (Gen. 20:4, 6), and later he states that the wombs of *all* the women had been closed (Gen. 20:17). What makes this lack of trust in Yahweh so dangerous is that Sarah is pregnant with Isaac. This means if Abimelech had slept with her, everyone be left to wonder who Isaac belonged to, and Abimelech could claim Isaac as his own. Isaac would no longer be the child of the promises. Yahweh is not just protecting Abraham and his family but also His covenant promises. Yahweh's chosen ones cannot, by failing, destroy His ultimate plans for them.

Abraham being called a "prophet" by Yahweh here is the first explicit reference to a prophet in the First Testament. Prophets received direct revelations from Yahweh and communicated to others the will of Yahweh on behalf of Yahweh. Here, the role of the prophet includes that of

intercessor, as it does elsewhere in Scripture. The irony here is that Abraham is not acting like a prophet by lying to Abimelech to protect himself.

20:8-13 Just as Pharaoh did, Abimelech questions Abraham and asks why he would lie to him and do such a thing. Notice that, unlike Pharaoh, Abimelech is not concerned just for himself but for all his people. Between this and his conversation with Yahweh, the narrator is showing that Abimelech is a god-fearing man. The narrator reveals with Melchizedek and Abimelech that not everyone in Canaan is as wicked as Sodom and Gomorrah. Even in a pagan land there are still those who fear God.

Unlike the previous time, Abraham does respond to the questioning. Abraham shows that he had completely misread Abimelech and his people by saying that he assumed that no one in the city feared God. He also shows an incredible lack of faith in that he did not believe Yahweh could protect him. After being rescued in Egypt, defeating the kings of Mesopotamia, and so many other incidents, he still does not have the faith that Yahweh could protect him. The most surprising of all Abraham's comments is that he says that they always pass Sarah off as his sister when they go to new places. The narrator has only recorded one other time, so is Abraham lying, or are those other times just not recorded? Abraham does not look good in either option. The first makes him a liar, and the second shows him to be a man of very little faith. In the context of the greater story, the first option is most likely. This adds the question of whether Sarah is actually his half-sister, especially when these events are the only places in Scripture this relation is mentioned. Considering his other lies, is Abraham telling the truth about this?

In Genesis 18, Abraham acted as a prophet interceding on the behalf of the righteous whom he did not know. Now he is acting with so little faith. The first time he did this with Pharaoh it was understandable, since he knew so little about Yahweh. Now it is shocking that he fears for his life and acts as if he does not know who Yahweh is. In contrast to the God-fearing Abimelech, Abraham does not look quite like the saint he did in contrast to the previous pagans he has encountered.

20:14-18 In the previous incident, the Pharaoh gave Abraham animals as a dowry for taking Sarah into his harem before he knew he had been deceived. Here, Abimelech gives Abraham animals *after* being deceived in order to make amends with Abraham. He also lets Abraham pick any part of his land to live in. Though this does not give Abraham ownership, he is closer to gaining possession of the land of Canaan than before. Once again, Abimelech looks better than Abraham.

Despite Abraham's failure, he still demonstrates faith in Yahweh through his prayers as he intercedes on behalf of Abimelech. Here, Abraham finally acts as a prophet as he reveals the grace and power of Yahweh to a foreigner.

The truly amazing part of this story is that Yahweh still watched over and protected Abraham despite his lack of faith. Not only that, he chose to use Abraham as a prophet in the life of Abimelech to bring him and his family restoration—even though Abraham had failed and no repentance is evident in this scene. Yahweh continues to honor his promises despite the lack of faith of His chosen people.

H. Isaac Displaces Ishmael (21:1-34)

Yahweh proved Himself faithful to His promise to Abraham by providing Isaac after so many years of waiting. However, Ishmael became a threat to Abraham's heir, so Abraham sent Ishmael away into the wilderness, where Yahweh continued to provide for him. This event removes the threat of Ishmael to the promises of Yahweh through Isaac, the promised son. There are similarities in structure between the two Hagar scenes (Gen. 16:1-16; 21:1-21).

Sarai's infertility (16:1)	Sarah's fertility (17:1-5)
Sarai's response of "sleep with my maidservant" (16:2-3)	Sarah's response of praise laughter (17:6-8)
Hagar pregnant, abuses Sarai (16:4)	Ishmael abuses Isaac (17:9)
Sarai complains and drives Hagar out (16:5-6)	Sarah complains, "drive out Hagar" (17:10)
Yahweh speaks, sends Hagar back (16:7-9)	Yahweh speaks, "Send Hagar out" (17:11-12)
Promise to increase descendants (16:10)	Promise to make the son of your maid a nation (17:13)
"Ishmael will be a lone wanderer" (16:11-14)	Hagar and Ishmael alone in the desert (17:14-18)
Ishmael born to Abram (16:15)	Ishmael saved (17:19-20)
Ishmael born to Hagar (16:16)	Hagar gets Ishmael a wife (17:21)

21:1-5 Yahweh's visiting people shows His special and relational attention to people and His direct involvement in their lives. Twice Yahweh predicted the birth of Isaac (Gen. 17:16-21; 18:10-15), and here the fulfillment of the promise is mentioned twice (Gen. 21:1, 2). Abraham's immediate response when Isaac was born was to name his son Isaac and have him circumcised in obedience to Yahweh. The lack of hesitation shows Abraham's faith and dedication to Yahweh.

21:6-8 Sarah likewise shows obedience by immediately praising Yahweh for His faithfulness and telling others about the joyous occasion. She even sings a song of praise using the word for *laugh*—the name of Isaac—twice. The second laugh is the exact form of his name, "everyone who hears it will *Isaac* for me." Whereas before the laughter was from disbelief, here it is joy.

When Isaac is at the age of weaning, Abraham throws a feast to celebrate his life. Children were not usually weaned until three years old. In a culture where the infant mortality rate was high, to make it to three years old was significant and usually accompanied by a large feast.¹²¹

21:9-10 The contrast here is between the joy of the birth of the son Yahweh promised and the mocking of Ishmael, who did not align himself with the will of Yahweh. From the very birth of Isaac, these two nations were already at odds.

¹²¹ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 81.

The Piel participle used for the word “mocking” is the same root as the name “Isaac.” What exactly Ishmael was doing is not clear. Most likely, Ishmael was making it clear that he was the firstborn and that he, not Isaac, would get the inheritance. Sarah saw this as a threat and cruelly demanded the banishment (“drive off”) of Hagar and Isaac. The irony is that this was the result of Sarah’s idea to give Hagar to Abraham in order to acquire a son (Gen. 16:2-3).

21:11-13 The Hebrew says that “Abraham was *very* displeased.” In other places when men are displeased, they explode in anger (Num. 11:10; 1 Sam. 18:8). When Yahweh is displeased, He brings death as judgment (Gen. 38:10; 2 Sam. 11:7). Only here is someone described as being *very* displeased. This shows the great distress and anger that Abraham felt at this. To Sarah, Ishmael is the son of her maidservant. To Abraham, Ishmael is his son.

Yahweh comes to Abraham and tells Him to obey Sarah and send Ishmael away. The last time Abraham obeyed Sarah it was a mistake (Gen. 16:2), so Yahweh assures him that He would take care of the child. Yahweh also restates the promises of Gen. 17:20 to further assure Abraham.

The Hebrew word *naar*, which is translated “child,” does not necessarily refer to Ishmael’s age but to anyone from childhood to full grown. But in Genesis it usually refers to those capable of taking care of themselves (Gen. 18:7; 37:2) and those who are morally responsible for themselves (Gen. 19:4).¹²²

21:14-16 In obedience to Yahweh, Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael off with provisions. To “send her off” is a softer version of the term “drive out” (Gen. 3:23; 18:16; 19:20) and is used of divorce (Deut. 22:19; 24:1, 3) and of the release of slaves with generous provisions (Ex. 11:1-2; Deut. 15:13).¹²³

Hagar and Ishmael wander in the wilderness for so long that their provisions run out and they are about to die. Hagar is so desperate and distraught that she hides Ishmael away so that she would not hear his cries and see him die.

21:17-21 It was in response to this despair that Yahweh appears in order to rescue them. As usual, Yahweh asks Hagar questions in order to draw her out and into a relationship of trust in Him. Yahweh enables Hagar to see a well that would provide life for them. As promised in Genesis 16, Yahweh is faithful to provide for them and honor the promises that He had made. The story ends with Ishmael growing up, becoming an accomplished archer, and getting married in order to continue his line—as promised by Yahweh.

21:22-23 It is difficult to know where the event of Abraham’s treaty with Abimelech fits in the chronology of the story, as well as the literary significance of its placement here in the story. Scholars George Coats and Benno Jacob believe the phrase “at that time” refers to the feast of Isaac that Abimelech and Phicol were already attending and that this may be why the narrator does not explain their coming.¹²⁴ This is the same Abimelech that Abraham had deceived in Genesis 20. Now he has come to Abraham with the desire to enter into a treaty with Abraham and requires of Abraham that he would not be deceived again. The fact that he comes with an army suggests that Abraham has a considerable force as well. Abimelech is not concerned only for himself but also for his people. He seems to anticipate the continued growth of Abraham.

¹²² See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 83.

¹²³ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 84.

¹²⁴ See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16-50*, p. 91.

This shows that Abraham is truly growing as Yahweh had promised, becoming so great that others want to be part of that blessing (Gen. 12:1-3).

21:24-26 Abraham agrees to the friendship but complains that one of the wells he has dug has been seized by Abimelech's men. Abimelech becomes angry at the accusation and states that Abraham has never mentioned this before.

21:27-34 Apparently satisfied with this, Abraham makes a treaty with Abimelech. The fact that Abraham is the only one who offers animals suggests that he is the lesser king in the treaty. Abraham sets apart seven lambs to give to Abimelech as payment for the well and proof that it belongs to him. The well is named *Beer Sheba*, which means "the well of the oath." Later, the Law would forbid the making of treaties with the people of Canaan (Ex. 23:33; Lev. 20:26; Deut. 7:2).

The name "Philistines" living in the land may anticipate the Aegean people who came across the Mediterranean in 1200 BC and settled in Canaan or to an earlier and smaller group that have already settled in Canaan at the time of Abraham. The significance of the tamarisk tree is unknown, but trees are symbolic of life and blessings (Ps. 1:3; Jer. 17:7-8)

"The reader is forced to ask why the author constantly draws attention to the fact that Abraham was dwelling with the Philistines during this time [cf. v. 34]. The purpose of such reminders may be to portray Abraham as one who had yet to experience the complete fulfillment of God's promises."¹²⁵

¹²⁵ John H. Sailhamer, *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 177.

I. The Sacrifice of Isaac (22:1-24)

This section is the most important event in the Abraham story, both literarily and theologically. It is the climax of Abraham's faith in his willingness to sacrifice his only son to Yahweh. Despite Abraham's failures, this event shows the full extent and offers the most vivid demonstration of his faith in Yahweh (James 2:21). The chiasmic structure emphasizes Abraham's journey of faith up the mountain to the altar of sacrifice. It also emphasizes Abraham at the foot of the mountain on the third day and then going up the mountain alone in the same way that Israel would later come to the mountain on the third day and Moses would go up alone. Where Abraham would sacrifice his son, Moses would receive the Law that was based on the sacrificial system.

A Yahweh's command to sacrifice Abraham's son (22:1-2)

B Departure the next morning (22:3)

C The third day at the foot of the mountain (22:4-6b)

C' The journey up the mountain (22:6c-8)

B' Preparation for sacrifice (22:9-10)

A' Angel speaks to stop sacrifice (22:11-18)

It is here that the Abrahamic Covenant becomes finalized and unconditional for all the generations of Abraham to follow. This was the last time that Yahweh spoke to Abraham in the story, emphasizing all the more the importance and the finality of the Abrahamic Covenant.

22:1-2 From the very beginning, the reader is informed that it was only a test (Ex. 20:20; Deut. 8:2), thus removing from the story the tension about any ultimate danger to Isaac and the righteous character and goodness of Yahweh. It shifts the reader from the question "will Isaac be sacrificed or will Abraham pass the test?" The real danger was not to Isaac's life but to Abraham's relationship with Yahweh.

What is unusual is that even though Yahweh is speaking to Abraham, the name Elohim (generic term for God as sovereign creator) is used instead of Yahweh. Yet the name Yahweh is used at the end of the story when Yahweh stops Abraham and confirms His covenant with him. There is a theological motive behind the use of Elohim. It is Elohim, the creator of universe, that requires the child to be surrendered. But it is Yahweh, the God of the covenant, who forbids the extreme act, for the son of the promise cannot die.¹²⁶

Yahweh is acting in a remote and odd way when he asks for Abraham to sacrifice his son. Yet in some ways Yahweh as creator of the land and humanity, who gave Abraham his son, could demand the life of Isaac. Yet the loving and relational Yahweh of the covenant does not desire human sacrifices (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5). In the Hebrew, the command begins with the word "please," which is very unusual of Yahweh's commands. It makes the command more of an entreaty and shows that Yahweh understood the difficulty of the command and what it would cost.

¹²⁶ See Franz Delitzsch. *New Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 2, p. 91.

“In fact, the God who requires Abraham to sacrifice his only son after the manner of the Canaanites (2 Kings 3:27; Jer. 19:5) is only apparently the true God. The demand was indeed only made to prove that Abraham was not behind the heathen in the self-denying surrender of his dearest to his God, and that when the demand had been complied with in spirit, the external fulfillment might be rejected.¹²⁷

Even though Ishmael is also Abraham’s son, the reference to Isaac as Abraham’s “only son” emphasizes the fact that he is the only son of the covenant promises of Yahweh. It also is somewhat practically true since Ishmael has left the family. The command to “go to the land of Moriah” echoes the language of Gen. 12:1, where Yahweh first commanded Abraham to follow and obey Him. These two phrases frame the story of Yahweh’s covenant promises with Abraham and Abraham’s obedience. The designation of “the land of Moriah” occurs again in 2 Chr. 3:1 as the mountain on which the temple stood in Jerusalem, where all the sacrifices of Israel were offered. The later mention of “on the mountains” is an allusion to Mount Sinai, where Yahweh would later appear to the nation of Israel (Exodus 19).

A burnt offering was one in which the sacrifice was completely consumed in the fire and represented the offeror giving all of themselves to Yahweh, since the animal represented the offeror, and their atonement for sin. Abraham would truly be offering to Yahweh himself and the promises through the sacrifice of his son.

22:3-8 The mention of “early the next morning” (Gen. 22:3) shows that there was no hesitation in Abraham’s obedience. Yet Abraham saddles the donkey *before* he cuts the wood, which suggests that his thoughts are elsewhere as he prepares to leave. Even though Abraham shows great, unwavering faith, it could not have been emotionally easy for him (Mark 9:24).

On the third day (symbolic of redemption), Abraham makes it to the mountain. Three days would have been a long time for Abraham mentally and emotionally as he moves closer to the moment. His willingness to obey means that he has already lost his son and so by referring to Isaac as “the boy,” he may be emotionally detaching himself. Yet Abraham tells the servants that they are going to go up the mountain and worship and then *they* would return. Was Abraham lying about Isaac’s return so that no one would know what he is going to do, or did he hope or believe that Yahweh would rescue Isaac? This can be seen in the fact that Abraham uses the word “worship,” which is a vaguer term than “offer” and can mean “bow down.” Also, when answering Isaac’s question about the lamb, he answers that Yahweh would provide a lamb (Gen. 22:6-8). This seems very important considering how much space is given to this dialogue. Though the reader can never know the thoughts of Abraham, the author of the book of Hebrews concluded that Abraham believed that Yahweh would give him his son back. Three days is a long time to think through who Yahweh is and what He had asked.

First, Abraham knew that the character of Yahweh was different from all the other gods and that He abhorred child sacrifice, yet now Yahweh was requiring him to sacrifice his son. Second, Yahweh had proven to Abraham throughout his life that there was no limit to what He could do as creator and sovereign over the creation, even resurrecting the dead womb of Sarah. Third, Yahweh had promised that it would be through Isaac specifically that He would fulfill His promises to Abraham, and Yahweh had always honored His promises. Thus, Abraham reasoned that he could offer his son to Yahweh in the faith that Yahweh would raise him from the dead

¹²⁷ Franz Delitzsch. *New Commentary on Genesis*, vol. 2, p. 91.

because He can do anything (Heb. 11:17-19). Not only did Abraham commit his life to Yahweh in faith, he also knew Yahweh so well that he could anticipate what He would do.

22:9-10 The fact that Isaac is called a “boy”—the same word used for Ishmael (Gen. 21:12; 22:4, 12)—and the fact that he is able to carry the firewood shows that he is at least a teenager. That Isaac allows a hundred-year-old man to tie him up and lay him on the altar shows that he is a willing participant. He trusts his father and Yahweh so much that he allows himself to be laid on the altar. Abraham in total obedience to Yahweh lifts his hand with the knife in order to sacrifice his one and only son to Yahweh.

22:11-14 In harmony with the reader having been informed that this was only a test and Abraham’s expectation to come back with his son, Yahweh stops him from sacrificing his son Isaac since Abraham has adequately demonstrated his faith in Yahweh. Yahweh then states, “for now I know that you fear God because you did not withhold your son, your only son, from me.” This emphasizes that the Abrahamic Covenant had been, according to Genesis 15 and 17, conditional, for Yahweh is testing to see if Abraham would be faithful to his end of the covenant. Yahweh is not testing Abraham to find out if he would be obedient, for He already knew this. Yahweh is testing Abraham to reveal to Abraham what his faith consists of and how much he really loves Yahweh. Often we never know how we will react or what we will do in certain circumstances until that moment comes. Now Abraham knew how much Yahweh meant to him. Because of Abraham’s faithfulness, Yahweh provided a substitutionary sacrifice to die in Isaac’s place.

22:15-19 Here Yahweh makes the covenant with Abraham unconditional. Yahweh swears by Himself (Heb. 6:13-20) that because of what Abraham did that day, Yahweh would most certainly bless Abraham and his descendants. The phrase “by myself” communicates the solemnness and the one-sidedness of the oath (Jer. 22:5; 49:13; Ezek. 37:14; Amos 4:2; 6:8; Heb. 6:13-18). From here on, all of Abraham’s descendants would reap the benefits of the covenant because of Abraham’s faithfulness. The fact that Yahweh makes a big deal about swearing that He will honor His promises based on Abraham’s actions here and does not use any conditional language demonstrates that this is the first time that the covenant truly becomes unconditional.

These words are the most important words of Yahweh in this story. First, they bring the story and promises to a conclusion and guarantee the security and longevity of the covenant after the death of Abraham. Second, they are necessary in order to show that the covenant would live on through Isaac and not Ishmael. Without these words, the last time Yahweh had spoken was His confirming the promises to Ishmael through Hagar. This would have left the reader with the idea that Ishmael was the son of the covenant (Gen. 21:17-19). These final words seal the covenant promises in the name and line of Isaac, just as Yahweh had promised.

The Second Testament alludes to this event as a type of Christ in that that Yahweh would (like Abraham) ultimately sacrifice His own Son for humanity but that this Son would (like the ram) be a substitutionary sacrifice for all humanity. In the same way that Isaac was called Abraham’s “only son, whom you love,” Jesus is called this in the gospels and epistles (Matt. 3:17; 17:5; Jn. 3:16; Rom. 8:31-32). The difference is where Isaac did not and could not become the atoning sacrifice, Jesus accomplishes what he would and could not.

An interesting item to note is that the narrator mentions only Abraham, and not Isaac, coming back down the mountain. There is no hint as to the meaning of this.

22:20-24 The genealogy of Nahor establishes the background for Rebekah, who would become the wife of Isaac and continue the line after the death of Abraham and Sarah.

“This section signals a change in the direction of the narrative. It moves from Abraham to the next generation and its connections with the East. The record of Nahor’s 12 sons prepares the way for the story of Isaac’s marriage. It also shows that Rebekah was the daughter of Bethuel’s wife Milcah (v. 23), not the daughter of Bethuel’s concubine (v. 24). Isaac’s marriage was very important because Isaac was the heir of the promises (ch. 24).”¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Genesis*, p. 163.

J. Purchase of Burial Ground (23:1-20)

Sarah's death not only begins to bring an end to the Abraham story, but it also demonstrates the faithfulness of Yahweh in that He provided a son before the curse of death could come on Abraham's family. The main focus of this story is not on the death and burial of Sarah but on the purchase of the land. This emphasis shows that between the purchased well from Abimelech (Genesis 21) and the land Abraham purchases here, this is all of the land that Abraham has obtained from what Yahweh had promised. Here the narrator begins to develop the idea of the partial fulfillment of the promises in the lives of the patriarchs. This begins to hint that the promises must entail so much more than what was on the surface for Abraham to be the true recipient of the promises (Heb. 11:13-16).

23:1-2 Sarah is the only woman in the Scriptures whose lifespan is given, showing her importance. She died when Isaac was 37, three years before he was married. Abraham outlived her by 38 years.

23:3-9 Abraham's desire to purchase a burial site in Canaan was one final demonstration of his rejection of the pagan gods. The people of the ancient Near East believed that you needed to be buried in the land of your gods or else they could not take you into the afterlife since they were limited in power to only their territory. By not burying his wife in Mesopotamia, where they were from, Abraham showed that he was trusting Yahweh with the soul of his wife in the afterlife.

The sons of Heth show Abraham great respect by calling him a mighty prince and offer him the burial cave for free. The generosity is partly genuine because of who Abraham has become and partly the custom of negotiations in the ancient Near East. Abraham refuses to take the cave for free and offers to pay the value of the cave. A gift rather than a sale places the recipient under the obligation of the donor. Three times Abraham and the sons of Heth go back and forth until the deal is finalized.

23:10-11 Ephron the Hittite's responses to Abraham's requests sound very generous, but he is really making it difficult for Abraham to pay less than his asking price. Ephron's objective may have been to get a present from Abraham for having given him the field and cave that would compensate for the value of the land. Such a gift was customary. On the other hand, he may have wanted to preclude Abraham's offering to pay him less than his asking price.¹²⁹

“Why did Ephron want to sell Abraham the entire plot of ground in which the cave lay rather than just the cave as Abraham requested (vv. 8-11)? Hittite law specified that when a landowner sold only part of his property to someone else, the original owner had to continue to pay all taxes on the land. However, if he sold the entire tract, the new owner was responsible to pay the taxes (cf. 1 Chron. 21:24). Consequently Ephron held out for the entire tract knowing that Abraham needed to make his purchase quickly so he could bury Sarah.”¹³⁰

23:12-20 Abraham is willing to pay the full price of the field because he knows that Yahweh has provided him with the means to do so and would continue to provide for him and his descendants in fulfillment of His promise. The price is substantial, meaning that Abraham has purchased a large parcel of land or that Ephron has overcharged him.

¹²⁹ See C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch. *The Pentateuch*, 1:255-56.

¹³⁰ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Genesis*, p. 164.

“It should be stressed here that the world of the patriarchs was that of a developed and organized society and not what is usually regarded as a simple pastoral-bedouin existence. Throughout Genesis 12-50 there are connections to Mesopotamia and to Egypt as well as negotiations with local political centers (Shechem, Salem and Hebron) as well as Gerar in the Western Negev on a branch of the Coastal Highway.”

“Much of the theological relevance of the patriarchs is based upon the fact that there were other more attractive lifestyles available to these early Biblical figures. The option they chose gave them few of the advantages they could have enjoyed elsewhere, especially in Mesopotamia where their family was established. In light of this fact and the great promises made to Abraham during his lifetime, his remark to the leaders of Hebron after the death of his wife, Sarah, takes on new meaning.”¹³¹

¹³¹ James M. Monson. *The Land Between*, pp. 153-54.

K. The Betrothal of Rebekah (24:1-67)

Obtaining a wife for Isaac is an important part of Yahweh's faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant. It was not enough to provide a son to Abraham; He must continue Abrahams's line in order to fulfill the covenant.

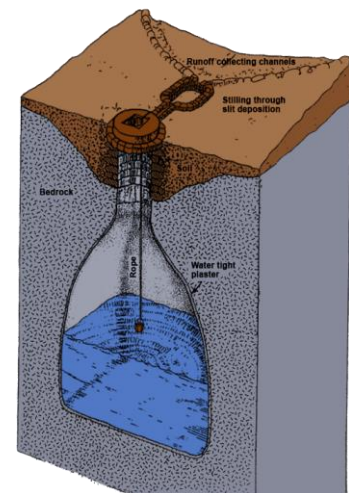
24:1-5 This is the first time that the narrator has specifically mentioned that Abraham was blessed in everything. It shows that even though he had not gained all the land that Yahweh had promised him, he had gained all the other blessings that Yahweh had promised.

Abraham sees that it is time for Isaac to marry and so charges his servant, who is unnamed, with the task of finding a wife for Isaac. The statement "put your hand under my thigh" is a reference to the loins—a euphemism for the seed of Abraham, which was Isaac. By placing his hand under the thigh, he would be touching the genitals, the privacy of this making the oath especially solemn. The circumcised genitals were the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant and so connects the acquiring of a wife for Isaac to the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant to provide descendants for a great nation. This oath is sworn in the name of "Yahweh, the God of heaven and the God of the earth," which takes the reader back to creation and the seed of the garden.

Abraham does not want his son marrying one of the wicked Canaanites that surrounded them (Gen. 9:24-27; 15:16; 18:18; Deut. 7:1-4), which would later also be forbidden by the Law (Ex. 34:16; Num. 25; Deut. 7:3). The only other option is to send his servant back to where he came from to find a wife from among his family. However, his family lives in the land that Yahweh had called him out of, and he wants to ensure that his descendants will not return to that land, so he sends his servant rather than his son. He trusts that Yahweh will guide his servant to one who is right for Isaac. The absence of Isaac in finding his own wife suggests his passivity.

24:5-9 The servant questions whether it will even be possible to find a woman who is willing to leave her family and come to a new land to marry a person she has never met. He then asks if he should take Isaac. Abraham responds with an emphatic *no*. To "take care" is often used to refute a shocking or unworthy idea (Gen. 31:24, 29; Ex. 34:12; Deut. 4:9). Abraham is confident that the same God that had called him out of the land of his father, blessed him with so much, and had been so faithful to him will be faithful to continue to bless him with a wife for Isaac. But Abraham ends by assuring him that if no woman will return with him, then he will be free from the oath. To this the servant agrees and pledges the oath to Abraham.

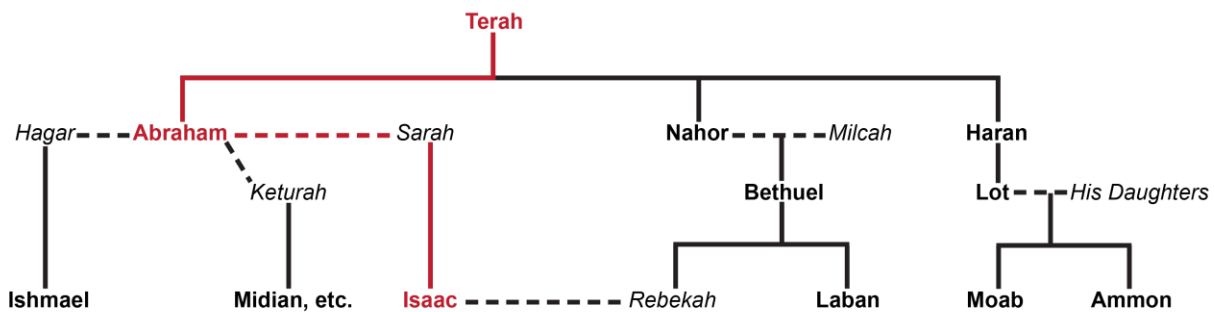
24:10-14 The servant then goes with great wealth to the land Abraham had left. Camels were extremely rare at this time in the ancient Near East, so for a servant to be able to take ten camels loaded with goods would have been a great amount of wealth for any family to receive for giving their daughter in marriage to Isaac. Exhausted from the journey, the servant would have been dependent upon the generosity of a family to take him in. He goes to the city's well at the time that the women come to the well. It was customary for women, especially unmarried women, to water the herds (Gen. 29:10; Ex. 2:16; 1 Sam. 9:11). The well mentioned here is a cistern. This is a large, raindrop-like hole carved out of the bedrock that would collect rain during the rainy season. After the rainy season this would be the only water the village had until the next rainy season. Once it was filled, it would be covered with a large, circular



stone. With no light or air, the bacteria would die, and the sediment would settle to the ground, leaving purified drinking water in the cistern.

The first thought of the servant is to pray to Yahweh for guidance in finding a woman for Isaac. He praises Yahweh for his faithfulness and asks that Yahweh would be faithful to him as He had been to Abraham (Ex. 20:6; Deut. 5:10; Ps. 136). It is clear here that throughout the years Abraham's faith has influenced his servant. The servant sets up a clever test of a woman's character. Though it would not be uncommon for a woman to offer a traveler water to drink, to then offer to water ten camels in addition would be extremely unlikely. A camel can drink up to thirty gallons of water. A woman who is willing to offer this would be a woman of great generosity and character.

24:15-21 Before the servant has even finished praying, Yahweh sends Rebekah, who is related to Abraham, his way. The meaning of the name Rebekah is unknown. Rebekah is the granddaughter of Abraham's brother Nahor. The narrator makes it clear that she is beautiful and that she is a virgin.



The servant asks Rebekah for a sip of water, but she lowers her jar and offers him to drink as much as he wants. Then she volunteers on her own to also provide water for all his camels, just as he had prayed, and not just for the camels to drink *some*—but as much as they want. The narrator stating that she did this “quickly” and “ran back” shows the eagerness and cheerfulness of her generosity.

24:22-27 As a payment for her generosity, he gives her a hefty sum of money. It shows that he is wealthy and generous. He then asks her whose daughter she is and if there is room for him to stay in her father's house. She tells the servant who her family is, but she does not give her name, which would have been unwise. Likewise, she tells him there is room but does not offer to let him stay because that would not have been her decision to make on her own.

The servant's first response is to praise Yahweh for answering his prayer so quickly and providing him with a wife for Isaac.

24:28-31 It was custom in Hurrian society to consult the bride before going to the family. Likewise, the brother usually took the lead in giving his sister in marriage. Notice that Laban, her brother, is the principal negotiator who represents the family, rather than Bethuel, her father (Gen. 24:50). The description of the family farewell also reflects this system of patriarchy (Gen. 24:59-60).¹³² Laban's name means “white,” which is a metonym for the moon (Isa. 24:23; 30:26) and shows his family's connection with the pagan gods. Notice that Laban immediately notices

¹³² See Stuart A. West. “The Nuzi Tablets.” *Bible and Spade* 10:3-4 (Summer-Autumn 1981), pp. 67-68; Ephraim A. Speiser. *Genesis*, pp. 184-85.

Rebekah's jewelry, the camels, and the wealth of the servant, whereas Rebekah did not even mention the camels until after she had provided the servant with water, and money was not mentioned until after her generosity to the servant. Laban is a greedy man interested mostly in wealth rather than people. Laban invites the servant in not because of his generosity but because of the servant's wealth. This character trait becomes an important factor in the Jacob story.

24:32-49 The servant refuses to eat until he has recounted the amazing way that Yahweh guided him there and provided for him. The repetition of the events of how the servant met Rebekah emphasizes that it was the providence of Yahweh that brought them together. Likewise, it also shows the servant's faithfulness in making the blessings of Yahweh known to others. The servant first tells of his master Abraham and his oath and then recounts his encounter with Rebekah at the well. Notice that *after* meeting Laban, the servant puts more emphasis on the wealth of Abraham and the close family connection with Bethuel than the narrator had when telling the account of what happened.

24:50-61 Laban and Bethuel agree to marry Rebekah off to Isaac because Abraham is familiar to them and they are aware of his wealth. Most likely, they ask the servant to stay longer because of the wealth that he had brought with him. But the servant being anxious to get back puts the decision to Rebekah. Her unhesitating willingness shows incredible bravery to go to an unfamiliar land to marry an unknown man.

The blessing pronounced upon Rebekah echoes Yahweh's blessing upon Sarah (Gen. 17:16). Just as Isaac is the seed of Abraham and continues the covenant blessings, so Rebekah becomes the next matriarch who will join Isaac in the continuation of the seed and blessings.

24:62-65 The odd thing about the story here is that the servant takes Rebekah back to Isaac rather than to Abraham. Isaac was living in Beer Lahai Roi, while Abraham was living in Hebron. And the servant calls Isaac "my master," rather than Abraham. This might seem to indicate that Abraham has died. However, Isaac was 40 years old when he marries Rebekah (Gen. 25:20), making Abraham 140, who does not die until age 175. Likewise, there is no mention of his death. So we see that even though Abraham has not died, the narrator seems to be suggesting that Isaac is the new Abraham and Rebekah is the new Sarah. This especially seems to be clear with Rebekah taking the tent of Sarah.

When Rebekah sees Isaac in the distance, she covers her face to show that she is the bride. Israelite women were not normally veiled (Gen. 12:14; 38:14). However, they would wear a veil on their wedding day.

24:66-67 Isaac takes Rebekah into his mother's tent because it would not have been right for her to go into his before they were married. The fact that Rebekah is given Sarah's tent shows Rebekah's connection to Sarah. Once they are married, Isaac sleeps with Rebekah. Isaac's connection to Rebekah becomes a comfort to him in the loss of his mother. This again continues to develop the idea that Rebekah is the new Sarah.¹³³

¹³³ See John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis." In *Genesis-Numbers*, p. 178.

L. The Death of Abraham (25:1-18)

The death of Abraham not only records the end of his life, but this event occurs when it does because Isaac has been married off, a sign that the line will continue on.

25:1-4 The fact that Keturah is not mentioned until after the death of Sarah means that Abraham did not marry her until after Sarah had died. This is made even more possible by the fact that he lived 40 more years after Sarah's death (Gen. 23:1; 25:7). Even so, many scholars suggest that this marriage happened while Sarah was still alive. Not everything in the life of Abraham is chronologically arranged. If it were, then the death of Abraham should be included after the birth of Jacob and Esau since he lived 15 years after their birth.

This genealogy may have been included to show that Abraham was truly the father of many nations and to specifically introduce the Midianites, who come into prominence later in Genesis. This shows that Yahweh was faithful in giving Abraham many descendants, though Isaac and his branch of the family would be the recipients of Yahweh's special blessings.

25:5-6 Abraham gives all of his possessions to his son Isaac, showing that Isaac has the firstborn title. The sending away of the sons was to make Isaac's position more secure. The "land of the East" to which Abraham sent his sons (other than Isaac) was evidently Arabia. It lay to the east and south of Canaan. However, sending the sons away and especially to the east—the direction that people in Genesis go after being judged (Gen. 3:24; 4:16; 11:2; 13:11)—seems to suggest that these sons were a threat to the Abrahamic promises and that Abraham should have never fathered them (like Ishmael). This puts the marriage to Keturah in a bad light along with Hagar.

25:7-11 The phrase "gathered to his people" implies reunion in Sheol (grave), the place of departed spirits, with friends who had died previously. It presupposes continued personal existence after physical death (Gen. 15:15; Heb. 11:13).¹³⁴

From an Israelite perspective, a natural death at the end of a long and satisfying life was not thought of as punishment, but as a great reward (Gen. 35:29; Ex. 20:12; Jud. 8:32; Ps. 21:4; 91:16). In contrast, an early death or death in exile represented Yahweh's punishment (Ps. 102:23; Is. 65:20; Deut. 28:58-68). In Gen. 46:30, Jacob said that he was ready to die after seeing Joseph alive. He was satisfied, and he regarded his life as complete. However, when he believed Joseph to be dead, he anticipated that his own death would be a bitter one as a result (Gen. 37:35). Similarly, Numbers 16 records several examples of premature death, which came through the judgment of Yahweh. In Num. 16:29, 30, the narrator indicates that this was the only kind of death that would be interpreted as the judgment of Yahweh. The thought of a premature death was abhorrent to the righteous Israelite, who feared being cut off from his people and from the worship of His God (Ps. 88).¹³⁵

25:12-18 These verses form the seventh *toledot* and show that Yahweh has fulfilled His promises regarding Ishmael (Gen. 16:10-12; 17:20). Ishmael, like Nahor and Jacob, fathered twelve sons. The inclusion of the fact that Ishmael lived "in defiance of all his relations" shows the fulfillment of Yahweh's prediction to Hagar (Gen. 16:12).

¹³⁴ See Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Genesis*, p. 169.

¹³⁵ Robert A. Pyne. *Soteriology*, p. 30.

III. The Life of Jacob (25:19–37:1)

This division begins the eighth *toledot*. Although it says it is “the account of Isaac,” it is really the narrative of Jacob’s life and faith in Yahweh. But not just of Jacob but also Esau, who also comes from Isaac. Esau’s role in the story as the one whom Jacob deceives, the reconciliation of Jacob back to Esau, and Esau’s genealogy are major sections of this *toledot*. The Jacob story is less episodic than the Primeval period and the Abraham story and more integrated from act to act. Jacob is far more complex and ambiguous in his characterization than Abraham was. Yahweh appears even less frequently in the Jacob story, only a couple of times in visions, than He did with Abraham.

The family line of Abraham continues with his son Isaac. What is interesting about Isaac is that there is very little mentioned about him compared to his father Abraham and his son Jacob. Isaac is only the major character in Genesis 26 and a minor character in Genesis 25, 27, and 28. The rest of the story is dedicated to Jacob, and Isaac is mentioned only briefly at Jacob’s return to Canaan in Genesis 35. The narrator “seems” to be less interested in his life than in Abraham and Jacob. From the little that is told about him, he seems to be much like his father. As mentioned previously, he demonstrated the same unwavering faith in Yahweh as his father did at his sacrifice. However, unlike his father, he was far more passive and allowed others around to dictate or manipulate his life. Perhaps this is why there is not much to say about him.

“The figure of even a great man may be dwarfed by comparison with that of a distinguished father or of a famous son. Thus the character of Isaac is overshadowed by the majesty of Abraham and the dramatic interest of Jacob. There was a third factor, which diminished the importance of Isaac; he was the husband of a clever and masterful wife. No matter how exciting the scene in which he may appear, he is always assigned to a minor part. At least, by contrast with these other actors, his role in life was prosaic, uneventful, obscure.”¹³⁶

Whereas the story of Abraham focused more on the barrenness of his wife and the threat of Ishmael to the promises of Yahweh, the Jacob story focuses on the struggle between the two legitimate sons to secure the birthright and Jacob’s struggle with Laban. The conflict is in whether Jacob will receive the Abrahamic Covenant through his faith in Yahweh, like his fathers before him, or will instead seek his own blessings through his deceptions. Unlike Abraham, Jacob spends most of his life demonstrating very little faith as he seeks to gain blessings through his own devices. The story reaches its climax as Jacob is running away from the life and family he had ruined with Laban, while the place he had to go was the life and family he had ruined with Esau (Gen. 31). It finds its resolution when Jacob wrestles the angel and claims the promises of Yahweh, when we learn that Yahweh had caused Esau to forgive Jacob (Gen. 32-33), and when Jacob finally buries his idols, making himself a part of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 35:1-15). The story concludes when Jacob has his own righteous son, Joseph, who would save the Abrahamic family and his other son, Judah would continue the Abrahamic line.

¹³⁶ Charles R. Erdman, *The Book of Genesis*, p. 86.

A. Esau Disdains His Birthright (25:19-34)

The birth of Esau and Jacob further testify to the faithfulness of Yahweh to the Abrahamic Covenant. However, just as Ishmael threatened the promises of Yahweh found in Isaac, Esau's rash and worldly desires threaten the promises of Yahweh found in Jacob. The focus in this section is on where the struggle between the brothers began and on Esau revealing his true character when He disdained his birthright. Yahweh responds to this by giving the birthright to Jacob. The chiasmic parallel emphasizes Esau's disdain for his birthright.

A Jacob was boiling stew (25:29a)

B Esau came in from the field; he was tired (25:29b)

C Let me eat some of that red stew (25:30)

D First sell me your birthright (25:31)

X I depart; I die! Of what use is a birthright to me? (25:32)

D' Swear to me first. So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob (25:33)

C' Jacob gave Esau bread and stew; he ate and he drank (25:34aa)

B' He rose and went his way (25:34ab)

A' Thus Esau despised his birthright (25:34b)

25:19-21 Just like Sarah, Rebekah was barren. Yahweh allows this so that the chosen family would recognize her children as the fruit of His grace and a supernatural seed rather than simply the fruit of nature. The fact that Isaac prays and Yahweh opens her womb emphasizes this point. And the fact that Isaac was 40 when he married Rebekah (Gen. 25:20) but has no sons until he is 60 (Gen. 25:26) shows that there was a long time of barrenness. However, unlike the Abraham story, which was mostly about the barrenness of Sarah, the narrator spends less time on the barrenness and moves directly to the struggle of the brothers, which becomes the focus of the story. Isaac's prayer on behalf of his wife is one of the only times that he is not passive in the relationship. Yahweh answers his prayer and allows Rebekah to conceive.

25:22-23 Rebekah becomes pregnant with twins, who struggle in the womb with each other to the point that Rebekah cannot take it anymore. This foreshadows the constant struggle that Esau and Jacob will have throughout their life. This time Rebekah prays to Yahweh to know what to do. Yahweh tells her there are two nations in her womb, that one will be stronger than the other and that the older will serve the younger. The idea of multiple nations coming from Isaac is not new to the promises, but that there will be a division between them is. Even though with twins one is not truly older than the other, the idea that one comes out before the other gives the impression of one being older than the other. Though Yahweh will give Jacob, the younger, the firstborn blessing, it is not clear here that Yahweh is choosing Jacob at this moment to receive the firstborn title. Yahweh is announcing what will happen, not necessarily choosing one.

25:24-28 The first of the twins to come out is Esau, who has thick, red hair all over his body. His hair must have been thick because later Jacob will cover his arm in goat's hair, which is very thick and coarse, to deceive Isaac into thinking he is Esau. In the ancient world, all the way up to the middle period, there was prejudice against people with red hair as being wild and uncivilized. The name Esau (*'esav*) does not mean "hairy" but instead sounds like the Hebrew word for "hairy" (*se'ar*). Jacob came out second, grasping the heel of his brother. Jacob (*ya'aqob*) is similar sounding to "heel" (*'aqeb*). The name (since it is a verb) may mean "may he protect," as

in a rearguard or dogging the heels, which carries the idea of a dog following close behind the herd to guide them and protect them. Jacob's name does not carry of the idea of deception. It was not until later that Esau would ascribe a negative meaning to Jacob's name (Gen. 27:37).

Esau becomes a hunter-warrior for the family, as well as Isaac's favorite because he is a hunter and Isaac loves the taste of meat. Jacob is the complete opposite, a smooth-skinned shepherd who prefers to stay home, making him Rebekah's favorite. The fact that Jacob is said to be even-tempered in contrast to Esau implies that Esau is rash and makes decisions based on emotion, which will be seen later.

25:29-30 Jacob cooks some stew, which would have been a rich, meaty stew. The Hebrew word "cook" (*zid*) sounds like the word for "hunter" (*tsayid*). The irony is that Esau the hunter would become the hunted. The sound play between these two words means to "set a trap by cooking."¹³⁷ Esau is so hungry that he is willing to sell his birthright for stew. This is most certainly an overreaction, especially in a family as wealthy as his. Esau demands that Jacob "feed" him, which is the Hebrew word *la'at* and is used of feeding animals. This puts Esau in a negative light. Esau called the stew "the red stew," which is why he was also called *'edom*, which means "red." This would become the name of Esau's descendants. Edom was the place where they lived, named after the reddish nature of the hills. The narrator used the word *red* to describe the stew that Esau demanded in order to convey the nature of Esau and his descendants. They were a lustful and profane people who lived for the moment.

25:31-33 Jacob's quick reply to ask for the birthright shows that he had been thinking about and planning this for a while. Typically in the ancient Near East, the biological firstborn son would get the firstborn title when the father died. The firstborn title entailed two things. First, the son would get the majority of his father's inheritance (double portion) including money, animals, and land. Second, he would receive the headship of the family, clan, or tribe, meaning he would have authority over all the other males including his younger brothers. For Yahweh, the birthright (firstborn title) is more than these two things; it is the blessing of carrying on the family line through which He would bring the messiah. It bears both the blessings and responsibility to represent Yahweh to the world and thus be a blessing to the world. It is the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3).

Esau shows his rash and emotional decision-making nature when he gives up his entire future for a bowl of stew. Not only that, he cannot think ahead enough to see the value of a birthright. He is evidently too hungry to wait for the time that it would take to prepare a meal for himself. Jacob demands him to swear an oath so that it would be binding.

"It is quite apparent from the Nuzi tablets that instances of the transference of birthright, such as occurred in the Patriarchal narratives, were not uncommon in Hurrian society. One example concerns a certain Zirteshup, whose father disowned him but later restored his status... Another instance of the transference of birthright from the Nuzi tablets is the exchange by one Kurpazah of his birthright in consideration for three sheep given to him by Tupkitilla, his brother. In the light of this example, Esau's willingness to exchange his birthright for Jacob's mess of pottage (Gen. 25:29-34) is perhaps more understandable"¹³⁸

¹³⁷ See J. P. Fokkelman. *Narrative Art in Genesis*.

¹³⁸ Stuart A. West. "The Nuzi Tablets." *Bible and Spade* 10:3-4 (Summer-Autumn 1981), p. 71.

25:34 Jacob deceives Esau by giving him lentils instead of the meaty stew. The rapid sequence of verbs “gave,” “ate,” “drank,” “got up,” “went out” shows that Esau most likely eats in silence over having been deceived. In rare fashion, the narrator makes a moral comment on the action of Esau. Esau gave greater value to immediate gratification and temporary earthly pleasure and satisfaction over the birthright of the Abrahamic Covenant, thus disdaining the birthright and the covenant responsibility of Yahweh’s promises. The word “disdain” is the same word used of those Yahweh would curse when they disdained Abraham (Gen. 12:3). Thus, in fulfillment of Yahweh’s promises to Abraham and in response to Esau’s actions, Yahweh rejects him as the firstborn and gives it to Jacob instead. Although Jacob’s moral character is not that great, at least he desires things greater than the physical and material.

Just as Isaac, the second born, received the firstborn title instead of Ishmael, Jacob also receives the firstborn title instead of Esau.

B. Isaac and the Philistines (26:1-33)

This section shows that Yahweh is faithful to renew His covenant with Abraham's descendants and continues to bless them just as He had promised. The fact that Isaac demonstrates a lack of faith immediately after the renewal of the covenant and repeats the same sins of his father shows the grace of Yahweh and that the Abrahamic Covenant is truly unconditional.

Here the narrator shows the passivity and peacefulness of Isaac as he encounters the people around him. Isaac allows himself to be pushed around, giving up without a fight the wells he has dug. But eventually he keeps a well and lays claim to more territory that Yahweh had promised him. In fact, he will gain greater wealth and blessings than Abraham before him (Gen. 26:12-14). This shows that Yahweh will fulfill His promises despite the personality of the patriarch. The passivity of Isaac seen in this story also serves to illustrate the abnormality of the strife between Jacob and Esau and how it would tear the family apart. If Isaac could accomplish so much and gain so much wealth, then why did Rebekah and Jacob see the need to fight and deceive others for the blessings? If the source of blessing was obvious to foreigners, then how much more should it have been to those who lived in the family?

Some scholars question whether this story belongs in Genesis or is reliable because it is so similar to the two encounters Abraham had with foreigners (Gen. 12:10-20; 20) and seems out of place. However, the Dinah and Shechemites (Gen. 34) story also seems out of place. These two stories help to balance each other out in the chiastic parallel of the Jacob story. This is also not the only seemingly out-of-place story in Genesis. The betrothal of Rebekah (Gen. 24) and the story about Judah and Tamar (Gen. 38) show this is a common thing for the narrator of Genesis. These two stories (Gen. 26; 34) are linked together in their context by the common themes of strife and deception. Both describe the patriarch's relationship with the surrounding people of Canaan, among whom they are foreigners. Genesis 26 also serves as a link to the Abraham story by showing that Isaac is like his father and Abraham is mentioned eight times in this chapter (Gen. 26:1, 3, 5, 15, 18[2x], 24[2x]).

The fact that Isaac and Rebekah could live in the land for such a long time (Gen. 26:8) without anyone realizing that they were married shows that there were no children in the family yet. Thus it is clear that this event happened before the birth of Jacob and Esau.

26:1-6 Just as with Abraham (Gen. 12:10), there is a famine in the land. However, unlike with Abraham, Yahweh comes to Isaac and tells him not to go to Egypt but rather to Gerar, where there were no relationships between the city and Abraham. Yahweh renews the covenant promises of the covenant to Isaac and promises to take care of Isaac. This is the first time that Yahweh has spoken directly to Isaac, making it a significant revelation from Yahweh. This is also the first time that Yahweh has specifically promised someone "so I may be with you." This looks forward to the revealing of Yahweh's name in Exodus 3, which carries the idea that Yahweh is with you. What is interesting is that Yahweh said all this would happen because of Abraham's obedience, not Isaac's. This continues to show that the covenant was unconditional because of Abraham's demonstration of faith. Thus, the lesson that is conveyed is that Yahweh's faithfulness in the past can be counted on in the present and the future. What He had done for the fathers, He would also do for the sons. The question to each individual is whether they will make themselves a part of the covenant blessing through their faith in Yahweh.

In Gen. 26:5, the terms "my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" are legal designations for sections of the Mosaic Law and presuppose the existence of the law. Some

Rabbinic teachers taught that Abraham had fulfilled the Mosaic Law before it was even given. However, this would make Genesis 15:6 sound like Abraham's obedience to the law was what saved him and would contradict Paul's teachings in Galatians 3 and Romans 7. It makes more sense that the author (Moses the Lawgiver) described Abraham's obedience by using terms that the Israelites were familiar with. Thus, he depicts Abraham as the model of obedience to Yahweh's commands, whose example Israel should follow.

“In choosing Abraham and not Moses, the author shows that ‘keeping the law’ means ‘believing in God,’ just as Abraham believed God and was counted righteous (Gen 15:6). In effect the author of the Pentateuch says, ‘Be like Abraham. Live a life of faith and it can be said that you are keeping the law.’”¹³⁹

The Philistines were an Aegean people who came across the sea from the region of Greece and settled along the western coast of Canaan in the 1200s BC. Though there is evidence of earlier migrations, these Philistines are seen as a small kingship rather than a large pentapolis. They are also relatively peaceful compared the ever war-waging Philistines of history and later in the books of Samuel and Kings. Mostly likely, these are an earlier Aegean people known as the Caphtorim (Deut. 2:23).

26:7-11 The name Abimelech is a title rather than a personal name and means “royal father.” This may have been a ruler other than the one Abraham dealt with, especially since he made no reference to this happening to him earlier with Isaac's father. By repeating the mistakes of his father, Isaac shows that he has not learned from his father's mistake. He shows the same fear of foreign rulers that Abraham had and appeals to the customs of the time rather than on Yahweh's sovereign protection. However, Yahweh had just promised him that He would protect and bless him. Did he not learn anything from Yahweh's involvement in his father's life, especially the way that Yahweh had delivered him when Abraham was about to sacrifice him (Gen. 22)?

Yahweh's protection is evident in that Rebekah had been with Abimelech for a “long time” (Gen. 26:8), yet no one had slept with her (Gen. 26:10). Once again, the promises of Yahweh have been put at risk because of the potential of the wife being taken by a foreigner. And just as before, Abimelech shows himself to be more righteous than the patriarch of Yahweh's covenant promises, who was supposed to be a blessing to the world.

26:12-14 Just as his father before him, Yahweh blesses Isaac tremendously, and the extent of his blessings are greater than they were with Abraham. Whereas Abraham had gained wealth and provision, the narrator makes the point that Isaac has begun to settle down in the land and even plant crops that produce a hundredfold what he planted. Here the reconnection between humanity and the land is beginning to happen through the Abrahamic Covenant and looks forward to Israel occupying the land after the exodus. This is only the third time that the narrator has mentioned that the blessings had become a reality (Gen. 24:1; 25:11).

26:15-18 Whereas earlier Abimelech and others wanted to join Abraham because of his success, here the Philistines are jealous and fill in the wells that Isaac had dug and drive him away. The narrator begins to reveal the character of the Philistines that would become more characteristic of them in the books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings. So, Isaac reopens wells that his father had dug,

¹³⁹ John H. Sailhamer, “The Mosaic Law and the Theology of the Pentateuch,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (Fall 1991):253, 254.

perhaps because they too had been filled in by the Philistines. By renaming them what his father had named them, he shows that they truly belonged to his family and thus to him.

26:19-22 Several times the Philistines claim a well that Isaac had dug, and without a word Isaac withdraws and moves on to a new location. Isaac's passivity comes out as he says nothing to claim his right to the well, especially in light of the treaty that his father had made (Gen. 21:27-31). Finally, Isaac moves far enough away that he is able to keep a well without quarreling.

26:23-25 In the face of constant attacks, Yahweh comes to Isaac again and reminds him of His covenant promises and that He will take care of Isaac. Isaac shows that he believes Yahweh by building an altar and worshiping Yahweh there just as his father before him had done.

26:26-33 Abimelech comes back to Isaac, this time with the desire to make a treaty with him. No matter how hard they had tried to make it for Isaac, Yahweh kept protecting and prospering Isaac (Gen. 12:1-3). Considering the passivity of Isaac, this abrupt change in his response to Abimelech shows his total frustration with the Philistines. Abimelech had seen something different in Isaac and his God and wanted to be a part of it. So, Isaac makes a treaty with Abimelech, and they depart on good terms. The respect that Isaac earns from Abimelech and the treaty that they make not only show that Isaac followed his father in bearing the covenant but also reveal his success, character, and faith. Yahweh rewards Isaac by providing water through the well that he had previously dug.

C. Jacob Takes Esau's Blessing (26:34–28:22)

This section shows that the dysfunction of Isaac's family and their lack of faith in Yahweh's ability to continue the Abrahamic Covenant through them. The focus is on the fact that despite Yahweh's having promised Jacob the blessing, Jacob could not wait for Yahweh but tried instead to seize it for himself. However, Yahweh continues to use the family despite their lack of faith and continues the blessing on through Jacob. The section ends with Yahweh coming to Jacob and promises him the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant because of His faithfulness to His promises and despite Jacob's lack of faithfulness. The concentric parallel emphasizes the blessing of Isaac.

A Isaac and the son of the birthright (Esau) (27:1-5)

B Rebekah sends Jacob on the stage (27:6-17)

C Jacob appears before Isaac and receives the blessing (27:18-29)

C' Esau appears before Isaac and receives the anti-blessing (27:30-40)

B' Rebekah sends Jacob from the stage (27:41-45)

A' Isaac and the son of the birthright (Jacob) (27:46-28:5)

26:34-35 The Hittites were recognized as a part of the Canaanites (Gen. 10:5; 15:16-21; 23:3; 28:1) and were thus seen as wicked and cursed by Yahweh (Gen. 9:24-26) and so not to be included in the covenant promises. By marrying more than one (polygamy) Hittite, Esau showed that he had no regard for the purity of the covenant or the will of Yahweh. The report of Esau's marriages to Hittite women (Gen. 26:33-35 and 28:6-9) frames the narrative of Jacob's taking the blessing from Esau. By doing this, the narrator shows why Esau was unfit to have the blessing and partially why Yahweh chose Jacob. The question is why Isaac didn't find wives for his sons like his father had done for him. This shows not only the disobedience of Esau but the passivity of Isaac.

27:1-4 Even though Isaac will not die for many years yet, he chooses to give his blessing to his son Esau. The reference to his poor eyesight hints at the deception that is to come. Isaac shows total disregard for the prophecy of Yahweh that the older should serve the younger by calling Esau in for the blessing (Gen. 25:23). The fact that Isaac specifically mentions the "tasty food that *I love*" shows that he is allowing himself to be ruled by his appetite and not by theology or obedience to Yahweh. Also, the fact that he has overlooked Esau's marriages and poor character shows his favoritism. This especially stands out because it was uncommon to summon only one son for the blessing (Gen. 49; 50:24-25). Usually all the sons would be summoned and the firstborn would receive a double inheritance, after which the others would receive their inheritance. Why is Jacob not also summoned, and why does Isaac not intend to give Jacob any blessing? Isaac tells Esau that there is no blessing left for him after he had unintentionally given everything to Jacob (Gen. 27:37).

27:5-10 The fact that the narrator refers to Esau as *his son* (Gen. 27:5) and Jacob as *her son* (Gen. 27:6) shows how divided and dysfunctional the family really is. Though Jacob is capable of his own deception (Gen. 25:31), he is not the initiator in this deception; Rebekah is. Without hesitation she develops the plan, commands Jacob to get a goat, and prepares the meal. Why does she not have Jacob prepare the meal? Does she not trust him to do it right or act quickly enough? Though Rebekah was sincere in her desire to give the blessing to Jacob and may have

even done it in accordance with Yahweh's earlier command, the way she went about it shows a lack of faith in Yahweh.

27:11-17 When Jacob does hesitate and expresses concern, it is not based on moral principles but rather on his fear of getting caught and receiving a curse. Rebekah responds by stating "let the curse fall on me." This does not even make sense since if the blessing is not transferable to Esau (Gen. 27:37), neither could a curse be transferable. Rebekah and Jacob would have to know this, so her assurances are empty. Even so, Jacob obeys his mother and goes along with the deception, showing his lack of trust in Yahweh as well. Rebekah puts the goat skin on Jacob's arms and neck. This either means that Esau is incredibly hairy or that Isaac is failing tremendously in his touch as well as his eyesight.

27:18-26 The fact that Isaac asks which son has come shows that he is immediately suspicious of Jacob. When Isaac expresses confusion on how Jacob got the stew so quickly, Jacob responds with an overly spiritual answer of God's provision. Isaac speaks eight times and Jacob four times. Jacob is speaking too much and overselling the ruse. Isaac recognizes the voice, but the touch of Jacob's goat skin arm is convincing to him. When he asks Jacob one more time if he is Esau, Jacob speaks only once more to say "I am." The smell of the clothing of Esau is the final proof Isaac needs in order to bless him.

27:27-29 Isaac blesses Jacob with an abundance of rain and crops. The reference to "grain and new wine" is the image of a banquet and the idea of plenty and abundance that Yahweh would provide as a blessing of the covenant. This blessing would be repeated in Deut. 7:13—when Israel enters the Promised land—and with the prophets, it would become the sign of the messiah (Gen. 49:10-11; grain: Matt. 14:13-21; 26:26; Jn. 6:25-59; wine: Jn. 2:1-11; 6:53-59; 18:1-8; Matt. 26:27-29). He also blesses Jacob with headship over all his *brothers* (plural), which is interesting since Jacob has only one brother. This could look forward to Joseph, who would rule over his brothers, or to Israel as a nation ruling over the surrounding nations who had descended from Abraham.

Everything in the blessing is new compared to the previous blessings in Genesis. Only the "curse and bless" refers back to the Abrahamic promises (Gen. 12:3). The passive participles of "cursed/blessed" instead of "I shall bless/curse" and in reverse order implies multiple enemies, whereas previously Yahweh had emphasized the opposite.¹⁴⁰ This shows that Isaac is not as familiar with the Abrahamic promises as he should be.

27:30-36 Esau barely misses Jacob, and seeing that everything is normal with his father he begins to prepare the meal. Confused, Isaac does not know who he is talking to. When he realizes that he has been deceived, he begins to shake violently. The Hebrew word for "tremble" by itself is used of Joseph's brothers' fear when they were arrested (Gen. 42:28) and of the Israelites at Mount Sinai (Ex. 19:16). Here, it is supplemented by the adjective "very great."

Esau responds to Isaac with his own wailing. The hopelessness is emphasized with his begging for a blessing and Isaac's inability to give him one. As mentioned above, this shows the extent of Isaac's favoritism in that he would give all the blessing to Esau (not knowing it was Jacob) and leave nothing for Jacob.

Esau changes the pun on Jacob's name from "guarding the heel" (Gen. 25:26) to "tripping the heel," giving the name the sense of being "cheated" or "deceived." However, the precise

¹⁴⁰ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16–50*, p. 210.

meaning is unclear, for it only occurs here, in Jer. 9:3, and in Hos. 12:4 as a description of Jacob's behavior. Technically, Esau has no right to be upset with Jacob, for he had already given up the blessing to Jacob earlier in their lives (Gen. 25:29-34). He also showed that he did not really value the blessing.

27:37-41 Isaac ends up giving Esau a blessing that foreshadows his descendants (Edomites) serving Jacob's descendants (Israelites) until they finally throw off the oppression of Israel. The Edomites will end up settling south of Canaan and the Dead Sea in a mountainous and desolate terrain. The Edomites are repeatedly conquered by Israel and revolt throughout their history. Later, Saul defeats them (1 Sam. 14:47) and David makes them his vassals (2 Sam. 8:14). They try to revolt under Solomon but are unsuccessful (1 Kings 9:14). The Edomites are subject to Judah until King Joram's reign when they successfully rebel. During Amaziah's reign, Judah again subjugates them (2 Kings 14:7) and they again achieve independence during Ahaz's reign (2 Kings 16:6). John Hyrcanus conquers Edom about 129 BC, forcing them to be circumcised and incorporating them into the Jewish nation. Later, through Antipater and Herod, they establish the Idumean dynasty over Judah that lasts until the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD.¹⁴¹

As a result of this incident, Esau hates Jacob, showing his true nature in his desire to kill his own brother (Gen. 4:8; 1 John 3:12; Jude 1:11). Esau's desire to please his father causes him to promise that he will wait until his father's death before taking revenge on Jacob.

27:42-45 It is not clear whether Rebekah misunderstands Esau's desire to kill Jacob because she senses a greater urgency for Jacob to flee in order to protect his life. She tells him to go to her brother Laban in Haran to find shelter for a little while. However, what she thinks will be a little while will end up being 20 years due to the deception of her own brother, to whom she is sending Jacob for protection. Just as she deceived Esau out of the blessing, her brother's deception will prevent her from seeing her son. Rachel fears losing both her sons in one day. If Esau kills Jacob, then Isaac would be obligated to execute Esau for murder, leading to the death of both sons.

27:46 Rebekah used her dislike for Esau's wives as an excuse to gain Isaac's permission for Jacob to go to Haran (Paddan-Aram) to find a wife. Knowing Isaac's favoritism of Esau, she could not say that Esau wanted to kill Jacob for that would cause Isaac to defend Esau and explain it away. She appeals to what they agree upon, their dislike for the Canaanite wives. Nor does she call them Esau's wives, fearing that this would attach a positive feeling towards them. Rather, she only references them as "the Canaanite daughters." She also does not tell him what to do but allows him to make his own decision.

28:1-5 As Abraham before him, Isaac commands Jacob to go to the house of Bethuel and find a wife because he must not marry among the Canaanites (Gen. 24:3-4). The Aramean women, from whom Jacob would take a wife, had the reputation of embracing their husband's faith, whereas the Canaanite women, whom Esau had married, would seduce their husbands to join their wicked pagan lifestyle.

The blessing of Isaac in Gen. 27:27-29 is very general and does not refer to Yahweh nor the Abrahamic Covenant. However, the blessing of Isaac in Gen. 28:1-4 specifically mentions the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant and Yahweh as the bearer, for in nearly every phrase is found the Abrahamic promises (Gen. 12:2-3, 7; 13:15, 17; 15:7-8, 18; 17:1, 6, 8, 16, 20; 22:17; 24:7) and repeats Isaac's blessing (Gen. 26:3-4, 24). This may show that Isaac has finally and

¹⁴¹ See Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Genesis*, p. 184.

fully realized that Jacob was to be the true bearer of the covenant and has now taken on the responsibility of his patriarchal duties as representative of the Abrahamic Covenant, fulfilling the prophecy of Gen. 25:23. This account is another demonstration of Yahweh's ability to use the sins of people to accomplish His purposes while also punishing the sinners for their sins.

However, the irony here is that even though the blessing that Jacob had received has given him everything, he now has to flee his home, family, and the fruit of the blessing with nothing. He will live in a foreign land outside the covenant land and blessing and be financially dependent upon and subject to the deceptions of Laban without a family to defend his rights.

28:6-9 Esau demonstrates his total ignorance of the Abrahamic Covenant and the feelings of his father by the fact that he just now realizes how his father felt about the Canaanite woman that he had married. Because he wants to please his father—and probably hopes for a future blessing—he goes to a descendant of Abraham in order to marry women who were acceptable to his parents. However, he fails to recognize that Ishmael had been separated from the Abrahamic Covenant, which shows even more how out of touch he is with the religious and spiritual heritage of his family line. In addition, he is adding even more women to his polygamist family.

28:10-15 Jacob in the wilderness on his own lies down for the night with a rock for a pillow. The phrase “around his head” may refer to placing the rock around his head for protection, as seen in other passages (1 Sam. 26:11-12; 1 Kgs. 19:6). That night in the wilderness, Jacob has a vision of a stairway to heaven with angels going up and down it. The word “stairway” refers to a stone staircase, like the steps of a ziggurat, rather than a ladder or sloped hill that some have suggested. However, unlike the ziggurat of the pagan religions, humans had not built this one nor were humans ascending it to become like gods. Rather, the angels are the ones ascending and descending, bringing the will and blessings of Yahweh to humanity and taking the prayers of humanity to Yahweh (Heb. 1:14). The ancients viewed the ziggurat as a gateway to heaven, the top being the house of the gods. Here, Yahweh is showing Jacob that despite all his efforts and deception, he still has not obtained the blessings of the covenant. Instead, it is Yahweh who is bestowing the blessings upon him out of His own grace.

Some have suggested that since the angels were placed in charge over the nations (Deut. 32:8; Job. 1:6; Zech. 1:8-17), the angels *ascending* are responsible for Canaan and those *descending* are responsible for Mesopotamia, the land where Jacob is going. These angels rule the nations but report to Yahweh (1 Kgs. 22:19-22; Job 1:6-8; 2:1-3; Zech. 1:10). This would communicate to Jacob that Yahweh is sovereign over the land he is leaving as well as the one to which he is going.¹⁴²

Jacob had been trying to obtain the blessings of Yahweh through his own efforts, and it had gained him nothing. Yahweh comes to him instead in order to give him the blessings of the Abrahamic Covenant, despite Jacob's lack of faith in Yahweh and the deception of his father. Yahweh's calling Himself “the god of Abraham and Isaac” reminds Jacob that He is the God of the Abrahamic Covenant and the blessings that come with it. Yahweh promises this to Jacob not because he deserves it but because He is a merciful God, honoring His promises to Abraham. Yahweh gives Jacob a glimpse of heaven and shows that the kingdom of Yahweh is open to him through the Abrahamic Covenant.

¹⁴² See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16–50*, p. 222.

28:16-19 Jacob sees this stairway as the true gateway to God and so names the place *Bethel*, which means “house of God” (Gen. 28:17).¹⁴³ The type of pillar that Jacob builds with the pouring out of oil on it is associated with the consecrating of cultic items (Ex. 40:9-13; Lev. 8:10-12; Num. 7:1). Jacob may see this as a cultic item that contains the divine spirit of Yahweh and represents Yahweh Himself. This is seen in the fact that Jacob seems to be connecting the presence of Yahweh too closely with this specific location when he names it the “house of God.” These types of standing stones were forbidden by Yahweh in the Law (Ex. 23:24; 34:13; Deut. 16:21-22; 1 Kgs. 14:23).¹⁴⁴

This is the same place to which Abraham had come when he entered the land of Canaan and built an altar to Yahweh. Jacob is leaving the land of promise because of his inability to wait on Yahweh for the blessings.

28:20-22 Jacob’s vow of obedience is not in response to who Yahweh is or out of his love for Yahweh; rather, it is a conditional vow—“only if God does this for me will I obey Him.” Once again, Jacob shows that he desires the things of Yahweh but only on his terms. He had missed the point of what Yahweh was teaching him through the vision.

¹⁴³ See C. Houtman, “What Did Jacob See in His Dream at Bethel? Some Remarks on Genesis 28:10-22,” *VT* 27 (1977): 337-52.

¹⁴⁴ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16–50*, pp. 223-224.

D. The Marriages of Jacob (29:1-30)

In this section, Jacob will reap the consequences of the deception that he had sown in Canaan with his brother Esau. Here, he will be deceived by Laban. The irony is that rather than exercising the headship with which he had been blessed, he will become enslaved to Laban in a foreign land. Not only that, he will be blinded by his appetite for Rachel rather than seeing Leah as the godlier woman, just as his father was blinded by his appetite for meat and ignored the will of Yahweh. Yahweh brings Leah to Jacob for him to marry, but because Jacob was ruled by his own lust and desire, he misses Yahweh's will and pursues Rachael instead. This will lead to many problems within his family for the rest of his life.

29:1-8 After Jacob leaves his home, he makes his way to Haran, to the home of his uncle Laban, in hopes of finding a place to live and work. It is at a well (see note on Gen. 24:10-14) that Jacob encounters Rachel, one of the daughters of Laban.

The shepherds, not knowing who Jacob is, are cold toward him, and their responses are short. The shepherds point Rachel out to Jacob when she comes, as if to get rid of him. The cold response of the shepherds emphasizes the warm welcome of Laban. The shepherds explain to Jacob that they do not get water until everyone has arrived. The stone over the well would take more than one man to roll away.

29:9-14 When Jacob sees Rachel, he decides to impress her and removes the stone himself. The Jacob who stayed in the tents with his mother most of his life and then lost his family is now overjoyed to the point of tears upon seeing a relative. Upon finding out that they are related, Rachel goes home to tell her father Laban, who then brings Jacob to his home. Laban's warm welcome helps show that Yahweh has taken care of him and also sets Jacob up for the unexpected deception that is about to come.

29:15-20 After Jacob has stayed with Laban for a while, working for him to earn his keep, Laban decides that Jacob should be paid for his work. Laban has two daughters: the older is Leah, whose name means "cow" and is described as having "soft" or "tender" eyes. It is not clear what this word means. Some think it means that her eyes had no sparkle, a desirable trait in the ancient Near East. Or it could mean that she had appealing eyes, in reference to a tender heart and good character. The latter seems likely, given her character that is developed throughout the rest of the story. No matter what the word means, the point is that she did not measure up to her incredibly attractive sister. The younger sister is Rachel, whose name means "ewe" and is described as having a lovely figure. Jacob only notices the good-looking Rachel and falls in love with her. It is interesting that the text says nothing about Rachel's interest in Jacob.

Since Jacob has nothing to offer Laban as a dowry for Rachel, he agrees to work seven years for her. This would have been significantly more than most people would have ever offered. Casual workers received between a half and one shekel per month for their pay. This would have totaled between 42 and 84 shekels. The Law forbade a man to pay more than 50 shekels (Deut. 22:29), which was seen as significantly higher than most people would pay.

Laban agrees to the deal but states that he would give *her* to him, not actually specifying who "she" is. According to the Law, single men who became indentured slaves were to be released after six years (Ex. 21:1-6; Deut. 15:12-18), making Jacob's service a violation of the Law, especially considering the 14 years total he would work. Yet to Jacob the seven years seem like nothing because he is so in love with Rachel.

29:21-24 The terseness of Jacob’s comment to Laban and the lack of “please” reveals that their relationship for the last seven years has likely not been on the best of terms. He demands to be with Rachel for whom he has worked so long. Laban agrees and throws a wedding celebration. Normally, wedding celebrations were a week long. There would be a ceremony and celebrations on the first day, and the couple would consummate their marriage that night. Then that would be followed by six more days of celebration. On the first night, Laban gives Jacob Leah instead of Rachel. The bride would have been veiled throughout the ceremony, and with the consumption of alcohol and entering the tent with the bride at night, it would have been easy to deceive Jacob. The text never states why Leah went along with the deception, especially since Jacob had never really paid attention to her. Most likely, in a patriarchal society to go against the will of the father would incur punishment and maybe even banishment from the tribe. This shows a lack of consideration and compassion for his own daughter as Laban uses her to gain a greater profit.

29:25-30 In the morning, Jacob discovers that he has been deceived and goes to Laban to complain. Ironically, Jacob ends up being deceived in the same way he deceived his father. And just as Jacob had put himself before the firstborn, now the firstborn of Laban is being put forth first. Jacob is reaping what he had sown, yet he is focused on the fact that he had been wronged. Laban’s argument is that the younger is never given in marriage before the older. The fact that Jacob does not know of this custom suggests that Laban is lying. And if this is true, then why did Laban not mention it seven years ago when Jacob specifically requested Rachel? The concentric structure of Gen. 29:20-30 emphasizes the deception and its consequences.

A Jacob’s payment for his wife (29:20)

B Consummation of the marriage to Leah by deception (29:21-24)

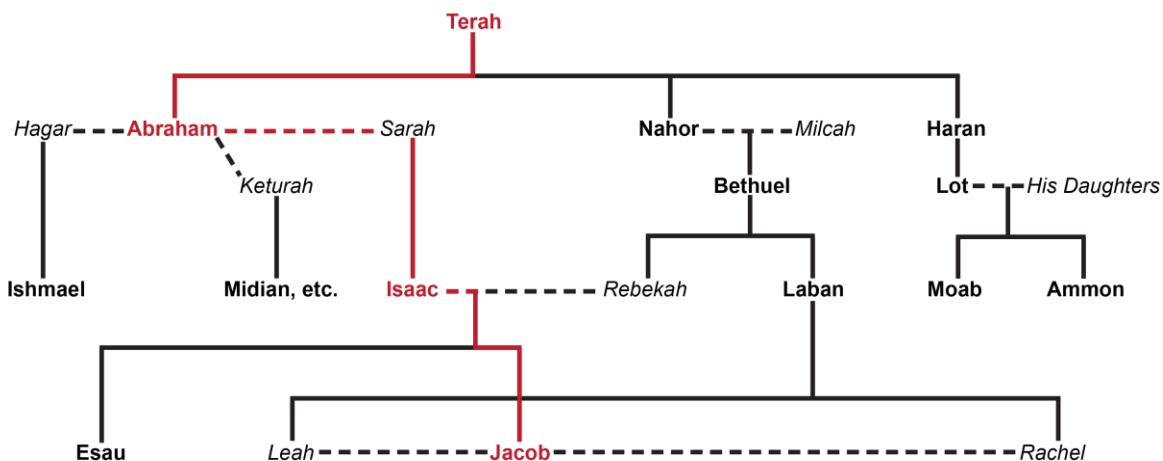
C Jacob’s accusation against Laban (29:25)

C’ Laban’s defense (29:26)

B’ Consummation of the marriage to Rachel by negotiation (29:27-30a)

A’ Jacob’s payment for his wife (29:30b)

Laban agrees to give Rachel to Jacob for seven more years of service. Jacob is expected to finish out the wedding week with Leah, which would be followed by a wedding week celebration with Rachel, and then he would work seven more years to pay off his debt for Rachel. The Mosaic Law later prohibited marrying two sisters at the same time (Lev. 18:18). Bigamy and polygamy were never Yahweh’s will.



From Leah's perspective, this would be *incredibly* humiliating—having her husband sleep with her, all the while thinking she is her sister; then having him look at her the next morning with shock and disgust and immediately run out on her; then having to sit next to him for a week at her own wedding while he stares at her sister; and then being tossed aside as her sister takes her place. It is for this reason that Yahweh will have compassion on Leah and allow her to have children (Gen. 29:31).

Throughout this, however, there is also a sense that Yahweh uses the deception of Laban to provide Jacob with the godlier wife (Gen. 50:20), yet Jacob misses it and plows on in his lust into polygamy. “Jacob had planned to take Rachel as his wife, but God intended him to have Leah.”¹⁴⁵ In the next chapter, the narrator will develop the godly character of Leah but point out the fact that Rachel will bring the idols into the family (Gen. 31:30-32). Now Jacob's family is going to be torn apart by the competition for his love that will ensue as a result of his selfish desires. The mention of the servants Zilpah, who was given to Leah (Gen. 29:24), and Bilhah, who was given to Rachel (Gen. 29:29), introduces the characters who will also become wives of Jacob.

¹⁴⁵ John H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 195.

E. The Growth of Jacob's Family (29:31–33:24)

In this section, Jacob becomes a passive character as his two wives become the focus of the story in the competition to have children. The irony in Jacob's family was that Leah was able to have children but did not have Jacob's love, while Rachel had Jacob's love but was not able to have children. Between this predicament and Jacob's favoritism, Jacob, his wives, and children quickly grew into a dysfunctional family. The dysfunction grew because of their own selfish desires.

Yet through the dysfunction of the family the narrator subtly highlights the fact that Leah is the godlier of the wives by recording Leah using the name *Yahweh* and Rachel using the name *Elohim*; this distinction shows their true attitudes and relationship with Him. *Yahweh* shows favor to Leah by providing her with more children than the other three combined. The emphasis in this section is on the fact that the family grows because *Yahweh* blessed them as He said He would through the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 12:1-3) and to Jacob in the desert (Gen. 28:10-15). The story culminates in the birth of Joseph, which will cause Jacob to return to the Promised Land, with the son who will become the savior of the family in the next division in Genesis.

29:31-35 *Yahweh* enables Leah to have children, both out of His compassion for her being unloved and because it is Leah from whom he desires the nation of Israel to come. "Yahweh sees" is often used of *Yahweh* acting on behalf of the weak or oppressed (Gen. 6:5; 7:1; 18:21; 31:12; Ex. 2:25; 4:31). Leah gives birth to her first four sons. The name *Reuben* means "see, a son," and the name *Simeon* means "hearing." Together, the names emphasize that *Yahweh* had seen and heard her in His providential care. The meaning of the name *Levi* is debated, but it sounds like the verb *lavah*, which means "to join," with the idea that Jacob would be joined with her. The name *Judah* means "he [God] will be praised."

"Jacob had planned to take Rachel as his wife, but God intended him to have Leah. Thus in two major reversals in Jacob's life, we can begin to see the writer's theme taking shape. Jacob sought to marry Rachel, but Laban tricked him. Then Jacob sought to build a family through Rachel, but she was barren; and God opened Leah's womb."¹⁴⁶

The names of Leah's first three sons express her deep desire to gain the love of her husband. But notice that in all her sons' births she uses the covenantal and relational name *Yahweh* and not *Elohim*. In contrast to Rachel, who does not use the name *Yahweh* until the birth of Joseph, this shows that she has a more intimate understanding of who *Yahweh* is than Rachel does. This is emphasized with the birth of Judah, where Leah resigns herself to the fact that Jacob does not love her and chooses to be thankful and praise *Yahweh* for the numerous children that He has given her. After four children, Leah is no longer able to have children. Did she choose to stop, or did Jacob stop sleeping with her? The text does not provide the answer.

30:1-7 Rachel's reaction to *Yahweh*'s kindness is jealousy. She demands that Jacob give her children or she will die. Rachel's reaction is more desperate than Sarah and Rebekah's (Gen. 16:2; 25:21) even though they went longer without children than she has. Though polygamist marriages often resulted in dysfunctional families, Jacob's is by far the most dysfunctional yet. Jacob rebukes Rachel by stating that children are a gift from God and therefore only He can provide children. Rachel shows no evidence of praying to *Yahweh*. And like Sarah (Gen. 16:2), she appeals to the customs of the time rather than praying and trusting in *Yahweh*, as her mother-

¹⁴⁶ John H. Sailhamer. *Genesis*, p. 200.

in-law, Rebekah, had. She hands over her maidservant to become Jacob's wife and provide her with children.

Bilhah gives birth to Dan and, unlike Sarah, there is no conflict between Rachel and her maidservant, for the conflict is already between her and her sister. The name *Dan* means "he vindicated" or "he judged." Dan's name communicates Rachel's triumph over her sister rather than her desire to have children or a praise of Yahweh. Though Rachel claims she has cried out to Yahweh, the narrator gives no evidence of this by stating it or the way that he has developed her character. Notice that Rachel does not use the name *Yahweh* as Leah had. The name of the second son, *Naphtali*, means something like "my struggle." The name *Gad* means "good fortune." Once again, Rachel expresses her victory over her sister. What victory does she see when she has fewer children than Leah and not of her own body? Did she see Leah in some way as preventing her?

30:8-13 Leah, not able to have children anymore, begins to fall into the competition that Rachel has created, and she also gives her maidservant Zilpah to Jacob in marriage to produce another son. The name *Gad* means "good fortune" and reflects Leah's feeling that good fortune has come her way. Then Zilpah had a second son. The name *Asher* means "happy one."

30:14-16 Reuben is about five years old at this time, so from the context it seems that he is older. Reuben is collecting mandrake plants and brings them to his mother. The mandrake plant has roots that can look like a human body and produces yellow plum-size fruit. Mandrakes have a strong, pleasant fragrance and were believed to arouse sexual desire and increase fertility in the conception of children.

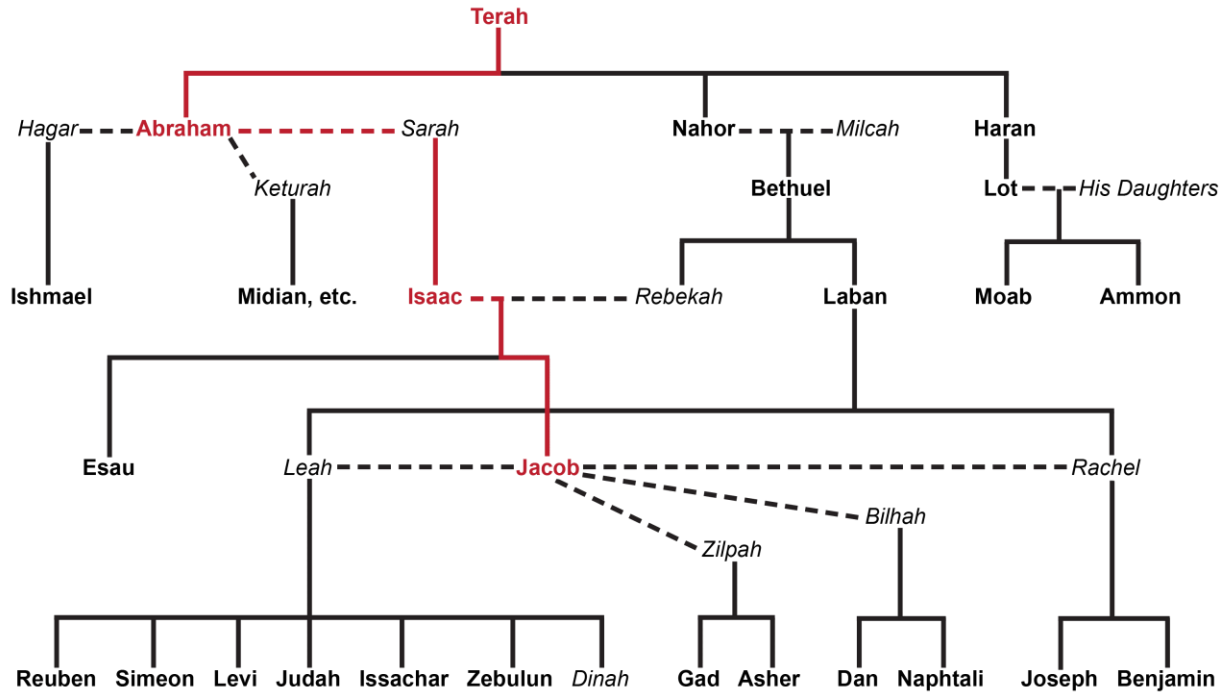
When Rachel sees these, she demands Leah give her some. Rachel shows her desperation in her impolite demand but also reveals that she is trusting in superstitious magic rather than Yahweh for children. Leah expresses her bitterness that Jacob is no longer sleeping with her, which shows how much he is favoring Rachel over her. Rachel's willingness to give up a night with Jacob in exchange for the mandrakes shows how desperate she is and how much she believes that the mandrakes will make her fertile.

When Jacob comes home, Leah states that he must sleep with her because she has paid for him. Just as Jacob's relationship with Laban for his daughters seemed to be nothing more than a commercial relationship, so the same is happening with his wives. Because Jacob played favorites, he unintentionally pitted the two sisters against each other in order to find their self-worth. Not only that, but he has now been reduced to a stud to provide children rather than a relational husband. It is in this dysfunctional setting that all the children will be raised.

30:18-21 Yahweh once again allows Leah to have more children. Yahweh's provision of children shows that although Rachel and perhaps Leah saw fertility in the mandrakes, it is really Yahweh who provides children (Ps. 113:9). Leah, who gives up the mandrakes, bears three children, while Rachel, who possesses them, remains barren for three more years.

The name *Issachar* means "man of reward" or possibly "there is reward." The name *Zebulun* means "honor." The meaning of the daughter's name, *Dinah*, is unknown and is the only named daughter of Jacob. Counting Dinah, Leah had more children than the other women combined—and the perfect number of children, seven. This shows Yahweh's favor toward Leah. It is through Judah—a son of Leah, not Rachel—that Yahweh will continue the chosen line leading to Jesus.

30:22-24 “Then Yahweh remembered Rachel” makes a turning point in the story. Just as Yahweh remembered Noah (Gen. 8:1), which led to the flood waters receding and the revealing of the land, it is Yahweh remembering Rachel that leads to her conceiving and Jacob returning to the Promised Land. The name *Joseph* means “may he add,” expressing Rachel’s desire for more children. This is the first time that Rachel uses the name Yahweh—now that she has what she wants. The birth of Joseph becomes significant to the story as well, for he will be the one who will add grain and life to the family of Jacob. Though Judah will become significant in the long term, it is Joseph who becomes the immediate savior of the family in the final division of Genesis.



F. Jacob Flees Laban (30:25–31:55)

What started off as Jacob finding safety with Laban for a couple years (Gen. 27:44) has turned into several years of servanthood. With the end of his servanthood and the birth of Joseph to his favorite wife, he now wants to return home. But Laban does not allow this. So, Jacob resorts to his own efforts to free himself. Despite this, Yahweh is with him and blesses Jacob because of His covenant promises.

30:25-30 Rachel's birth of Joseph initiates Jacob's desire to return home. Jacob aggressively asks Laban's permission to take his family and leave. Later, in the Law and the laws of surrounding cultures, if a slave were given a wife by his master, he would be required to leave her and the children behind when he was freed after his six years of service (Ex. 21:3-6). If he wanted to remain with them, he had to remain a slave. If this is true here, then Jacob is asking for more than he is entitled to.

Laban does not want Jacob to leave, though not necessarily because of his daughters; rather, because everything that Jacob has done has succeeded and prospered. Laban knows that Jacob has made him wealthy. However, Jacob was prospering because of Yahweh, not due to his own efforts (Gen. 12:3; 22:18; 28:14). Laban cleverly states that Jacob could name his wages and that he would then pay him and Jacob could leave. Laban owes him nothing but his two daughters, according to their agreement (Gen. 28:18, 27). Therefore, if Jacob wants to leave with more than Leah and Rachel, which he would need to, then he would have to work longer.

Jacob responds by saying that Laban has far more than he would have ever had if Jacob had not been with him all these years. Surely he was entitled to a percentage of the animals since he had prospered Laban so much.

30:31-36 Laban's question "what should I give you?" does not mean that he agreed with Jacob but rather that he was willing to make a deal with Jacob. Jacob, knowing that Laban would not give him anything, decides to make a proposition. Jacob proposes that any sheep or goat that is speckled or striped would be his, and the sheep and goats with solid color coats would be Laban's. In a flock, sheep are mostly all white, and goats are mostly all black or brown. Jacob has requested the significantly lower percentage of type of sheep or goat as his wages. The typical wage for a hired shepherd was twenty percent of the flock, and it was very unlikely that the speckled animals would reach such a percentage.¹⁴⁷ It looks like Jacob is requesting nothing as his wages. Laban agrees, and to keep Jacob honest he removes all the speckled or striped sheep and goats from the others and takes them a three-day journey away from Jacob. Jacob is left to tend only the solid-colored sheep and goats.

30:37-43 Jacob decides that he will increase the number of his flock through his own devices. He takes branches and strips the bark off them. Then he sets the branches in front of the animals' water troughs. The idea is that when the animals have intercourse, they would be staring at the striped branches, which would cause their offspring to have striped coats. This indicates a belief in a superstitious folk remedy. Jacob does show some understanding of breeding by taking the stronger animals and placing them in the front of the striped branches and removing the weaker animals from the striped branches when they bred. He also separates the striped animals from the solid-coat animals so that they would not breed with each other. The success of Jacob's plan was due ultimately to the grace of Yahweh (Gen. 31:10-12).

¹⁴⁷ See Bruce K. Waltke. *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 419.

31:1-13 Jacob’s brothers-in-law see Jacob as a threat to their inheritance as his flocks begin to increase in size, and they turn Laban against Jacob. Seeing this, Jacob decides to flee with his family. Jacob and his wives leave Laban for two reasons. First, Yahweh came to Jacob in a dream and told him to leave and go back to his home (Gen. 31:3, 11-13). Second, Laban had mistreated them all for so many years (Gen 31:6-7, 14-17), and now that they had their own wealth and were free from Laban’s debt, they were free to leave.

Not knowing where his wives stand—with him or their father and brothers—Jacob plays up how Laban has wronged him but is careful not to slander their father. Jacob states how he has been cheated and humiliated by Laban but stays away from the details of the marriage since that could create tension among him and his wives and instead focuses on the lack of wages and his tending to the flocks.

Three times in these verses Jacob acknowledges Yahweh’s involvement in his life and gives credit to Him for the idea about breeding the flocks and the increase in the size of his flocks. What is interesting, however, is not once has the narrator recorded Jacob seeking, praying to, or acknowledging Yahweh in his life while living with Laban. Has Jacob begun to turn to Yahweh at the end of many years of being cheated by Laban, or is he merely invoking the name of God to give legitimacy to his plight?

31:14-16 Leah and Rachel show that they have no love for their father and that they are siding with Jacob. What inheritance they feel cheated out of is not clear, since they had each received a slave woman, which would have been significant wealth. They may be implying that their husband has been enslaved by their father for 14 years without pay, which has affected them. They also feel cheated by the way Laban used them to deceive Jacob to merely gain a profit.

31:17-21 Jacob takes his family and flees Laban and begins to move back toward his home in Canaan. At the same time, Rachel steals the household gods that belonged to her father. These gods are called *teraphim*, sometimes translated as “household gods.” They were small figurines (two to three inches long) and were sometimes carried on the body as charms, many of which archaeologists have discovered. They may have been the images of family ancestors whom they were expected to honor and consult. Devotion to these teraphim would bring blessing and protection to the family. Rachel may also have hoped they would make her a fruitful mother.¹⁴⁸



The fact that Rachel steals these gods shows that she had been synchronizing her faith in Yahweh with her faith in the pagan gods. She takes the idols for protection rather than trusting in Yahweh. This also says something about Jacob; it is unlikely that her continued devotion to these

¹⁴⁸ See Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., “The Linguistic Origins of Teraphim,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* (July-September 1967): 230-38; and Gerhard Mehlman, “Genesis 31:19-39: An Interpretation,” *Journal of Reform Judaism* 29:3 (Summer 1982): 33-36.

pagan gods had gone unnoticed. Either he had overlooked it because he favored her, or she had brought him into the same practices. Either way, he had not acted in the faith that was characteristic of Abraham.

Jacob deceives Laban by not telling him that he is leaving and even leaves in the middle of the night. Since Laban had moved his flocks three days' journey from Jacob, Laban unknowingly gave Jacob a three-day head start.

31:22-30 Laban pursues Jacob and catches up in seven days. Yet Yahweh appears to Laban and warns him not to harm Jacob. Yahweh, true to His promises, threatens to curse Laban if he disdains Jacob (Gen. 12:3). On the other hand, Yahweh also tells him not to bless Jacob because that is not his right as one outside of the Abrahamic Covenant.

When Laban speaks to Jacob the next morning, his first accusation against Jacob is that he took his daughters by force and did not let him say goodbye. The hypocrisy and contradiction in Laban's argument is seen in the fact that he accuses Jacob of taking his daughters by the sword as if they are prisoners, while it is he who has held them captive for all these years. Likewise, he states that he would have thrown a party for them, but in the last party he threw for them he used them to gain a profit. The irony here is that Laban accuses Jacob of deceiving him when that was exactly what he had been doing to Jacob. Both men had resorted to selfishness and deceit throughout their lives, and it had ripped their families apart.

Laban shares that he had allowed Jacob to leave only because Yahweh came to him and warned him not to harm Jacob (Gen. 31:7, 29). Laban had seen over the years the power and protection of Yahweh over Jacob, so now he had obeyed Yahweh because he had come to respect Him as a powerful God.

Laban's second accusation is that Jacob had stolen his gods, not knowing Jacob had no knowledge of this and that it was really his daughter Rachel he ought to blame. Laban seems to be more concerned about his idols being stolen than about his daughters leaving home.

31:31-35 Jacob does not contest his flight as breach of etiquette but does attack Laban for mistreating him and wanting to steal his wives from him. But then in his anger Jacob makes a rash vow and swears that whoever has the idols would be put to death. The irony here is that, because of his rashness, he has just sentenced his favorite wife to death were she to be discovered. "It is curious that Rachel, and not Leah, should have almost always turned out to be Jacob's greatest hindrance in life."¹⁴⁹

The tension builds as Laban searches each tent, coming to Rachel's last. But Rachel shows her cleverness by hiding the idols in a bag and sitting on them and then using the excuse that she could not stand because she is on her monthly period. By being on her period, Rachel and everything she is touching has become unclean. Laban would not risk searching under her for fear of becoming unclean himself, a process that would require a week of purification rituals. So, he looks around her tent and finds nothing. Laban now looks like the fool because the only legitimate accusation that he had against Jacob has turned out to be false.

31:36-42 Now that Laban has no evidence for his own accusation, Jacob lays into him with his own complaints about how Laban had been mistreating him all these years but that he had nevertheless worked hard for him, and Laban's flocks were blessed as a result. In fact, Jacob

¹⁴⁹ W. H. Griffith Thomas. *Genesis*, p. 285.

states that the more he thinks about it, the more he realizes that Laban has been stealing from him. Jacob acknowledges that Yahweh is the only reason that Laban has not completely cheated him.

31:43-55 Laban shows that he did not hear anything Jacob has said, still claiming that everything Jacob has belongs to him. Laban's entitlement goes so far as to claim Leah and Rachel as his own, ignoring the fact that he gave them to Jacob as wages for 14 years of service.

Laban wants to make a Mizpah treaty, swearing that neither would trespass the pillar of stones they will set up between them, lest they be killed by the other. Basically, this treaty stated, "We will live in peace as long as you stay on your side." The Mizpah treaty was not a promise between friends but a warning between men who did not trust each other. To keep each other true to the terms of the covenant they had just made, Laban, as a polytheist, called upon the gods of Nahor, and Jacob, as a descendant of Abraham, called upon Yahweh. Laban also expected that Jacob would not take other wives in addition to his daughters. The irony is that Laban is the one who had pushed Jacob into polygamy.

G. Jacob and Esau Are Reconciled (32:1–33:20)

Jacob has now hit rock bottom. A broken relationship with Laban behind him and a broken relationship with Esau ahead of him, Jacob has nowhere to turn. For the first time, he truly turns to Yahweh. Yahweh will now show Jacob who He really is, reconciling Jacob and Esau despite what they had both done to each other in the past.

It is clear throughout Genesis 28-31 that Jacob has shown very little, if any, faith in Yahweh. Never during this time has he ever gone to or acknowledged Yahweh in his life. The only time Jacob even made note of Yahweh was when Yahweh came to him. It is clear that Jacob has no relationship with Yahweh and may even be involved in pagan idolatry. Yet it is also clear that despite this, Yahweh, in His grace and faithfulness to the Abrahamic Covenant, has protected and blessed Jacob in his life.

32:1-2 The angels of Yahweh appear to Jacob on his way back to Canaan to assure him that Yahweh is with him and protecting him. The name *Mahanaim* apparently means “two camps” or “double host.” Perhaps the two camps are those of Yahweh and of Jacob. Jacob encountered angels as he left the land of Canaan (Gen. 28:11-22), and now he sees them again as he returns to the Promised land.

“The events of this chapter are couched between two accounts of Jacob’s encounter with angels (vv. 1, 25). The effect of these two brief pictures of Jacob’s meeting with angels on his return to the land is to align the present narrative with the similar picture of the Promised land in the early chapters of Genesis. The land was guarded on its borders by angels. The same picture was suggested early in the Book of Genesis when Adam and Eve were cast out of the Garden of Eden and ‘cherubim’ were positioned on the east of the garden to guard the way to the tree of life. It can hardly be accidental that as Jacob returned from the east, he was met by angels at the border of the Promised land.”¹⁵⁰

32:3-8 Jacob sends his servants ahead to meet Esau with the intent of letting Esau know that he is on his way back home. The messengers’ return is not comforting, for they do not bring a message back from Esau but rather report only that Esau is coming and with an army. Is Esau coming to wage war or to receive his brother as if he were royalty? Jacob becomes afraid and divides his people into two camps so that if one gets attacked, the other can get away. Jacob is trying to protect himself—his standard response to trouble. Despite Yahweh sending his angels, Jacob is still filled with fear.

32:9-12 For the first time in his life, having no home, fearing Esau, and having nowhere to turn, Jacob calls out to Yahweh for help. Jacob’s prayer (his first recorded in Scripture) reflects his fear and need for Yahweh’s help, as well as his own humility. In his prayer, he reminds Yahweh of His covenant. If Yahweh lets him and his family die, then He has not honored the promises of His covenant. Surprisingly, Jacob also confesses his unworthiness and lack of any claim upon Yahweh’s favor. What is also interesting is that although he has done nothing to grow his relationship with Yahweh, he now claims the promises that Yahweh had made him 14 years ago (Gen. 28:13-15).

32:13-21 Though Jacob hopes for Yahweh’s help, he still tries to do what he can to appease Esau’s anger. His hopes to pay Esau off with a large portion of his blessing, which he figures Esau would claim. What is also seen here is the tremendous blessing of Yahweh, for when he

¹⁵⁰ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis.” In *Genesis–Numbers*, p. 208.

first left Canaan Jacob had nothing, but now he has been blessed by Yahweh with tremendous wealth.

32:22-32 Jacob sends his family away to cross the Jabbok. The Jabbok was probably just a few miles east of the Jordan Valley. It joins the Jordan River about midway between the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. There is a play on words with the Hebrew word *vayye'aveq*, which means “struggled” and sounds like the Hebrew names *ya'akov* (Jacob) and *Yabboq* (Jabbok). The account here is strange and obscure, raising more questions than it answers.

That night an angel appears representing Yahweh, and Jacob wrestles him throughout the night. The narrator calls the opponent “a man,” reflecting Jacob’s perspective at the beginning of the encounter. Later in the struggle, Jacob realizes the angel’s true identity. The fact that it is night means that Jacob would not know who his opponent is. He most likely would not have wrestled him if he knew who he was. The statement that the angel sees that he cannot defeat Jacob is odd and certainly not factual. The fact that the angel simply touches Jacob’s hipbone for it to dislocate shows his superior strength and power over Jacob.

The point here is not that Jacob is somehow able to “overcome” the angel (Hos. 12:4) but that Jacob demonstrates his desire to have the blessings of Yahweh. Yahweh is also using the experience to demonstrate how Jacob keeps trying to wrestle Yahweh for the blessings that Yahweh is eager to give him. Jacob has always tried to live life without Yahweh, so to make Jacob dependent upon Him, Yahweh pops his hipbone out of its socket. His physical handicap will remind him of his dependency upon Yahweh.

The angel knows Jacob’s name but forces him to confess it, which would be a confession of his true character. It is then that the angel gives him a new name, emphasizing the new man he is becoming and is to be. The name *Israel* means “God fights.” The point is that Jacob does not need to fight and deceive to get what he wants; Yahweh will be his provider. This is emphasized by the dislocated hipbone. This new name is both a promise and a call for faith. Throughout Israel’s history, Yahweh forbids Israel to have their own horses and chariots because He was to be their horses and chariots (Deut. 17:14-16; 2 Kgs. 6:15-19). The battles of Israel in the Bible are not won with their armies but with Yahweh using His creation (nature) to defeat the enemy.

“It was when Jacob was alone, having done everything he could to secure his own safety, that God came to him (v. 24). The ‘man’ was the Angel of the Lord (vv. 28-30). Note that God took the initiative in wrestling with Jacob, not vice versa. God was bringing Jacob to the end of himself. He was leading him to a settled conviction that God was superior to him and that he must submit to God’s leadership in his life (cf. Rom. 12:1-2).”¹⁵¹

“The name Israel denoted a spiritual state determined by faith; and in Jacob’s life the natural state, determined by flesh and blood, still continued to stand side by side with this. Jacob’s new name was transmitted to his descendants, however, who were called Israel as the covenant nation. For as the blessing of their forefather’s conflict came down to them as a spiritual inheritance, so did they also enter upon the duty of preserving this inheritance by continuing in a similar conflict.”¹⁵²

The reason the angel did not want to stay past dawn and did not give his name is unknown. Perhaps it is because no human can see the face of Yahweh and live (Ex. 33:20). Despite this,

¹⁵¹ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Genesis*, p. 199.

¹⁵² C. F. Keil and Franz Delitzsch. *The Pentateuch*, p. 1:307.

Jacob names the place *Peniel*, which means “face of God.” Either Jacob truly believed he had seen God, or it is figurative for how much of Yahweh’s character had been revealed to him. The phrase “face to face” is used in the Bible only of God-human relationships (Ex. 33:11). The Hebrews refraining from eating the sinew that is attached to the socket of the hip reminds them of who they are and of their dependency upon Yahweh.

33:1-2 Jacob still shows his favoritism for Rachel by the way he divides his people. Jacob places Rachel and Joseph in the rear of the camp where they will be safe. In contrast, he puts Leah and her children in the front. If Esau does attack, Leah’s family will die first, giving Rachel’s family a chance to run away.

33:3-17 The next day, Jacob meets Esau and bows down before him. This is a complete reversal from what was supposed to happen according to the blessing of Isaac (Gen. 27:27-29). The blessing is not being fulfilled because Jacob has not been trusting Yahweh for its fulfillment. Despite this, Yahweh is still taking care of Jacob by having brought Esau to a place of forgiveness over the years of their separation. Yahweh had stayed with Esau throughout the years, blessing him and softening his heart just as much as He had with Jacob. Jacob had done nothing to affect the situation in his favor. The fact that Yahweh had chosen Jacob to carry the covenant does not mean that He had forsaken Esau in a relationship.

33:18-20 On the one hand, Jacob shows that he is more in tune now with Yahweh’s covenant will and involvement in his life by having moved his family into the land of Canaan and erecting an altar to Yahweh. By naming the altar “the God of Israel is God,” Jacob worships Yahweh as he said he would and uses his new name (Israel), the identity that Yahweh had given him, acknowledging that he is now on a new path. This is the first time that Jacob initiates the building of an altar and worships Yahweh without Yahweh having to first come to him.

However, he also set up camp near Shechem, a Canaanite city, which is reminiscent of Lot’s choice to live near Sodom (Gen. 13:12). Jacob had promised Yahweh that he would return to Bethel to live, which would have been more appropriate, being a location removed from all other Canaanite cities (Gen. 38:18). Though the story seems to have ended well with the reconciliation of the two brothers, the mention of Shechem hints that not all is well in the land.

H. Dinah and the Hivites (34:1-31)

In this section, the narrator shows how the favoritism of Jacob has not only destroyed his relationship with his wives but also with his children. As a result, Dinah's morality has been compromised, seen in her willingness to hang out with the Canaanites and seen in the sons' willingness to kill all the men of a city out of vengeance. This story also sets the reader up for the story of Joseph and why he is despised by his brothers because of their father's favoritism.

34:1 Dinah is introduced as the daughter of Leah, the unloved wife of Jacob. The implication is that Dinah is also unloved, which would explain Jacob's mild reaction to her rape later in the story. Dinah's being unloved by her father may also explain why she is rebellious and goes out to meet the women of the land. The reference to the "women of the land" is a reference to the Canaanite women, who were repulsive to Abraham, Isaac, and Rebekah (Gen. 24:3, 37; 27:46; 28:1, 6, 8), but here, Dinah is going to join them. Furthermore, she goes alone, which is extremely unwise in this culture. Girls of a marriageable age would not leave a rural encampment to go unchaperoned to an alien city. This reveals Dinah's character, in that she prefers the Canaanite culture to her family and is another Lot, moving toward the city.

34:2-4 Shechem is the son of Hamor, who was the ruler over a Hivite city. The Hivites were a sub-group of the Canaanites. The repetitive references to Shechem's rape of Dinah communicates the intensity of the violation. Yet afterward he becomes deeply in love with her and even speaks with passionate love toward her, which shows that he really does want to marry her. Unfortunately, when he goes to his father, he demands that his father get her as his wife. He does not say *please*, he calls her a child, and he does not even use her name, presenting him as harsh and demeaning of Dinah.

34:5 Jacob's lack of emotions upon hearing about the rape is somewhat shocking, considering how emotional he has been at other times (Gen. 29:11, 18; 32:7; 33:4; 37:34-35). He does not even see it as important enough to inform the family right away. His apathy is made even more evident when set alongside the anger of the brothers upon hearing about Dinah's rape.

34:6-7 In contrast, Jacob's sons were rightfully indignant and outraged by the violation. Unlike Jacob, the sons see it as a violation of Israel as well. Why had Jacob not responded in the same way? The sons and the narrator come together in the statement that "such a crime should not be committed." This is the first time that the name Israel has been used of the chosen people of Yahweh. The fact that it is used in the phrase "Shechem had disgraced Israel" shows that Shechem's violation was not just against Dinah but also against the chosen people of Yahweh (Gen. 12:1-3).

34:8-12 Shechem's father Hamor comes to negotiate the marriage of Dinah with his son. Hamor shows how willing he is to make this happen by offering to become one people group through multiple intermarriages. He argues that it would be economically beneficial to Jacob's family because they would have free reign of the land. Shechem then declares that he will offer anything that the sons would ask for. However, this intermarriage is forbidden by Yahweh later stated in the Law (Deut. 7:3).

34:13-17 The sons immediately start the negotiations with the intention to deceive Hamor and Shechem. They do not require money as much as they require that every male of the Hivites become circumcised. Though this is what Yahweh requires of those who would choose to join Israel, this is not the way it was to be done. It is in Gen. 34:17, 26 that the narrator reveals that

Dinah has not been returned to Jacob and is being held in the city. The silence of Dinah seems to suggest that she is there against her will. This reveals the desperation of the brothers as Hamor and Shechem have leverage over them. This is not a legitimate negotiation if the brothers fear what might happen to their sister if they do not respond in a way that Hamor and Shechem approve. Their deception becomes somewhat understandable considering this fact.

34:18-24 The fact that Hamor agrees to this condition shows how much he wants to please his son and make the marriage happen. The fact that the entire city agrees to the condition shows the power and influence that Hamor has over the city.

34:25-29 Three days later, while the Hivites are crippled with post-circumcision pain, Simeon and Levi enter the city and slaughter every male. Simeon and Levi are the second- and third-born sons of Jacob and full brothers of Dinah.

“[The Hivites] have largely brought down that violence on themselves by seeking to impose their will on Jacob’s family. With Dinah in Shechem’s hands, the option of polite declining is closed to her guardians. And once the brothers refused to submit to the Hivite version of a shotgun wedding, they were left no avenue to the retrieval of their sister except force. Hence also the need for “deceit.” Considering the numerical superiority of the troops behind the ‘prince of the land’—‘two of Jacob’s sons’ faced whole city—no wonder the brothers resorted to trickery to odds make even. And the order of presentation supports the reading of the slaughter as an act enforced and purposive rather than expressing blind fury. First comes the attack on the townsmen, next the killing of Hamor and Shechem, and only then the extrication of Dinah: to rescue their sister this orderly movement implies, they had to deal with all possible resistance, let alone future retaliation.”¹⁵³

If they had only killed Shechem and maybe even Hamor, their actions could be seen as justice. However, they slaughter every male and plunder the city, also taking the women and children as slaves. This certainly is not being a blessing to the world (Gen. 12:1-3). The brothers are right in their desire to keep these two family lines from intermixing; however, they are wrong in the way they go about it. Yahweh had said He would curse those who cursed Abraham’s descendants (Gen. 12:3). Rather than trusting Yahweh for vengeance, they took matters into their own hands, just as their father Jacob had so many times before. From their first act of deception to their getting carried away in the killing and looting of the Hivites, they show themselves to be lacking self-control.

What makes their actions even more grievous is that they used circumcision, the sign of Yahweh’s covenant blessings with His chosen people (Gen. 17:1-14), to deceive and murder the Hivites. What was supposed to be a sign of bringing people into the blessings of Yahweh has been used instead to destroy people’s lives. They show their disregard not only for others’ lives and for justice but also for the covenant relationship of Yahweh.

34:30-31 Unlike with Dinah’s rape, Jacob becomes very angry with his sons for what they have done. Unfortunately, he seems to be angrier over his tarnished reputation than over the unrighteous acts of his sons. Jacob is more concerned with how he will look among the other people groups and how they will treat him as a result. This shows that he is not trusting Yahweh to protect him and is not as concerned about morality as one would expect him to be. The sons’ response is bitterness toward their father because he did not get angry or seem to care when

¹⁵³ Meir Sternberg, *The poetics of biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, p. 468.

Dinah was raped. They view him as treating her as a prostitute since he was willing to give her in marriage to Shechem. Still, despite his anger with them, he does not discipline them in any way. Many years later, Jacob judges them for their actions (Gen. 49:5-7).

This story reveals the immoral and dysfunctional nature of Jacob's family. The narrator also reveals the deep rift between Jacob and his sons due to his favoritism of Rachel over Leah and her children. Jacob has failed to be a blessing to his own family, and thus he has failed to be a blessing to the world (Gen 12:1-3).

I. Israel Fulfills His Vow (35:1–37:1)

This final section brings a close to the story of Jacob. About ten years have passed since Jacob returned from Paddan-Aram, and he still has not returned to Bethel to fulfill his vow there (Gen. 28:20-22). Yahweh appears to Jacob and commands him to fulfill his vow. This section shows for the first time Jacob renewing his life and family to Yahweh and actually pursuing Yahweh in a relationship. Perhaps it is his daughter's desire to hang out with the Canaanites or the vile sin of his sons against the Hivites that wakes him up to the dysfunctional nature of his family and the need to get right with Yahweh and pursue obedience. After many years pursuing his own path, Jacob's story ends on a positive note of his rededication to Yahweh.

35:1-7 Yahweh comes to Jacob and commands him to go to Bethel as Jacob had promised he would. This is the first time a patriarch has been directly commanded to build an altar. The language makes a comparison to Yahweh's command to Abraham to offer his son as a burnt offering (Gen. 22:2). Though this test is not as extreme, it may have been difficult for Jacob to complete because of his fear of what the Canaanites would do to him (Gen. 34:30). Like Abraham, Jacob immediately responds by having all the pagan gods in his family buried and his family cleansed and their clothes changed. The rings they remove may be part of the loot they had obtained from the Hivite slaughter or be associated in some way with the pagan gods (Num. 31:48-54). Jacob's call for them to rid themselves of their gods shows that he has been aware of them the whole time. The burial of the gods signifies that the gods are now dead to the family and points to their desire for renewed devotion to Yahweh (Jos. 24:14, 23-24; Judg. 10:16; 1 Sam. 7:3-4). Yahweh responds by placing fear in the hearts of those who surround Jacob; He is honoring His promise of protection.

35:8 This is the first time Rebekah is said to have a maidservant. What is odd is that the maid servant's death is mentioned, but Rebekah's is not. Perhaps the reader is to assume that she died while Jacob was in Haran with Laban. Perhaps she is not mentioned because her death happened while Jacob was away.

35:9-15 By Yahweh reaffirming Jacob's name change to Israel, He is reminding Jacob of the new life to which He has called him. It is as though Yahweh is erasing or cleansing Jacob and his family from the events at the Hivite city and their failure to move to Bethel, and He is starting all over with them. The constant pursuit as well as forgiveness of Yahweh are seen yet again. The blessing of Yahweh here echoes His blessing in Gen. 17 and Gen. 28:3-4.

“The importance of God's words to Jacob in vv. 11-12 cannot be overemphasized. First, God's words ‘be fruitful and increase in number’ recalled clearly the primeval blessing of Creation (1:28) and hence showed God to be still ‘at work’ in bringing about the blessing to all mankind through Jacob. Second, for the first time since 17:16 (‘kings of peoples will come from her’), the mention is made of royalty (‘kings,’ v. 11) in the promised line. Third, the promise of the land, first given to Abraham and then to Isaac, was renewed here with Jacob (v. 12). Thus within these brief words several major themes of the book have come together. The primeval blessing of mankind was renewed through the promise of a royal offspring and the gift of the land.”¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis.” In *Genesis–Numbers*, p. 218.

35:16-20 Jacob is not disobedient to Yahweh in leaving Bethel. Yahweh’s instructions to go to Bethel and “live there” are evidently directions to dwell there while he fulfills his vow. Yahweh does not command permanent residence there.

Rachel’s death during childbirth, though sad, would not have been shocking since it was not uncommon in ancient times for women to die during childbirth. Because of her agony, she names her son *Ben-oni*, meaning “son of my pain.” Jacob renames him *Benjamin*, which means “son of my right hand.” The right hand of the patriarch or king was seen as the hand of authority, and to sit there indicated a position of power and even inheriting the headship. Jacob’s naming him this gives Benjamin great authority and prominence in the family. This is especially interesting since he is the last born, yet he is from Rachel. This will continue to drive a rift between the sons of Leah and the sons of Rachel.

35:21-22 It is after the birth of Benjamin and the death of Rachel that Reuben sleeps with Bilhah, the maidservant of Rachel and concubine of Jacob. Reuben’s act of sleeping with his father’s concubine would have been seen as an attempt to seize power from his father. In the ancient Near East, when a king died, the son would sleep with his father’s wives to secure the throne for himself. Likewise, a man who wanted to assert his superiority over another man might do so by having sexual relations with that man’s wife or concubine (2 Sam. 3:7-8; 16:21-22). Ancient Near Easterners regarded this act of physical domination as evidence of personal domination. Perhaps what causes Reuben, the firstborn child, to do this was the significance of Jacob’s naming of Benjamin. Maybe he is also trying to prevent Bilhah from succeeding Rachel as Jacob’s favorite wife. Not only would this have been a challenge to his father’s authority, but it is also an immoral act (Gen. 19:33-38; Lev. 18:8; Deut. 22:30; 2 Sam. 16:21-22; 1 Kgs. 2:13-25) and punishable by death (Lev. 20:11). Jacob once again shows himself as a passive father when he hears of it and does nothing. Is Jacob indifferent to the abuses of Bilhah like he was to Dinah? Or does he care but is incapable of exercising authority over his sons? However, at the end of his life, he will deal with Reuben when he gives the blessings to his sons (Gen. 49:2-4).

35:23-26 Now that Benjamin has been born, the complete list of Jacob’s sons is recorded, according to their four mothers. These sons will become the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel (Jacob), which Yahweh will one day bring out of Egypt and make into a great nation, fulfilling the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant.

35:27-29 Jacob returns to his father’s inheritance. Jacob presumably visited Isaac in Hebron on various occasions following his return from Paddan-aram. However, on this occasion he moves his family to his father’s encampment and evidently remains there as Isaac’s heir.

“The end of the Jacob narrative is marked by the death of his father, Isaac. The purpose of this notice is not simply to record Isaac’s death but rather to show the complete fulfillment of God’s promise to Jacob (28:21). According to Jacob’s vow, he had asked that God watch over him during his sojourn and return him safely to the house of his father. Thus the conclusion of the narrative marks the final fulfillment of these words as Jacob returned to the house of his father, Isaac, before he died.”¹⁵⁵

36:1-43 These verses form the ninth *toledot* about Esau’s genealogy. This genealogy first shows Yahweh’s faithfulness in multiplying Abraham’s seed as He had promised, even if they are not from the chosen line of Isaac and then Jacob. Second, it shows that Esau, like Lot and Ishmael,

¹⁵⁵ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis.” In *Genesis–Numbers*, p. 220.

has chosen to reject the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant and live outside the land of promise and blessings. Third, the lengthy record of Esau's descendants also presents the hope that he may be reconciled back into Jacob as one nation just as they were reconciled relationally in Genesis 33. Even though Paul uses Jacob and Esau as an example of Yahweh's sovereignty to choose whom He will, Paul does look forward to the day in which those who previously rejected the gospel find mercy (Rom. 11:25-32), and Rev. 7:9 sees a countless number of believers from every nation and tribe standing before the throne of Yahweh. Fourth, the genealogy also serves to provide connections with the descendants of Esau referred to later in the history of Israel.

IV. The Family History of Jacob (37:2–50:26)

This division begins the tenth and final *toledot*. Although it says it is “the account of Jacob,” it is really the narrative of all the sons of Jacob. Though the story focuses on Joseph’s life, it is not the main idea being developed. The main point is Yahweh’s provision for the family of Abraham as He promised (Gen. 12:1-3). Yahweh uses Joseph and Judah to accomplish this task. Likewise, Reuben, Simeon, and Benjamin also become major characters in the family history of Jacob. The fact that the Joseph story ends in Genesis 47 shows that Joseph is not the focus. The book ends with Jacob blessing all his sons, which will become foundational in the establishment of the tribes of Israel and the redemption that Yahweh will unfold for them.

The story of Joseph centers on the conflict of Yahweh’s promise to Joseph that he would be ruler one day in order to save the Abrahamic line (Gen. 37:5-11). From that point on, many conflicts in Joseph’s life threaten the fulfillment of that promise. The story reaches its climax when Joseph is thrown into prison and then forgotten by the cupbearer for two years (Gen. 40:23). It finds its resolution when Yahweh lifts Joseph out of prison to interpret the dreams of Pharaoh and he is made ruler, where he begins to save the land of Egypt and Canaan from the famine (Gen. 41). The story concludes when Joseph is reconciled to his brothers and brings them to Egypt, whereby the Abrahamic line is saved (Gen. 42-26). The concentric parallel emphasizes the reconciliation of Joseph with his brothers.

A Introduction: Beginning of Joseph story (37:2-11)

B Jacob mourns “death” of Joseph (37:12-36)

C Interlude: Judah signified as leader (38:1-30)

D Joseph’s enslavement in Egypt (39:1-23)

E Joseph savior of Egypt through favor at Pharaoh’s court (40:1-41:57)

F Journey of brothers to Egypt (42:1-43:34)

G Brothers pass Joseph’s test of love for brother (44:1-34)

G’ Joseph gives up his power over brothers (45:1-28)

F’ Migration of family to Egypt (46:1-27)

E’ Joseph savior of family through favor at Pharaoh’s court (46:28-47:12)

D’ Joseph’s enslaving of Egyptians (47:13-31)

C’ Interlude: Judah blessed as ruler (48:1-49:28)

B’ Joseph mourns death of Jacob (49:29-50:14)

A’ Conclusion: End of Joseph story (50:15-26)

The stories of the patriarchs find their conclusion in Jacob’s blessing of his sons, who become the twelve tribes of Israel (Gen. 48-49), safe in Egypt just as Yahweh had promised (Gen. 15:12-16). As Judah and Joseph were the focus of the story, so they are also the focus of the blessings of Jacob. Judah was not the firstborn son but the fourth (Gen. 35:23), yet he had now become the firstborn by title due to the sins of his older brothers—Reuben’s sexual sin (Gen. 35:22; 49:3-4) and Simeon and Levi’s act of violence (Gen. 34:30; 49:5-7). However, Jacob would favor Joseph as his firstborn son of Rachel and through the coat that he had bestowed upon him.

“Just as Abraham had two sons and only one was the son of promise, and just as Isaac had two sons and only one was the son of the blessing, so now Jacob, though he has twelve sons, has two wives (Leah and Rachel); and each has a son (Judah and Joseph) that can rightfully contend for the blessing. In the narratives that follow, the writer holds both sons, Joseph and Judah, before the readers as rightful heirs of the promise. As the Jacob narratives have already anticipated, in the end it was Judah, the son of Leah, not Joseph, the son of Rachel, that gained the blessing (49:8-12).”¹⁵⁶

The story of Jacob’s family (Gen. 37-50) is the most continuous story (not episodic at all) and emphasizes the human condition more than any other division in Genesis. Joseph is the dominant character, surpassing Yahweh in character development. Joseph is the most developed yet enigmatic character of Genesis. Yahweh never appears to anyone in the story. Yahweh communicates only three times through dreams (Gen. 37:5-9; 40:8-11, 16-17; 41:1-7) and only speaks one time in the Joseph story (Gen. 46:3-4). Compared to Gen. 1-11, the divine omnipresence and morally unambiguous Yahweh is replaced with divine reticence and human ambivalence in Gen. 37-50.

The Joseph story plays an important role within the whole story of the Torah. First, it links the history of the patriarchs with their settlement in Egypt. It explains how the patriarchs, who were living in the land of Canaan, came to be living in Egypt at the beginning of the book of Exodus. Second, it begins to unfold the theme, seen throughout the Torah, of partial fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises. Abraham was promised the land of Canaan and that he would become a great nation (Gen. 12:1-3), but by the end of Genesis, he still has neither. This is how each book in the Torah ends. Third, the fact that Joseph as a Hebrew slave could rise to power in Egypt is spectacular proof of the divine overruling and providence of Yahweh in the life of Israel as He promised (Gen. 12:1-3). The narrator’s repetition of the phrase “Yahweh was with Joseph” (Gen. 39:2, 3, 21, 29) points to this fact and to the true nature of Yahweh and the meaning of His name. Fourth, Joseph’s rise to power and salvation for the Near Eastern world from the famine is the closest that the patriarchs have come to being a blessing to the whole earth (Gen. 12:1-3). At the peak of Joseph’s power, the narrator gives a glimpse of what is intended for the role of Israel over all the nations—that Israel would be a blessing to them.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis.” In *Genesis–Numbers*, p. 218.

¹⁵⁷ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16–50*, pp. 357-358.

A. Joseph Rejected by His Brothers (37:2-36)

In this section, the narrator reveals the full extent of the dysfunction in Jacob's family. As the tension in the family increases—to the point that Jacob's sons seek to kill their own brother and then sell him into slavery—one wonders how this could ever be the family of Abraham and the people whom Yahweh has chosen to be a blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:3). Yet Joseph's dreams reveal that Yahweh is at work in the family, and despite the brothers' desire to kill Joseph, he ends up surviving in the house of Potiphar in Egypt. The dreams also point to the fact that Yahweh is going to use Joseph in some way to be a blessing to the world, this being the purpose of the Abrahamic Covenant.

37:2 Joseph is 17 years old when the story begins, and he is shepherding the flocks with his brothers. What is interesting is that it only mentions his brothers who belong to Zilpah and Bilhah. Joseph brings back to their father a bad report of his brothers. The Hebrew word “tales” or “report” is always used in a negative sense of an untrue report, and here it is qualified by the adjective “evil” (Num. 13:32; 14:36-37).¹⁵⁸ However, some scholars have suggested that the story has the feel of wisdom literature in that Joseph is presented in a good light though not perfect. He is faithful to his father in the little things by doing what is right even if it does not make him popular. Therefore, Yahweh will give him authority over greater things. Though one might see Joseph as a spoiled brat in Genesis 37, it is unlikely that he would have become such a godly and responsible caretaker in just a couple of years by Genesis 39.

37:3-4 Since Joseph is the son of Rachel, Jacob's love and favoritism have transferred to Joseph, which excludes Joseph from the love of his brothers due to no fault of his own. Jacob displays this favoritism by giving Joseph a tunic, which he does not give to any of his other sons. It is not clear what this tunic was like because the meaning of the Hebrew word that describes it is uncertain. The idea that it was a coat of many colors comes from the Greek translation of the First Testament (the Septuagint). The term for the coat is used only one other time, in 2 Sam. 13:18-19, as the robe of a princess, which communicates royalty and authority. Some scholars connect the word to an Akkadian term meaning a long-sleeved robe or a richly ornamented robe. Whatever it is, it singled Joseph out as special and maybe even as having more authority than his brothers. The brothers' hatred is emphasized by the phrase “they hated him” being mentioned three times (Gen. 37:4, 5, 8).

Here, the narrator refers to Jacob as *Israel*. The narrator's choice between using Jacob or Isaac is not always clear, though there do seem to be some indicators. First, *Jacob* is used more frequently than *Israel* since that is his name. Second, the name Jacob always refers to the individual, while the name Israel can be used of the individual or the people (Gen. 46:8; 47:27; 48:20). Third, when the name Israel is used of the individual, it alludes to his position as patriarch over the tribe. The name Jacob seems to be used of him when he is demonstrating a weakness in his character (Gen. 37:34; 42:4, 36; 47:9), while the name Israel is used when his character is godlier (Gen. 45:28; 48:2). Fourth, in the scenes where Joseph is present, Israel is used (Gen. 37:3, 13; 46:29, 30; 48:2, 8, 11, 14, 20, 21; 50:2).¹⁵⁹

37:5-11 Joseph has two dreams, which become the whole basis for the conflict that drives the Joseph story. When he tells his brothers, they hate him even more because of the nature of the

¹⁵⁸ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16–50*, p. 350.

¹⁵⁹ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16–50*, p. 351.

dreams. The first dream is of the brothers' sheaves of grain bowing down to Joseph's sheaf of grain. The second dream is of the sun (Jacob), the moon (Leah), and 11 stars (11 brothers) all bowing down to him. In the ancient Near East, dreams were a common means of divine communication and prediction. They believed that sleep put one in direct contact with the other world, where both the dead and the gods dwelt. Therefore, dreams were a gift from the gods.¹⁶⁰ While the later dreams in this story are interpreted with Yahweh's help (Gen. 40:8; 41:16, 25, 28), there is no mention of Joseph's dreams coming from Yahweh or of His giving the meaning here. Yet as the story continues to develop, it is clear that these dreams came from Yahweh. The meanings of these dreams are understood clearly by the family (Gen. 37:8, 10). An isolated dream can be misinterpreted, but two dreams with the same meaning confirm the interpretation (Gen. 41:25). Similarly, the significance of two dreams shows that it is firmly decided by Yahweh and will come quickly.

“This revelation at the beginning of the story shows God as the Director behind the entire account. This is the first dream in the Bible in which Yahweh does not speak (cf. 20:3; 28:12-15; 31:11, 24). It forms a transition in the dominant means of God's revelation from theophany in Genesis 1-11, to dreams and visions in Genesis 12-35, and now to providence in Genesis 36-50. These three stages resemble the three parts of TaNaK (i.e., the OT). In the *Torah* ('Law'), God speaks to Moses in theophany; in the *Nebiim* ('Prophets'), he speaks in dreams and visions; and in the *Ketubim* ('Writings'), he works mostly through providence.”¹⁶¹

Joseph told his family his dreams either out of arrogance or out of innocence. Arrogance could be seen in the fact that he was already spoiled by his father, thus he told them about a dream that was obviously about his rulership in order to lord it over them. The fact that he told them again after seeing their reaction the first time might emphasize this all the more. Innocence could be seen by his overall character throughout the story since nothing bad is ever mentioned about him. Knowing his good character with Potiphar, which is seen in the same general timeframe as his receiving the dream, it seems unlikely that he would be displaying a character of arrogance with his brothers. His second recounting being specifically to his father might also show his innocence since it is very unlikely that he would show such arrogance to the patriarchal figure. Being the man of Yahweh he is portrayed as throughout the story, he probably told the dreams to his family because he really believed they were from Yahweh, so that would simply have been the natural thing to do. Notice that even though Jacob publicly rebukes Joseph, he cannot help but ponder the significance of the dreams.

37:12-17 This time when the brothers go out into the fields, Joseph does not go with them, much like Jacob who stayed at home with his mother when he was growing up. The specific mention of the brothers being near Shechem should automatically arouse suspicion in the reader. Perhaps Jacob, recalling his sons' previous encounter with the Shechemites (Gen. 34), does not trust them to act righteously. His sending of Joseph shows not only his trust in Joseph but also his ignorance of the danger into which he was sending Joseph since he would be alone with his brothers far from home. Jacob is so worried about the threat from the Canaanites but is oblivious to the threat from within his family. Shechem is 30 miles north of Hebron, but upon discovering that his brothers are not there, Joseph travels another 14 miles to Dothan. Though it was common for

¹⁶⁰ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16—50*, p. 282.

¹⁶¹ Bruce K. Waltke. *Genesis: A Commentary*, p. 500.

shepherds to lead their flocks many miles from home in search of fields to graze, the distance increases the danger for Joseph who is far from home and from help.

37:18-20 The brothers' hatred has grown to such a point that they are willing to kill their own brother, like Cain before them (Gen. 4:1-17). Their plotting to kill Joseph communicates the intentionality of their hearts rather than an emotional loss of control in the moment. The statement "Here comes this master of dreams!" shows that the brothers resent the dreams as much as the dreamer. Given the fact that those in the ancient Near East believed dreams came from the gods, it is possible that the brothers were intentionally challenging Yahweh—to thwart His will by killing Joseph and therefore Yahweh's plans. Even if they did not fully realize that the dreams came from Yahweh, their reference to the dreams still shows that by seeking to kill Joseph they are also indirectly seeking to thwart the will of Yahweh who sent the dreams.

"The brothers' hate is therefore a rebellion against the matter contained in the dreams, against the divine power itself, standing behind them, who had given the dreams. The expression usually translated by 'the dreamer' [v. 19] means much more than our English word, namely, the one empowered to prophetic dreams."¹⁶²

37:21-22 Reuben, the firstborn, steps forward to prevent the wrongful bloodshed of their brother. The narrator states that Reuben has the desire to rescue Joseph from them. However, for some reason he does not stick around to truly protect him. Did Reuben desire to rescue Joseph because it was morally right or because he was more concerned about himself and getting back into his father's favor (Gen. 37:30)?

37:23-24 When Joseph arrives, they strip off his clothes, wording used of skinning animals (Lev. 1:6). A cistern was a deep, teardrop-shaped hole that was carved into the bedrock to collect rain during the rainy season for drinking water (see note on Gen. 24:10-14). If a cistern developed cracks over time, it was converted to a winepress cellar or dungeon (Jer. 38:6-18). As this one is empty (Gen. 37:24), the brothers have chosen a dungeon for Joseph. Though Joseph is silent here, the narrator later reveals that Joseph cried out with appeals for mercy (Gen. 42:21).

37:25-28 Judah's lengthy speech to his brothers makes him the main character in this scene. Judah's actions are mixed, for he starts by saying that there is no profit in selling their brother, that they could make money by selling him into slavery. They could be rid of him *and* have money. At the same time, however, he states that it is morally wrong to kill your own brother. It would seem he is more concerned with the moral issue of killing than Reuben (Gen. 37:21-22, 30), but at the same time he is willing to enslave his own brother.

The irony here is that the brothers, who are of the chosen seed of Yahweh (Abraham-Isaac), sell one of Isaac's seeds (Joseph) to an Ishmaelite, a descendant of Ishmael, whom Yahweh had rejected as a chosen seed. They give one of their own to a people from whom they were supposed to be separate and different. The terms *Midianites* and *Ishmaelites* seem to be used interchangeably (Judg. 8:24).

"They had not only sold their brother, but in their brother they had cast out a member of the seed promised and given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, from the fellowship of the chosen family, and sinned against the God of salvation and His promises."¹⁶³

¹⁶² Gerhard von Rad. *Genesis*, p. 353.

¹⁶³ Keil and Delitzsch. *The Pentateuch*, p. 1:332.

Twenty shekels was the typical price for a male slave between five and twenty years old during this time period (Lev. 27:5).¹⁶⁴

37:29-35 The brothers take Joseph's coat and cover it in the blood of a goat to deceive their father into thinking that Joseph is dead. The great irony here is that Jacob had deceived his father with the skin of a goat and the clothes of his brother Esau (Gen. 27:9-17). Jacob responds to the death of his favorite son with great mourning. His public mourning lasts longer than is custom for the culture. He declares that he will go to the grave mourning. This is the first time that going to *sheol* ("the grave") is mentioned in Genesis.

"Sheol is the place of the dead in the OT, where the spirits of the departed continue in a shadowy and rather unhappy existence (cf. Isa 14:14-20) and where relatives could be reunited with each other (cf. 2 Sam 12:23). Though Sheol is not beyond God's power (Amos 9:2), the psalmists pray for deliverance from Sheol, and it is possible that the OT believer hoped for something better than life in Sheol in the world to come (cf. Pss 16:10; 30:4[3]; 49:16[15]). The catastrophe of losing Joseph may be seen by Jacob as proof of divine judgment that will lead him to go down with the wicked to Sheol."¹⁶⁵

37:36 Despite the ill intentions of Joseph's brothers, Yahweh intervenes and brings Joseph to Egypt to begin fulfilling His desire for Joseph to be ruler. The name *Potiphar* is a shortened form of the Egyptian name *Potiphera*, meaning "he whom Ra [the sun god] has given." The title "the captain of the guard" (Gen. 40:3-4; 41:10, 12) might mean he was either Pharaoh's personal bodyguard or the head executioner in Pharaoh's court. Either way, he had great authority and influence in Pharaoh's court.

¹⁶⁴ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16–50*, p. 356.

¹⁶⁵ Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16–50*, p. 357.

B. Judah and Tamar (38:1-30)

Though this scene seems out of place in the story, it shows that this is not just the Joseph story but the story of Jacob's family. Judah is a major character in this story, and the narrator develops his change of character to explain at the end of Genesis who he has become and how Yahweh can use him in saving the line of Abraham. The central problem of childlessness ties it into the overall story of Abraham and to Yahweh's promise to give Abraham's descendants multiple children (Gen. 12:1-31; 15:5; 17:6, 20; 22:17; 26:4; 28:3; 32:12-35:11). It is through Tamar that this line will continue.

38:1-5 Judah moves to Adullam, which is in the foothills northwest of Hebron. The events of this scene span 20 years, assuming Judah's sons married in their mid to late teens. This means this story is happening during the same time Joseph is in Potiphar's house, prison, and in Pharaoh's house, since the brothers discover him in Egypt 22 years later (Gen. 37:2; 41:46-47; 45:6).¹⁶⁶

Judah acquires a Canaanite as his wife, which has been made clear by now is not acceptable for those of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 24:3; 27:46-28:1). The Hebrew word "take," for the taking of his wife, is used of illicit taking (Gen. 3:6; 6:2; 12:15; 34:2; Judg. 14:1-2). Not only does this show his own moral compromise but also a lack of keeping the Abrahamic seed pure. Judah has three sons who become significant for the setup of the story.

38:6-10 Judah's son Er takes as his wife Tamar, also a Canaanite as his father did. However, Er was so evil that Yahweh killed him in judgment. The Hebrew word for "evil" is Er spelled backwards. Judah tries to ensure the levirate rights of his daughter-in-law Tamar (Deut. 25:5-10). The levirate marriage was one in which a brother was required to marry his deceased brother's wife. This requirement ensured that the widowed woman and her children had a male provider responsible for them. It also ensured that the inheritance of the deceased husband/brother stayed within the family. Deuteronomy required that if the woman had no children, then the brother of the widow's deceased husband was required to provide a child through the widowed woman. This child would then take the name and inheritance of the deceased husband/brother, thus maintaining the family name and line. In addition to this being part of the Mosaic Law, it was a common custom in the ancient Near East before the giving of the Mosaic Law.

Onan's refusal to give Tamar a child to provide descendants for his deceased brother reveals his selfish heart in that he wanted for himself what had belonged to his brother. By providing an heir for his brother, the inheritance would go to his deceased brother's line. Yahweh judges him harshly not only for his lack of love for others but for his unwillingness to continue the Abrahamic line and Covenant. This is especially offensive to Yahweh since He has repeatedly promised the patriarchs multiple times (Gen. 12:1-31; 15:5; 17:6, 20; 22:17; 26:4; 28:3; 32:12-35:11). Compared to the inconsolable mourning of Jacob over Joseph (Gen. 37:36), there is no mention of Judah mourning the loss of his sons, which reveals a callused heart.

38:11 Judah is so out of touch with Yahweh and the moral behavior of his sons that he assumes the blame for their deaths lies with Tamar as a black widow. Judah sins against Tamar by not providing her with a husband. Judah thus shows his own apathy toward continuing the Abrahamic line and Covenant.

38:12-19 After the death of his wife, Judah begins to spend more time in Timnah with his flocks. Tamar knows that Judah has no intention of providing her with another husband for a levirate

¹⁶⁶ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16–50*, p. 365.

marriage and an heir, so she chooses to go to him directly, as a prostitute. There is evidence among ancient Assyrian and Hittite peoples that the levirate responsibility could pass to the father of the widow's husband if there were no brothers to fulfill it. Thus Tamar may simply be trying to acquire that to which she has a legal right.¹⁶⁷ The fact that she knows Judah will sleep with her as prostitute reveals his character. Tamar shows how desperate she is to become a part of the Abrahamic line and Covenant, which Judah takes for granted.

Judah promises her a goat but cannot pay that immediately, so he offers his staff, seal, and cord as guarantee of payment. Tamar takes these items not to guarantee herself payment but to exempt herself from the punishment that would come for what she has done. Whereas being with a prostitute was seen as foolish (Prov. 7), having intercourse with one's daughter-in-law was later punishable by death (Lev. 20:12). As with Jacob's deception (Gen. 27:9-17) and Jacob's sons' deception (Gen. 37:29-35), a goat and clothing are used in Tamar's deception of Judah.

38:20-23 Judah recognizes the public shame of what he did by sending a servant to find and pay the prostitute. The Hebrew word translated "cult prostitute" is derived from a verb meaning "to be set apart; to be distinct." The term refers to a woman who had not married but was dedicated to a pagan temple service as a cult prostitute, with whom men would sleep as an act of worship to the gods. Either Hirah thought incorrectly that Judah had been with a cult prostitute or Judah thought he had slept with a cult prostitute. Either way, it once again speaks to Judah's character. When she cannot be found, Judah gives up and lets her keep his pledge, lest he become a joke. The Hebrew word for "joke" is the contempt for the rich and arrogant (Ps. 123:3-4; Neh. 3:36).

38:24-26 Three months later, it is discovered that Tamar is pregnant. Judah, seeing her as an adulteress, condemns her to be burned. Judah could legally demand the death penalty (Deut. 22:23-24), but to demand death by burning is extreme and reserved for the daughters of a priest who were involved in sexual immorality (Lev. 21:9). The irony here is that Judah is condemning Tamar for prostitution when he himself is guilty of the same act.

Tamar defends herself by revealing the seal, cord, and staff belong that Judah had given her. Judah's statement that Tamar "is more righteous than I am" seems odd since she had deceived and prostituted herself to her father-in-law. His point was not that she had acted righteously but that she had desired the right things. It was important enough to her not only to have children and continue the line but also to be a part of the Abrahamic Covenant. Though her means were not righteous, she desired to be part of the plan of Yahweh more than Judah had. However, as a Canaanite, one cannot expect her to act righteously until she has become a part of the Abrahamic Covenant and come to know Yahweh.

"Judah's response to his sins against God and Tamar seems to have been genuine repentance (v. 26). He confessed his wrong and repented by ceasing from further sexual relations with her, his daughter-in-law. It is evidently because his repentance was genuine that Jacob did not exclude him from receiving a special blessing as he did Reuben, Simeon, and Levi. Because he humbled himself God raised him to be the chief of the house of Israel and blessed the children that he fathered even though they were a result of his sin. (Compare God's blessing of Solomon even though he was the fruit of the unlawful union of David and Bathsheba.)"¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ See Gerhard Charles Aalders. *Genesis*, p. 2:194.

¹⁶⁸ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Genesis*, p. 220.

38:27-30 Perez, whose name means “a breach or one who breaks through,” is the first of the twins born to Tamar. He becomes the ancestor of David and the Messiah (Matt. 1:3). The point of recording the birth of the twins is to emphasize that birth order does not determine who will continue the Abrahamic line—rather, it is the one whom Yahweh chooses.

“As the Jacob narrative began with an account of the struggle of the twins Jacob and Esau (25:22), so now the conclusion of the Jacob narrative is marked by a similar struggle of twins. In both cases the struggle resulted in a reversal of the right of the firstborn and the right of the blessing... The brevity and austerity with which the narrative is recounted leaves the impression that the meaning of the passage is self-evident to the reader. Indeed, coming as it does on the heels of a long series of reversals in which the younger gains the upper hand on the elder, its sense is transparent.”¹⁶⁹

Tamar becomes a great woman of righteousness, for it is she who saves the tribe of Judah within the Abrahamic line from dying out. Also, her actions reveal to Judah his lack of righteousness so that he may begin to be redeemed through the work of Yahweh. It is this story that explains why, when the brothers arrive in Egypt and stand before Joseph, Judah is so different than he was in Genesis 27.

It is obvious by now that the family of Jacob is becoming corrupted by the influence of the surrounding Canaanites. In His mercy, Yahweh will remove them from this influence so that they do not continue in their corruption. This is why He chose Joseph—to take them away from the Canaanites for a time.

¹⁶⁹ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis.” In *Genesis–Numbers*, p. 232.

C. Joseph in the House of Potiphar and Prison (39:1–40:23)

This section shows that despite the trials that Joseph faces, he stays faithful to Yahweh, and Yahweh is with him and blesses him (Gen. 39:2, 3, 21, 23). Yahweh's blessing allows Joseph to be promoted both in Potiphar's house and in prison. Though one may see this setback as a lack of faithfulness on Yahweh's part, Yahweh uses them to prepare Joseph and put him in the right place to meet the cupbearer, who will eventually bring him into the palace of Pharaoh.

39:1-6a Even though Joseph is a slave in the house of Potiphar, the narrator makes the point that Yahweh is with Joseph as he was with Isaac and Jacob (Gen. 26:3, 24, 28; 28:15, 20; 31:3). The narrator emphasizes this point three times here (Gen. 39:2, 3, 5). It is with this statement that it begins to become clear that the dreams of Joseph came from Yahweh. But at the same time, he is so far from their fulfillment. It is Yahweh's presence in Joseph's life that makes him so successful. Potiphar sees this and places Joseph in charge of everything in his house. Joseph rises in position in the house of Potiphar, and just as Yahweh has entrusted Joseph with so much, so does Potiphar.

39:6b-10 Joseph is righteous in character, intelligent, and handsome. Whenever the Bible mentions the physical beauty of an individual, it is usually an indication that it will lead them into temptation or sin (Gen. 6:2; 12:11; 26:7; 29:17; 1 Sam. 9:2; 16:12; 25:3; 2 Sam. 11:2; 13:1; 14:25; 1 Kgs. 1:6; Dan. 1:4; Est. 2:7).

Potiphar's wife begins to pursue and seek to seduce Joseph into having sex with her, but Joseph resists. Joseph is in a difficult position because as a slave he must obey her, but as servant of Potiphar, her husband, he must refuse. Joseph gives three reasons for why he must reject her advances. It is an abuse of the great trust placed in him, it is an offense against her husband, and it is a great sin against Yahweh. Notice that unlike the serpent and Eve (Gen. 3:1-7), Joseph focuses on all the blessings that have been given to him rather than on the one thing that has been withheld from him. Despite his objections, she seeks to wear him down by tempting him day after day. Yet Joseph remains strong because he chooses to submit to the will of Yahweh rather than hers. Joseph's righteous character and self-control in the area of sexual desire is contrasted with the lack of self-control seen in Judah in the previous chapter.

39:11-18 Desperate to have Joseph and maybe even angry that she has been rejected, she sends the house servants away and grabs Joseph in an attempt to force him to submit to her will. This time Joseph flees the scene in such haste that she rips his outer garment from him. Angry and scorned, Potiphar's wife decides to falsely accuse Joseph of rape. Without the presence of the other servants, it becomes the word of a prominent woman against the word of a slave. In fact, when they come back, she attempts to win them over by accusing her husband and their master of bringing Joseph in just to humiliate them. She may be playing up any jealousy of Joseph they might have for his success. This is the second time Joseph's garment has gotten him into trouble (Gen. 37:3-4).

39:19-20 When Potiphar comes home, she falsely accuses Joseph of trying to rape her even though she was the physical one in the situation. By laying the garment beside her, she is insinuating that Joseph had disrobed voluntarily. She also blames Potiphar for bringing this slave into their house.

The narrator never mentions why or with whom Potiphar is angry. Attempted rape was a capital offense and brought the immediate death penalty, especially for a slave (Deut. 22:23-27). Yet

Potiphar does not execute Joseph but instead throws him into the king's prison. This would be unheard of for a slave guilty of rape—unless Potiphar does not believe his wife's accusations. The integrity and character of Joseph must have impressed Potiphar, and there may have been some doubt over the faithfulness of his wife. Knowing that he could not take the word of a slave over that of a prominent woman without risking his own career, and maybe even his life, he chooses to throw Joseph into prison rather than execute him. However, the narrator is not so much interested in this point, only that Joseph is thrown into prison—the place where the royal prisoners are thrown—because it there that he will meet the cupbearer, an encounter that will lead to his eventual promotion.

39:21-23 Because Joseph's character has not changed and he has been faithful to Yahweh, Yahweh continues to bless him, and soon he rises in the ranks of the prison under the warden. With both Potiphar and the warden, Yahweh honors His promises of the Abrahamic Covenant when He stated that Abraham's descendants would bless His people and be a blessing to those who bless His people (Gen. 12:1-3).

“The Genesis account presents Joseph as a very unusual young man, possessed of a strong and sterling character, of a high morality and fidelity to God and his superiors. He was also characterized by gentleness in human relations. Remarkably, Joseph's spiritual and moral strength does not appear to be based on or related to God's periodic and direct revelations, as was true of Jacob, Isaac, and Abraham. Presumably then Jacob must have put a lot of character building truth into the young man's life at an early time. It does not appear that he could have obtained such information from any other source. If this is the case, Jacob did a much better job with Joseph than with his other sons.”¹⁷⁰

The previous narratives of the patriarchs were about Yahweh's faithfulness despite the lack of faith or understanding of the patriarchs, whereas Joseph demonstrates an uncompromising and unwavering faith in Yahweh despite all circumstances.

“This story about Joseph reverses a well-known plot in the patriarchal narratives. Whereas before it was the beautiful wife...of the patriarch who was sought by the foreign ruler, now it was Joseph, the handsome patriarch...himself who was sought by the wife of the foreign ruler. Whereas in the earlier narratives it was either the Lord (12:17; 20:3) or the moral purity of the foreign ruler (26:10) that rescued the wife rather than the patriarch, here it was Joseph's own moral courage that saved the day... Whereas in the preceding narratives, the focus of the writer had been on God's faithfulness in fulfilling his covenant promises, in the story of Joseph his attention is turned to the human response.”¹⁷¹

“The Joseph narratives are intended then to give balance to the narratives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Together the two sections show both God's faithfulness in spite of human failure as well as the necessity of an obedient and faithful response.”¹⁷²

40:1-4 “After these things” marks the passing of a considerable amount of time (Gen. 15:1; 22:1; 39:7; 48:1). The narrator does not make clear how much time has passed before the new prisoners arrive, only that Joseph's total time in prison was 13 years (Gen 37:2; 41:46).

¹⁷⁰ Howard F. Vos. *Genesis*, p. 134.

¹⁷¹ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis.” In *Genesis–Numbers*, pp. 234, 235.

¹⁷² John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis.” In *Genesis–Numbers*, pp. 234, 235.

Soon after, Pharaoh's cupbearer and baker do something to offend Pharaoh and are thrown into prison. The fact that the cupbearer and the baker are still alive means they were close enough to Pharaoh that they had merely offended him or that he had not yet decided their fate. The Hebrew word for "enraged" communicates the idea of a passion that is quickly roused, is powerful, and then dies away.¹⁷³ The "cupbearer" has been commonly misunderstood as one who tastes the Pharaoh's wine to see if it is poisoned. The Hebrew term for "cupbearer" corresponds to the Egyptian word *wb'*, which refers to an official, usually a foreigner who became an advisor to the king and wielded political power.¹⁷⁴ Nehemiah held this position in Persia and was a trusted advisor of the king. The cupbearer's role as a trusted advisor to Pharaoh can be seen in his later advice to Pharaoh to seek a Hebrew prisoner accused of rape for the interpretation of his dreams. It is also possible that the cupbearer was the one who looked into the wine cup to divine the will of the gods. The "baker" may come from the Egyptian word *retehti*, which referred to the head of the bakers. Such a diviner would have a high position. Notice that even in jail, where he was given authority, Joseph is placed *under* the authority of the cupbearer and baker.

40:5-19 Yahweh, as the God of dreams (Gen. 40:8), sends the cupbearer and the baker dreams for Joseph to interpret in order to open future doors for Joseph's release from prison. The cupbearer and the baker are depressed because no one around them can interpret their dreams, since they were cut off from the royal palace. As mentioned earlier (Gen. 37:5-11), dreams were seen as gifts and messages from the gods. The interpretation of the dreams was a complex science entrusted to only the learned scholars and specialists. While the dreamer might believe that the gods had spoken to him, he had to rely on the experts for a detailed explanation.¹⁷⁵ Joseph is quick to point out to them that the interpretation of dreams does not belong to the learned scholar but to Yahweh Himself.

Notice that the two dreams center on grain—the symbol of life in the ancient Near East—and wine—the symbol of blessings and the abundance of life (Gen. 27:28; Deut. 7:12-14; 33:26-29; 2 Kgs. 18:32; Ps. 104:13-15; Prov. 3:9-10; Joel 2:19, 24; Jer. 31:12). These symbols would become the signs of the Messiah (grain: Matt. 14:13-21; 26:26; Jn. 6:25-59; wine: Jn. 2:1-11; 6:53-59; 18:1-8; Matt. 26:27-29). The meanings of the dreams were that the cupbearer would be restored in three days and the baker would be executed in three days. Joseph asked the cupbearer to remember him after he was restored to his former position.

40:20-23 On the third day, the dreams were fulfilled in the very way Joseph said they would be. Perhaps one of the most depressing lines in the book of Genesis is the statement that the cupbearer did not remember Joseph. What makes it truly depressing is that the next verse (Gen. 41:1) states that two years went by. Joseph had been forgotten for two years.

“How nobly Joseph comported himself amidst all these trials and hardships! He might have sulked and become embittered; but instead of this his spirit was unconquerable by reason of its trust in God. He steadfastly refused to be unfaithful to his God, whatever might be the consequences. In duty he was loyal, in temptation he was strong, and in prison he was faithful. When this spirit actuates our life, difficulties become means of grace and stepping-stones to higher things. On the other hand, if difficulties are met in a fretful, murmuring, complaining, disheartened spirit, not only do we lose the blessings that would otherwise

¹⁷³ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16—50*, p. 282.

¹⁷⁴ See K. A. Kitchen. *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, p. 248.

¹⁷⁵ Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16—50*, p. 282.

come through them, but our spiritual life suffers untold injury, and we are weakened for the next encounter of temptation whenever it comes. There is scarcely anything in the Christian life which reveals more thoroughly what our Christianity is worth than the way we meet difficulties by the use of the grace of God.”¹⁷⁶

“Trials may be viewed from two standpoints, and it will make all the difference to our spiritual life and peace which of these two points of view we take. From the human side Joseph’s suffering was due to injustice on the part of Potiphar, and ingratitude on the part of the butler. From the Divine side these years were permitted for the purpose of training and preparing Joseph for the great work that lay before him. If we look only at the human side of trial we shall become discouraged, and it [sic] may be irritated and angered, but as we turn to look at it from the Divine side we shall see God in everything and all things working together for our good.”¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ W. H. Griffith Thomas. *Genesis*, pp. 375-76.

¹⁷⁷ W. H. Griffith Thomas. *Genesis*, p. 389.

D. Joseph's Rise to Power (41:1-57)

In this section, Yahweh uses Pharaoh's dreams to finally fulfill the dreams he had given Joseph years before (Gen. 37:5-11) and raise him to a position of rulership. However, the dreams are not completely fulfilled, since Joseph's brothers are not bowing down to him yet.

41:1-7 After two years, the Pharaoh has two dreams. Just as Yahweh had given the cupbearer dreams in order to make Joseph known, He now gives Pharaoh dreams to reveal Joseph as a future ruler in Egypt. The Nile in Egypt was the both the basis and the symbol of Egypt's power. "Egypt was the gift of the Nile." From ancient times to the present, the Nile has been the lifeblood of Egypt. No other country in ancient or modern times has been so dependent on its waterways as ancient Egypt. In Egypt, the cow symbolized Egypt, was the embodiment of the gods, and, along with the bull, was one of the most revered animals. The grain also represented Egypt for Egypt was the breadbasket of the ancient Near East and later the Roman Empire. Egypt was where everyone else in the ancient Near East went when famine struck their own land. All these symbols represented the heart and life of Egypt. The number seven is symbolic of completion and sometimes of fate.

41:8-13 Neither the magicians nor the cupbearer in Pharaoh's court could understand the meaning of Pharaoh's dreams. The idea presented here is not that none of them gave interpretations but that none of their interpretations were satisfactory to Pharaoh. This provided the opportunity not only to reveal Joseph to Pharaoh but also to bring glory to Yahweh. After two years, the cupbearer finally remembers Joseph.

41:14-16 Pharaoh summons Joseph to be brought before him, which meant shaving his beard, since Egyptians did not wear facial hair, and changing his outer coat to make him presentable. Pharaoh gives credit to Joseph for interpreting dreams, but twice Joseph humbly gives credit to Yahweh as the giver and interpreter of dreams (Gen. 41:16, 25). Though Joseph is being humble about himself, he is at the same time offering something better: access to Yahweh, the divine dream giver and interpreter.

41:17-32 Pharaoh recounts his dreams to Joseph and asks him to do what no one has yet been able to do. Joseph makes four points about the dreams. First, the fact that the dreams came one right after the other means they concern the same thing. Second, the seven cows and seven sheaves of grain represent seven years. Third, seven years of abundant crops will be followed by seven years of famine. Fourth, the duplication of the dreams means this is all going to happen promptly, and there is no changing what will happen.

41:33-36 Joseph cleverly advises Pharaoh to find a wise man to oversee the gathering of the abundant grain during the first seven years in order to feed the people of the land during the second seven years, knowing that Yahweh had already revealed to him that he was that man (Gen. 37:6-7, 9). Yahweh had placed Joseph in Egypt for this very reason, to save not only the people of Egypt and Canaan but his own family, the Abrahamic line, through whom the entire world would be blessed (Gen. 12:1-3). Pharaoh recognizes the wisdom in Joseph's advice and appoints him as the second-most powerful man in the land. In this position, he would oversee the gathering of the grain during the years of abundance in order to save the people of Egypt. Yahweh's prophecy to Joseph when he was 17 years old has now come true (Gen. 37:6-7, 9).

“Pharaoh recognized Joseph as one who had unique supernatural powers (v. 38; cf. Dan. 5:14). He probably did not identify the “spirit” in Joseph as the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. There is no evidence that Pharaoh understood or believed in the God of Israel. Most likely he thought some deity had manifested himself or herself through Joseph.”¹⁷⁸

“At any time the king would—and did—appoint outsiders. In fact, the noteworthy careers, as preserved for us in tomb inscriptions, broke through all departmental limitations. Men of humble origin could rise to the top once their gifts were recognized; and we find that they were called to a succession of posts which would seem to us to have required entirely different preparatory training.”¹⁷⁹

41:37-45 Pharaoh recognizes that the spirit of God is in Joseph and makes him “overseer of his household.” In Egypt, the overseer of Pharaoh’s house had power only in the house of Pharaoh, not over the land of Egypt. It was the vizier who was head over all governmental affairs in the land of Egypt. From the context, it is the position of vizier that Pharaoh seems to be giving Joseph. In Israel, the title “master of the palace” (1 Kgs. 16:9; Isa. 22:15, 19-20) carried with it the authority over Israel that a vizier had in Egypt. So, the narrator calling Joseph the “master of the palace” is using the correct Hebrew equivalent for the office of vizier in Egypt.¹⁸⁰

The gift of the royal signet ring symbolized the grant of authority to Joseph (Esth. 3:12; 8:8). Many Egyptian paintings show the pharaoh placing gold chains around the necks of servants he is rewarding. Whether the gold chain was an essential part of the office of vizier or just a reward of honor is not clear here.¹⁸¹

Joseph’s marriage to the Egyptian woman was by Pharaoh’s orders. Marriage into one of the top royal Egyptian families sealed Joseph’s promotion. The patriarchs avoided marriages with Canaanite women, but marriage to a non-Canaanite was less serious. However, Egypt was seen as Israel’s former enslavers, and Yahweh would later command Israel not to go back to Egypt for anything. The name *Asenath* may mean “she belongs to the goddess Neit.”

41:46-49 At the age of 30, Joseph has finally come to place of power as the dreams had foretold. Joseph executes his plan of storing up a fifth of the grain during the good years with great efficiency to an overabundance of grain. The same integrity, discipline, and efficiency that he demonstrated in Potiphar’s house in prison he has brought to the governance of Egypt.

41:50-52 Joseph has two sons by Asenath: Manasseh and Ephraim. The name *Manasseh* means “he who brings about forgetfulness,” referring to Joseph’s troubles being behind him and that he anticipated a better future. The name *Ephraim* means “to bear fruit” and may even have the idea of double fruitfulness, which is interesting because Ephraim would later receive the double land inheritance (Gen. 48:12-20) The theme of fruitfulness is connected with this family line (Gen. 49:22; Deut. 33:13-17; Hos. 13:15).

¹⁷⁸ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Genesis*, p. 226.

¹⁷⁹ Henri Frankfort, *Ancient Egyptian Religion*, p. 35.

¹⁸⁰ Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16—50*, p. 395.

¹⁸¹ Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16—50*, p. 396.

“‘Forget’ does not mean here ‘not remember’ but rather to have something no longer (cf. Job 39.17; 11:16. See, too, the Arabic proverb, ‘Whoever drinks water from the Nile forgets his fatherland if he is a foreigner’). The phrase refers, therefore, more to an objective external fact than to a subjective, psychological process.”¹⁸²

41:53-57 Joseph faithfully serves Yahweh, Pharaoh, and the people in gathering and storing the grain during the seven years of abundance. He then begins to sell this grain to the people during the seven years of famine. It would be this provision of grain—within Joseph’s oversight—that would reunite his brothers to him and bring about their reconciliation. Yahweh intended to use Joseph to save the Abrahamic line not just physically but also relationally and spiritually.

“Trials may be viewed from two standpoints, and it will make all the difference to our spiritual life and peace which of these two points of view we take. From the human side Joseph’s suffering was due to injustice on the part of Potiphar, and ingratitude on the part of the butler. From the Divine side these years were permitted for the purpose of training and preparing Joseph for the great work that lay before him. If we look only at the human side of trial we shall become discouraged, and it [sic] may be irritated and angered, but as we turn to look at it from the Divine side we shall see God in everything and all things working together for our good.”¹⁸³

¹⁸² Gerhard von Rad. *Genesis*, p. 379.

¹⁸³ W. H. Griffith Thomas. *Genesis*, p. 389.

E. The Brothers of Joseph Go to Egypt for Grain (42:1-38)

This section tells how Joseph's brothers are forced to go to Egypt to get food due to the famine in the land. It is in Egypt that they meet Joseph, without knowing it, and bow before him. The chiasmic parallel emphasizes the brothers' imprisonment.

A Joseph knew his brothers and remembered (42:7-9a)

B Joseph accused them of being spies, but they explained their situation (42:9b-13)

C Joseph set out a test whereby they could prove they were honest men (42:14-16)

X Joseph put them in prison (42:17)

C' Joseph set out a new test for the brothers to prove they were honest (42:18-20)

B' Brothers confess their guilt concerning their brother (42:21-22)

A' Joseph understood and wept (42:23-24)

42:1-5 The famine has affected Jacob and his family, so they are forced to go to Egypt to get grain. Jacob emerges as a major actor in this scene, where he shows that he is still the head of the family to whom his sons listen. Jacob takes decisive action as he rebukes his sons for not going to Egypt to get grain to feed their families. Jacob sends ten of his sons for the grain in order to buy and bring back as much as possible. Here, they are called Joseph's brothers, foreshadowing their subservient role in the next scene. However, Jacob does not allow Benjamin to go with the brothers because he fears losing his only remaining favorite son, as he had lost Joseph.

42:6-7 The narrator makes the point that Joseph is the ruler of Egypt and that the brothers come and bow down to him just as his dream had said (Gen. 37:5-11). The irony here is that at the beginning of the story, Joseph's brothers said that they would never bow down to him, and they hated him for his dreams (Gen. 37:8). Joseph immediately recognizes them but pretends not to know them. The Hebrew word for "he pretended" is a play on the word for "they plotted" (Gen. 37:18) with only one letter difference. This echoes Genesis 37, where the brothers plotted against Joseph, and sheds light on why Joseph is hiding his identity from them. The brothers do not recognize their brother Joseph because it has been 21 years since they last saw him, and they probably do not expect him to be alive anymore, let alone a ruler over Egypt. Joseph, as an Egyptian, would have had the hair on his head and body shaved and would have been wearing some kind of wig or headdress and have his eyes painted with an eyeliner. Likewise, as foreigners the brothers would not have been allowed to make eye contact, having their heads bowed, and Joseph would be speaking through an interpreter (Gen. 42:23). Joseph speaks harshly with them and asks them where they came from.

42:8-13 Joseph had not expected to see his brothers before him after all these years and maybe even forgot much of his childhood, according to his naming of his son Manasseh (Gen. 41:51). After seeing his brothers, many memories and emotions probably came flooding back as he remembered his dreams and how his brothers treated him because of them.

Joseph accuses them of being spies to spy out the land for its weaknesses so that the nation they are from can attack. The brothers deny they are spies and proclaim as their defense that they are all brothers of the same family. This expresses more truth than they realize as they stand before Joseph who is also their brother. By affirming that they are brothers, they hope to prove that they are not spies, since spies from the same family would not travel together and risk the whole family being caught. Joseph keeps accusing them of being spies in order to unnerve them and

break their resistance. They inform Joseph that one of their brothers is dead and that the youngest is with their father.

42:14-24 Joseph requires that they prove their story by sending one to bring back the youngest while the other nine remain in prison in Egypt. Also, Joseph certainly wants to see his only full-blooded brother whom he never really knew well since Benjamin was just a small boy when he was sold into slavery. Then Joseph imprisons the brothers for three days. On the third day, Joseph shows mercy by allowing all but one to return. Maybe he thought of the fact that Jacob and Benjamin needed grain and that more than one brother would be necessary to take it back.

It is interesting that after all these years the brothers assume this is happening to them as punishment for what they had done to Joseph. Nothing about what was happening to them would make them connect this suffering to the sin of what they had done to Joseph. Was this their reasoning every time something bad happened to them over all the years? This shows that they had begun to change and are not as callused as they were in Genesis 37, for there is real guilt and remorse here. Reuben immediately blames them for what they had done to Joseph when he had tried to stop them. Does he really care about Joseph, or is he just trying to escape the guilt? Why does not he offer himself up for Simeon instead if he is the head who is watching out for his brothers?

Joseph, hearing their discussion, begins to weep from the emotions that had long been forgotten and the realization that they do feel guilt and remorse. He then takes Simeon, the second-born, as prisoner, perhaps because he knows that Reuben had not been responsible for what they had done to him all those years ago. The narrator does not clarify why Joseph is treating his brothers this way. Is he seeking revenge? Testing them? It is up to the reader to figure it out as the story goes on.

42:25-28 Joseph commands that their money be returned to them and placed in each man's sack of grain. Later in their journey home, they open a sack and discover the money. The brothers are filled with even more fear when they discover that their money for the grain is in the sacks of grain that they had bought in Egypt. They begin to think that Yahweh is punishing them for their sins.

42:29-34 When they arrive home, they tell their father Jacob what happened, but they do omit a few details from their account. They do not tell Jacob that they had been imprisoned for three days or that Simeon is now in prison, rather that he "was detained in custody." They state that they were asked to "leave one brother of yours with me" to make Simeon's detainment sound more voluntary. They also leave out Joseph's warning about executing them if they return without Benjamin, so as not to worry Jacob.

42:35-36 When Jacob and his sons see that all their sacks contain their money, they are filled with fear. Jacob accuses them of making him childless, seeing Joseph and Simeon as already lost and fearing Benjamin will be taken away to never be returned.

Reuben tries to be a leader by offering to pay the price if anything happens to Benjamin while they are back in Egypt. However, Reuben shows his selfishness in offering his sons, not himself, as a sacrifice. One has to wonder what kind of person Reuben is, that he would be willing to pledge the death of his sons over his own life. The scene ends with Jacob's refusal to let Benjamin go; Jacob cares more about the life of Benjamin than the life of Simeon.

F. The Brothers Are Reconciled with Joseph (43:1–45:28)

It is in this section that the dreams of Joseph (Gen. 37:5-11) are truly fulfilled, not just with his brothers bowing down before him but with Joseph's forgiveness of his brothers, which allows him to save them from the famine. Just as Jacob and Esau were reconciled, so now Joseph is with his brothers except that Joseph will end up bringing them to Egypt to live with him. This is the whole purpose of Yahweh lifting Joseph up into a powerful position: to be a blessing to his family and to the world. At the same time, Judah rises up to take the headship of the tribe, not in a power grab but in a demonstration of self-sacrifice for his brothers. It is in this section that Judah and Joseph really step to the forefront as two men who have become true godly leaders.

43:1-7 After their grain is all gone, the brothers go back to Jacob to try to convince him to let them return to Egypt with Benjamin to get more grain. Whereas earlier the brothers glossed over Joseph's warning of killing them if they did not return with Benjamin, now Judah tells Jacob of the warning to emphasize the danger of trying to return to Egypt for more grain without Benjamin. The brothers defend themselves before their father for why they told Joseph so much about themselves, as they were trying to escape execution from the accusation of being spies.

43:8-14 Judah pushes his father to make a decision by appealing to his paternal instincts. Earlier, Jacob said that they should go to Egypt to buy grain so that they may live (Gen. 42:2). Now Judah makes the same point and emphasizes that he will save him "and our children as well." Judah then offers his life up for Benjamin if he does not return with Benjamin. Notice that in contrast to Reuben, Judah is willing to sacrifice himself rather than his son. Judah shows himself to be a self-sacrificing leader. At this, Jacob allows them to return to Egypt with Benjamin.

43:15-25 When Joseph sees that the brothers have returned with their brother Benjamin, he responds by sacrificing an animal and throwing a feast for them. This shows that seeing Benjamin is what Joseph was interested in all along. But the brothers are filled with fear, wondering why Joseph has gone from treating them harshly to inviting them into his home. They think that he is trying to entrap them, so they immediately confess regarding the money that they found in their bags from the previous visit. Joseph's servant assures them that everything was all right and that he received their money, so whatever was in their bags must have been given to them by their God. Then he brings Simeon out to them.

The servant then washes their feet, takes care of them and their animals like honored guests, and informs them that they will share a meal with Joseph. At this point, the brothers are likely very confused about what is going on.

43:26-30 When Joseph comes home, the brothers bow to him, fulfilling Joseph's dream (Gen. 37:5-11). Joseph asks them about their father and treats them very well, as if they are guests. When Joseph sees Benjamin, he is overwhelmed with emotion. Benjamin is 16 years younger than Joseph, making him 23 years old (Joseph is now 39 years old; Gen. 41:46; 45:6). He is the only full-blooded brother Joseph has, and he has never really gotten to know him.

43:31-34 Joseph then seats them at a separate table from himself, as was Egyptian custom. The narrator then informs the reader that the Egyptians viewed eating with foreigners as disgusting. The Hebrew word "disgusting" is often translated "abomination" in religious texts that describe

practices that are abhorrent to Yahweh (Lev. 18:22, 26, 29). Other customs that are disgusting to the Egyptians are recorded in Gen. 46:34.¹⁸⁴

“The caste system in Egypt required that Joseph as a member of the upper class eat at a table separate from his Egyptian companions. The Hebrews sat at a third table since they were foreigners (v. 32). The Hebrews and other foreigners ate animals that the Egyptians regarded as sacred. The Egyptians also followed strict rules for the ceremonial cleansing of their food before they ate it. This made the Hebrews ‘loathsome’ to the Egyptians.”¹⁸⁵

Joseph inviting them to eat with him would have been a significant gesture of hospitality to them, for eating a meal with someone in the ancient Near East was the equivalent of inviting them into your family.

“...according to the prevailing custom of the East, the very fact that they had been invited to Joseph’s table was in itself an encouraging circumstance. Though the Orientals are for the most part a revengeful people, yet if you eat with them, you are thenceforward sure of having their protection. Even should you have done them the greatest injury, yet you need be under no apprehension from their resentment.”¹⁸⁶

Joseph seats them in birth order, which amazes them of how he could have known. Then Joseph gives Benjamin five times more food than all the other brothers receive. When Joseph was favored by his father and became the source of his brothers’ problems, they wanted to kill him, and they sold him into slavery. Now he wants to learn if they will do the same to Benjamin. He feeds them so much food and wine that they become drunk.

44:1-5 When Joseph sends them back to Canaan, he fills their sacks with an abundance of grain, and he also places his silver cup in Benjamin’s sack. He then commands his men to let the brothers get ahead, afterwards accusing them of stealing his cup. Joseph’s calling it a “cup of divination” does not mean he is using it for that purpose. That would be unlikely, given his character and constant affirmation of Yahweh as the source of all knowledge (Gen. 40:8; 41:16, 25, 32). It is most likely a threatening comment to stress the severity of the brothers’ offense.

44:6-13 The brothers think that the trip has been a success, that they are returning with grain and Benjamin safe and sound. Suddenly they are accused by Joseph’s men of theft. The brothers are confused and defend themselves by reminding Joseph’s men that when they found their money in their sacks they were honest about it. Then they make a rash vow in their confidence of their innocence, stating that whoever has the cup will be put to death. The irony here is that they have just pronounced a death sentence on Benjamin, the very one whom they had promised to protect. Just as Jacob unknowingly pronounced a death sentence on Rachel, his favorite wife (Gen. 31:32), now the sons unknowingly pronounce a death sentence on Jacob’s favorite son. But they also state that the rest of them will become slaves as a result of the action of the one. This is different from, when they mistreated Joseph, for now they will suffer for the sake of the others. The servant states that whoever has it will become a slave. To build suspense, the men search in order of the oldest to the youngest until Benjamin is discovered. The brothers are devastated.

Joseph is not trying to torture his brothers nor get revenge on them; rather, he is testing them to see if they have changed. He is giving them every reason to hate Benjamin—favoring him at the

¹⁸⁴ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16—50*, p. 423.

¹⁸⁵ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Genesis*, p. 232.

¹⁸⁶ George Bush. *Notes on Genesis*, p. 2:316.

meal and now framing him for theft—so that they will turn on him and give him up or kill him, just as they had done with Joseph. If they hated Joseph, an innocent boy, enough to kill him, what would they do to Benjamin, who is now a thief and is bringing down the death penalty on them all?

“Joseph’s tests of his brothers were important in God’s plan to channel his blessing through the seed of Abraham. God had planned to bring the family to Egypt so that it might grow into a great nation. But because the people who would form that nation had to be faithful, the brothers needed to be tested before they could share in the blessing. Joseph’s prodding had to be subtle; the brothers had to perceive that God was moving against them so that they would acknowledge their crime against Joseph and demonstrate that they had changed.”¹⁸⁷

44:14-17 When brought before Joseph, Judah declares their innocence but realizes that they have no proof and so cries out to Joseph for mercy. Joseph states that there will be no mercy, that Benjamin will stay with him as his slave while the rest are free to go.

44:18-34 Judah steps up and takes the lead. He gives an impassioned and eloquent speech that is considered by many scholars the most beautiful speech of the First Testament. Judah begins by asking for the chance to speak on his brother’s behalf, and he maintains a deferential mode of address throughout his speech. He begins to recount their encounter with Joseph when they first came, leaving out all the details that might annoy Joseph and the warnings and imprisonments that would make Joseph look harsh and unfair. He includes fresh details about their family and specifically about their father, hoping these will soften Joseph’s heart toward them. He mentions their father 14 times.

He then begins to plead for the life of Benjamin through the emotions of his father. Judah shows that he has come to understand Jacob’s feelings for Benjamin and sympathizes with Jacob’s loss of Joseph and his fear of losing Benjamin. Perhaps Judah’s own loss of his eldest sons has given him an understanding of and compassion for Jacob. Judah has also come to accept Jacob’s love for Benjamin that is greater than his love for Judah and the other sons of Leah. Judah demonstrates a spiritual change in himself from Genesis 37, where he had callously orchestrated the selling of Joseph into slavery out of envy and anger, now being willing to become Joseph’s slave so that Benjamin might be set free and allowed to return to Canaan to rejoin their father. Judah has made himself the substitutionary sacrifice for Benjamin.

“This remarkable speech is a point-for-point undoing, morally and psychologically, of the brothers’ earlier violation of fraternal and filial bonds. A basic biblical perception about both human relations and relations between God and man is that love is unpredictable, arbitrary, at times perhaps seemingly unjust, and Judah now comes to an acceptance of that fact with all its consequences. His father, he states clearly to Joseph, has singled out Benjamin for a special love, as he singled out Rachel’s other son before. It is a painful reality of favoritism with which Judah, in contrast to the earlier jealousy over Joseph, is here reconciled, out of filial duty and more, out of filial love. His entire speech is motivated by the deepest empathy for his father by a real understanding of what it means for the old man’s very life to be bound up with that of the lad. He can even bring himself to quote sympathetically (verse 27) Jacob’s typically extravagant statement that his wife bore him two sons—as though Leah were not also his wife and the other ten were not also his sons. Twenty-two years earlier, Judah engineered

¹⁸⁷ Alan P. Ross. *Creation and Blessing*, p. 647.

the selling of Joseph into slavery; now he is prepared to offer himself as a slave so that the other son of Rachel can be set free. Twenty-two years earlier, he stood with his brothers and silently watched when the bloodied tunic they had brought to Jacob sent their father into a fit of anguish; now he is willing to do anything in order not to have to see his father suffer that way again.”¹⁸⁸

“To Joseph, of course, the speech again reveals even more than the speaker intended: the official version of his own death (‘torn to pieces’), the reason for the delay in the brothers’ return, the pain his testing as well as his fate must have given. Most important, if to a listener ignorant of the family situation and record, the brothers’ attitude as expressed by their leader would appear admirable, then to one in the know it surely manifests nothing short of a transformation, from subnormal to abnormal solidarity. That the sons of the hated wife should have come to terms with the father’s attachment to Rachel (‘my wife’) and her children is enough to promise an end to hostilities and a fresh start. That the second of these children should enjoy his brothers’ affection is amazing. But that Judah should adduce the father’s favoritism as the ground for self-sacrifice is such an irresistible proof of filial devotion that it breaks down Joseph’s last defences.”¹⁸⁹

45:1-8 After seeing that his brothers truly have changed, Joseph reveals himself to them. The brothers are so dumbfounded that they cannot respond to this new revelation. But they are more than shocked; they are afraid. The Hebrew word for “dumbfounded” carries the idea of paralyzing fear of those in war (Ex. 15:15; Judg. 20:41; 1 Sam. 28:21; Ps. 48:5). Joseph’s first thought is to comfort them and assure them that they should not feel guilt or be angry with themselves. It is amazing that he thinks of them and their feelings first after what they had done to him. It is clear from this passage that Joseph holds no anger or bitterness toward his brothers or Yahweh for what had been done to him or what had happened to him over the years.

“There is nothing more striking in the character of Joseph than the utter absence of revengeful feeling, whether it was against his brothers, or against Potiphar, or against the chief butler.”¹⁹⁰

Joseph tells them that it was Yahweh, not them, who brought him to Egypt. Here, Joseph shows an amazing understanding of what Yahweh had done in his life and that he sees the divine hand of Yahweh in bringing him to Egypt to save his family. He does not focus on their wicked intent. Four times Joseph acknowledges the providence and guiding hand of Yahweh in his life, in bringing him to this place. Even though Joseph’s dreams (Gen. 37:5-11) had not stated why he was to be ruler, he understood the character of Yahweh enough to see that it was so that he could be a blessing to his family and then the world (Gen. 12:1-3). This is the main reason Yahweh lifts anyone up into positions of influence.

“Here in the scene of recognition the narrator indicates clearly for the first time what is of paramount importance to him in the entire Joseph story: God’s hand which directs all the confusion of human guilt ultimately toward a gracious goal. After so much has been said exclusively about men’s actions, it is surprising for Joseph in two statements to mention God as the real subject of the whole occurrence; God, not the brothers, ‘sent’ Joseph here. Joseph veils the actual event with this alleviating expression. But it would be wrong to see only

¹⁸⁸ Robert Alter. *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 174-175.

¹⁸⁹ Meir Sternberg. *The poetics of biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading*, p. 308.

¹⁹⁰ W. H. Griffith Thomas. *Genesis*, p. 407.

distracting friendliness in Joseph's remarks; rather, Joseph wants to state an objective truth, in which, to be sure, the enigma mentioned above, the question of how this activity of God is related to the brothers' drastically described activity, remains an absolutely unsolved mystery. The matter must rest with the fact that ultimately it was not the brothers' hate but God who brought Joseph to Egypt and moreover to 'preserve life.'"¹⁹¹

45:9-15 Joseph then commands his brothers to go back to Canaan and get his father and their families and bring them to Egypt so that he can take care of them. He wants them to come and live in the land of Goshen so that they can be close to him. Joseph does not just forgive them but actively pursues them in a relationship so that he can provide for them and bless them. This is true forgiveness that comes about only through the work of Yahweh. Joseph then embraces Benjamin first and then all his brothers.

45:16-20 When Pharaoh hears of this, he and his entire household are pleased. This communicates the love and respect that the house of Pharaoh has had for Joseph throughout the last nine years of his rulership. Because of Joseph's integrity and faithfulness to Pharaoh, Pharaoh would now bless the brothers. Pharaoh instructs the brothers to go back to Canaan, to get their father and their families, and to return to Egypt, where he would give them Goshen, the best land in Egypt. Whereas Joseph had offered the brothers Goshen to be close to him, Pharaoh offers them the land because it is the best.

45:21-28 So Joseph sends his brothers to Canaan with everything they would need to make the journey there and back again. The emphasis on Joseph giving his brothers clothes may represent his reconciliation with them since it was his tunic that led to the brothers selling him into slavery. To Benjamin he gives extra favors.

When the brothers relate everything to Jacob, he does not believe them, but then he is convinced when they explain everything. The conversation would have been tremendously difficult and awkward as they explained to their father that they had been lying to him all these years. This closing scene offers a hopeful contrast to the two previous occasions when the brothers had reported news to their father. After telling their father about Joseph's death, Jacob said, "Joseph has been torn to bits... I shall go down to Sheol in mourning" (Gen. 37:33, 35). After the brothers' first return from Egypt, Jacob said, "There is no Joseph...he is dead" and "you will bring me down in my old age to Sheol with sorrow" (Gen. 42:36, 38). Now he says, "Joseph my son is still alive. I will go down to see him before I die." (Gen. 45:28).

¹⁹¹ Gerhard von Rad. *Genesis*, p. 398.

G. The Family of Jacob Moves to Egypt (46:1–47:31)

In this section, Israel settles in Egypt, and the Joseph story comes to an end with Joseph's wise administration of the land during the famine and his salvation of the Near East from starvation from the famine. Joseph has fulfilled the dreams and has also become a blessing to the world.

46:1-4 Israel set out from the Hebron area to Beersheba. Beersheba is 26 miles south of Hebron and is the southernmost city of Canaan (2 Sam. 24:2). Beyond Beersheba is the desert, where cultivation is difficult until one reaches Egypt. Jacob is apprehensive about the move to Egypt due to the clash between the need to go to Egypt to survive the famine and Yahweh's promises to give them the land of Canaan. However, Yahweh had previously told Abraham that his descendants would be taken to a foreign land and that He would bring them back out in the fourth generation (Gen. 15:13-14).

Thus, Yahweh comes to Jacob at Beersheba and reiterates the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant, promising to watch over him and his descendants while in Egypt. Yahweh states again that He will make them into a great nation (Gen. 12:2; 17:20; 18:18; 21:18) but adds that Jacob and his descendants will become that great nation in Egypt, not in Canaan. Yahweh promises to be with Jacob and his descendants just as He was with Abraham and Isaac (Gen. 26:24; 28:15, 20; 31:3, 5, 42; 39:2-3, 21, 23). He will make this promise again to Moses (Ex. 3:12) and to Joshua (Josh. 1:5). Yahweh then promises that He will bring them out of Egypt as a great nation, which looks forward to the exodus. Then He assures Jacob that he will have a peaceful death in the presence of Joseph, with whom he had lost so many years.

46:5-27 Assured of Yahweh's approval, Jacob takes his sons, their families, his grandchildren, and his livestock and possessions and makes the long journey to Egypt. The listing of the people in Jacob's family is comparatively long, which underlines the significance of Jacob's move to Egypt. The phraseology of "enter/bring in" (Gen. 6:18-20; 46:6-7) and "descendants" (Gen. 7:3; 46:6-7) echoes key terms from the flood story. The phrase "possessions which they had acquired in the land of Canaan" echoes the description of earlier major migrations of the patriarchs (Gen. 12:5; 31:18; 36:6). This shows this migration as a significance event of faith and salvation.¹⁹²

It is also significant that the number of Jacob's family has now reached 70 people (Ex. 1:5; Deut. 10:22). Seventy was the number of nations who descended from Adam and were scattered in judgment (Gen. 10). Deut. 32:8 states that Yahweh divided the nations of humanity (Gen. 10) according the number of the heavenly angels, also 70. Thus, the nation of Israel represents in a microcosm the family of humanity as a whole. Israel is to be the new humanity through whom Yahweh would work to redeem them into His image. As the 70 angels have authority over the nations, so now Yahweh has established 70 descendants of Abraham whom He would form into a chosen nation that would redeem the nations of humanity (Gen. 12:1-3).

46:28-34 Finally, after all these years, Joseph is reunited with his father Jacob. The fact that Joseph gets into his chariot and rides out to Jacob emphasizes his desire to see his father. Jacob is now content to die in his old age now that he has seen his son Joseph.

Joseph then instructs his brothers that he is going to emphasize to Pharaoh that they are shepherds and that they have all brought all of their animals. First, this lets Pharaoh know that Joseph has not filled Egypt with just his family, who would be a drain on society in the midst of a famine. They are able men with their own careers, and they have brought their own animals to

¹⁹² Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16–50*, p. 442.

sustain them. But it also informs Pharaoh that they need land, and Joseph's hope is that Pharaoh will give them Goshen, where the land is good for grazing. This would also keep Israel on the outskirts of Egypt and cities where they were less likely to intermix and be influenced by the Egyptian gods and culture. Then Joseph instructs his brothers that when Pharaoh asks what they do, to tell him that not only are they shepherds but that they also have taken care of cattle. Joseph emphasizes this since the Egyptians viewed sheep herds as disgusting but saw cattle as prized livestock. There is no evidence in history of Egypt's dislike for sheep herds, but sheep are completely absent from all drawings and records in Egypt. This dislike might be more for nomadic people, who were shepherds and were often seen as untrustworthy.

47:1-6 Joseph takes five of his brothers before Pharaoh to request the land of Goshen. As Joseph had expected, Pharaoh asks what they do. The brothers tell Pharaoh that they are shepherds. Some scholars have stated that they did not listen to Joseph and revealed that they were shepherds. But Joseph never told his brothers to lie to Pharaoh—simply to emphasize their skill with cattle. Joseph himself had said he was going to tell Pharaoh that they were shepherds (Gen. 46:31-32). Notice that although the brothers speak to Pharaoh, he replies to Joseph, as is common of courtly decorum. Pharaoh graciously grants them their request and gives them the land of Goshen. Then Pharaoh asks that some of them be put in charge of his own cattle, meaning they would be made officers of the crown, affording them legal protection not usually given to foreigners.¹⁹³

47:7-10 Then Joseph presents his father Jacob to Pharaoh. Whereas with the brothers' audience with Pharaoh was stiff and formal, it is more relaxed and intimate with Jacob. Jacob does not call himself "your servant" as the brothers had. Instead, he talks about himself naturally and in the first person. And whereas the brothers came asking favors, Jacob will bless Pharaoh. When Pharaoh asks Jacob about his age, Jacob emphasizes the length and the pain of his years, adding that they are not as long as his fathers', mostly because he had not walked with Yahweh in the same way that they had. Jacob portrays his life as a sojourner, since he had not fully received the land of the promises in his lifetime.

"When we first encountered Jacob he was struggling inside his mother's womb with his twin brother. As we come to the end of Jacob's life, he is struggling for his life in a famine-devastated Canaan. In between these first and last moments of struggle have been many trying experiences for Jacob. His life has had more sorrow than joy."¹⁹⁴

"These words [v. 9] appear to be the author's attempt at a deliberate contrast to the later promise that one who honors his father and mother should 'live long and do well upon the land' (Dt 5:15). Jacob, who deceived his father and thereby gained the blessing, must not only die outside the Promised land but also, we learn here, his years were few and difficult. From his own words, then, we can see a final recompense for Jacob's actions earlier in the book."¹⁹⁵

Jacob's blessing of Pharaoh is unusual in these circumstances since it implies that Jacob is superior to Pharaoh (Heb. 7:7). Perhaps Pharaoh accepts the blessing since Jacob is older than Pharaoh and may have been seen as wiser, especially being the father of Joseph. Regardless, the narrator shows that Jacob is indeed greater because of the Abrahamic Covenant. Yet Jacob's

¹⁹³ Nahum M. Sarna. *Understanding Genesis*. p. 319.

¹⁹⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, p. 612.

¹⁹⁵ John. H. Sailhamer. *The Pentateuch as Narrative*, p. 227.

blessing on Pharaoh is also a blessing on the world, for Pharaoh is the current ruler over the most powerful kingdom in the Near East—and indirectly over the Near East, as it was the only source of grain during the famine.

47:11-12 Pharaoh settles Jacob’s family in the land of Goshen (also called Rameses), located in the eastern part of the delta region of the Nile River. This region had very fertile and rich soil for the growing of crops and grazing of animals. The use of the name Rameses here and elsewhere (Ex. 1:11; 12:37; Num. 33:3, 5) has led some to assume that these events took place during the time of Rameses I (1347-1320 BC) or Rameses II (1279-1213 BC). However, biblical chronological references (1 Kings 6:1; Ex. 12:40) point to a date for Israel’s move to Egypt near 1876 BC.

“It is possible that the name Rameses (also spelled Raamses) was in use when Jacob entered Egypt even though extra-biblical references have not confirmed this. ‘Raamses’ simply means ‘Ra [the sun god] has created it.’ Second, Rameses may have been the name of this district later, in Moses’ day, when he wrote Genesis. He could have used the modern name when writing Genesis rather than an older one that was in use in Jacob’s day. A third possibility is that Rameses was the district name even later in history (e.g., after Pharaoh Rameses). A later scribe may have substituted Rameses for an older name that was in use when Moses wrote or when Jacob entered Egypt. Other late names appear in Genesis. For example, the town of Dan (14:14), formerly Laish (Judg. 18:29), received the name Dan during the judges period (c. 1350-1050 B.C.). Evidently someone after Moses’ day substituted the modern name Dan for the older name in Genesis 14:14. This may account for references to the Philistines in Genesis too.”¹⁹⁶

47:13-17 Joseph first collects a payment for grain from those in Canaan and Egypt since he is the only one in the land who has grain stored up from the previous years. After the people have no more money, they sell their animals to Joseph. Whether they actually sell them or mortgage them is not clear. But mortgaging would have been more practical since Joseph could not take care of all those animals on his own.

47:18-26 The next year, the people come back and sell themselves and their families into slavery to the Egyptian monarchy. Though this seems harsh, it is important to know that slavery in the ancient Near East was not the same as we know it in American history. Selling oneself into slavery was similar to filing for bankruptcy and was more like tenured employment. If you do not have money or food, you will starve to death. Being an indentured servant who is provided shelter and food for your family is better than death. And under a benevolent master, it could be quite comfortable. Likewise, most laws in the ancient Near East allowed a man to go free after six years of slavery. Many would even choose to remain a slave, showing that they did not view it as a harsh or abusive life. The self-employed landowner may have more freedom, but he faces greater risks. Notice that the people, after they have become slaves, state joyfully that Joseph has saved their lives. As with the animals, Joseph may also be mortgaging their lands because he gives them grain to sow and allows them to work the land. They only have to give a fifth of their crops to the monarchy—the rest is theirs to live on. Twenty percent is the equivalent of modern-day taxes. Joseph gives him grain because he does not want to see the lands return to the desert.

¹⁹⁶ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Genesis*, p. 241.

Joseph's wisdom causes Pharaoh to become wealthy, fulfilling the earlier blessing of Jacob on Pharaoh. For those who blessed and treated Israel well, Yahweh had promised a blessing on them as well (Gen. 12:1-3). At the same time, Yahweh blesses the family of Jacob, just as He had promised.

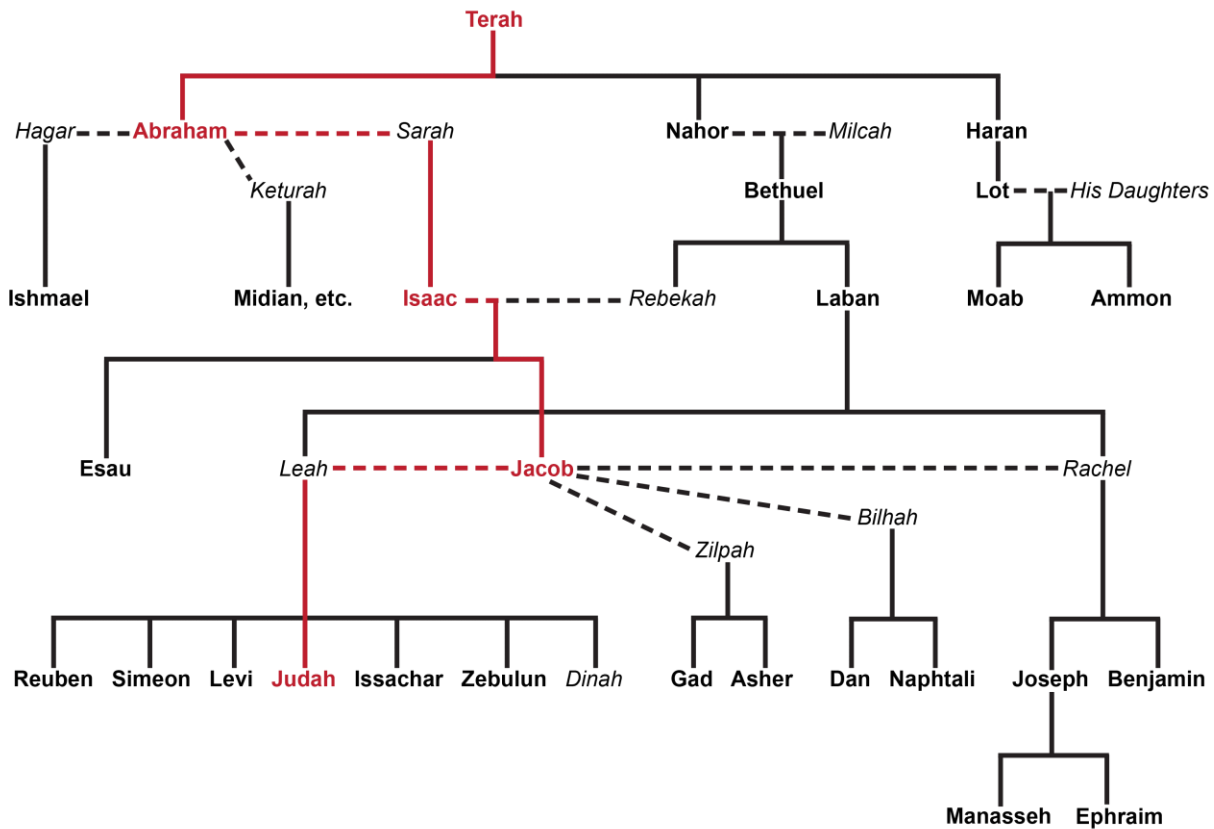
47:27-31 In contrast, the family of Jacob owns their own land, are fruitful, and increase rapidly in number. The narrator, in emphasizing their fruitfulness, alludes back to the garden and the promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. Yahweh is fulfilling the mandate of creation and His promises to Abraham. But it also ties these events into the book of Exodus, which begins by stating that Israel had been increasing greatly in numbers while in Egypt (Ex. 1:7).

As he comes to the end of his life, Jacob tells Joseph to place his hand under his thigh and swear to bury him in the land of Canaan, the land of the promises of Yahweh. Jacob shows his faith in Yahweh by his desire to be buried in the land of Canaan, the land that Yahweh had promised to Abraham and his descendants. Though his burial in Egypt would have been great, he prefers Canaan. Joseph swears that he will do this.

The narrator sets this scene up as a death scene, even though Jacob does not die until the end of Genesis 50, showing that this is the end of the Joseph story. The scene is also similar to Abraham making his servant swear to find a wife for Isaac (Gen. 24:1-10) and Abraham's death (Gen. 25:1-11). The final three chapters are the conclusion the family of Jacob story and the greater story of Genesis.

H. The Testament of Jacob (48:1–50:26)

In this final section of Genesis, Jacob, through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, gives an oracle to Joseph’s two sons and to his own twelve sons. This section should not be called the *blessings* of Jacob but the *testament* of Jacob, for his last word to his sons contain both blessings and cursing.¹⁹⁷ The focus is on the fact that the oracles given to his sons are prophetic of who they will become as the twelve tribes of Israel once Yahweh brings them out of Egypt (Gen. 15:13-16; Ex. 13-14) and makes them into a great nation (Gen. 12:1-3). This section also answers the question of who would get the firstborn title. Jacob does something unique here, splitting it between Judah and Joseph. Judah will receive the headship of the nation, but Joseph, through his two sons, will receive the double land portion (1 Chr. 5:1-2).



48:1-7 Joseph, learning that Jacob is about to die, takes his two sons to see their grandfather. Jacob refers to Yahweh as El Shaddai (Gen. 17:1) and to the promises Yahweh made to him at Bethel when he returned to Canaan (Gen. 35:9-13). But he also echoes the blessing given to him by Isaac (Gen. 28:3-4). Jacob states that he is going to adopt them as his own by making them equal to all his other sons when it comes to the final inheritance. Such adoptions are well attested in the ancient Near East. By doing this, he shows that he is giving the double portion of the firstborn title to Joseph and his descendants (1 Chr. 5:1-5).

48:8-14 Jacob asks who the two sons are because of his failing eyesight. Joseph places Manasseh, the firstborn and in his mid-twenties (Gen. 41:50), at the right hand of Jacob in order to receive the firstborn headship title. The right-hand side was considered the place of honor and

¹⁹⁷ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16–50*, p. 468.

blessing (Deut. 11:29; Ps. 110:1; Matt. 25:33; Heb. 1:3). Jacob, however, crosses his arms so that his right hand is on Ephraim, the second born. This continues the pattern of the firstborn's not receiving the headship title, as with Cain and Abel (Ge. 4:1-8), Ishmael and Isaac (Gen. 17:15-22), Peres and Zerah (Gen. 27:30), and Jacob and Esau (Gen. 27).

“There is a slight touch of irony here: Jacob had secured Isaac's blessing by guile and deceit, while Joseph is securing the blessing for his sons by honesty and forthrightness.”¹⁹⁸

48:15-16 Under the inspiration of Yahweh, Jacob deliberately gives second-born Ephraim the privileged firstborn blessing and predicts his preeminence. Under Joshua, Ephraim will receive an inheritance along with the other tribes (Jos. 16:5-9; 17:9,10,15-18; 1 Chr. 7:28,29). By the time of the judges and the kings, Ephraim will have grown to be very large and influential. When the kingdom of Israel splits into the northern and southern kingdoms (1 Kgs. 12:16-17), Ephraim takes the lead among the ten northern tribes (Isa. 7:2-17; Jer. 31:9,20) and flourishes to the extent that the Jews in the North use the name Ephraim interchangeably with the name Israel (2 Chr. 17:2; 25:6-7; Isa. 7:8-9; 11:12-13; 17:3; Jer. 31:18-20; Hos. 4:17; 5:3-5; 6:4,10; 8:11; 12:14).

One of the characteristics of the Messianic kingdom is the healing of the rift between the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel (Hos. 1:11; Isa. 11:13), which occurs through Jeroboam the son of Nebat (1 Kgs. 11:30; 12:20). Ephraim is often held accountable by Yahweh for the introduction of idolatry into the Northern kingdom through its city Bethel (1 Kgs. 12:29; Hos. 13:1-12). This is seen in Revelation when the twelve tribes are listed for sealing but Ephraim, though listed, is not mentioned by name; Yahweh mentions Manasseh but then refers to Ephraim as Joseph (Rev. 7:5-8).

48:17-18 When Joseph sees that his father had switched his hands and given the blessing to Manasseh, he protested, thinking that Jacob had made a mistake due to his poor eyesight. However, Jacob makes it clear that this was no mistake. Besides, it would have been too late, for Jacob would not have been able to take the blessing back—just as Isaac could not withdraw his blessing of Jacob (Gen. 27:34-38).

48:19-20 Under the leadership of Joshua, Manasseh will be granted land on the west and east side of the Jordan River (Jos. 17:1-12). The eastern half assists Israel in the conquest of Canaan (Deut. 3:18-20; Jos. 1:12-15; 4:12-13) and joins the other eastern tribes in erecting a monument to testify to the unity of Israel (Jos. 22). During the reign of David, some of the tribe of Manasseh joins him at Ziklag (1 Chr. 12:19-20) and also supports him at Hebron. They also join Judah during the reign of Hezekiah (2 Chr. 30) and are incorporated into kingdom of Judah (2 Chr. 15:9; 34:6-7).

48:21-22 Jacob then reminds Joseph of Yahweh's promise to bring them back to the land of their fathers (Gen. 15:12-16). Jacob then personally wills to Joseph land that he gained from the Amorites through war. This battle is never mentioned in Scripture.

49:1-2 Jacob blesses all twelve of his sons and foretells what will become of each of them and their descendants. He disqualifies Reuben, Simeon, and Levi from leadership and instead gives that blessing to Judah. He grants the double portion to Joseph. Each blessing contains at least one of the following elements: a summary of the son's personality, a foreshadowing of his potential,

¹⁹⁸ John J. Davis. “The Camel in Biblical Narratives.” In *A Tribute to Gleason Archer*, p. 294.

and a prophecy of his future. Also, with many of the sons Jacob alludes to an animal to illustrate the personality of that son.

The order of the sons is different from the birth order given in Gen. 29:31-30:24. Here, Zebulun precedes Issachar—maybe because Zebulun’s destiny is better than Issachar’s. Likewise, the order of the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah is different. Here, it is Dan (Bilhah), Gad (Zilpah), Asher (Zilpah), and Naphtali (Bilhah), applying a chiasmic structure to the names of the maidservants. It could be that this ordering of names reflects the geographic placement of the tribes north to south in the Promised Land (Num. 32:33-36; Josh. 19:24-48).¹⁹⁹

49:3-4 Jacob begins by declaring Reuben his might and strength, the one who should have been Jacob’s protector and the one to continue his name and receive the headship over all the other brothers. Instead, Reuben was like destructive water and, therefore, would not excel. The reference to “destructive water” is used of false prophets who invent prophecy (Jer. 23:32; Zeph. 3:4) and of men who take bribes to murder (Judg. 9:4). Reuben forfeited the title because he sought to take the title by his own means (Gen. 35:22). Thus, Reuben would receive nothing—no title, no land, no inheritance. Perhaps Jacob is finally willing to curse Reuben because he is about to die and is no longer afraid of Reuben.

No judge, prophet, king, or famous person is found among the tribe of Reuben. The only two people mentioned from Reuben are Dathan and Abiram, who will lead a rebellion against Moses (Num. 16). The tribe of Reuben eventually chooses to settle on the east side of the Jordan River, separate from everyone else (Num. 32:1-5; Judg. 5:15-16). Later, they integrate into the tribe of Gad.

“From this first oracle the teaching is clear that the behavior of one individual affects the destiny of his descendants.”²⁰⁰

49:5-7 Jacob refers to Simeon and Levi as “brothers.” This Hebrew word has the sense not of a biological relation but of an ally or confederate (1 Kgs. 9:13; 20:32). Together, they are violent and wicked men whom no one should trust in a covenant. They kill men for pleasure and have hamstringed oxen (to cut the back tendon to hobble the oxen) (Josh. 11:6, 9). The reference to oxen could refer to Hamor and Shechem, the leaders of the Hivite city that Simeon and Levi massacred (Gen. 34:25-31). The name *Hamor* literally means “donkey,” so it would be fitting to refer to the son as an ox. Leaders were often described as bulls. The other possibility is that the reference to the ox could refer to Jacob—that the sons hamstrung him by making him an embarrassment and a target to all the surrounding nations (Gen. 34:30).²⁰¹ Jacob curses them for slaughtering the Hivites by using the covenant of Yahweh to deceive and kill them (Gen. 34:25-31). Yet Jacob’s words also suggest that there were numerous other occasions on which they had demonstrated their wickedness and violence. Because of their wickedness, Simeon (Num. 1:23; 26:14; Josh. 15:32-42; 19:1-19; 1 Chr. 4:38-43; 2 Chr. 15:9; 34:6) and Levi (Josh. 18:7; 21) receive no tribal territory, and their descendants will live scattered among the other tribes (Simeon Josh. 19:1-9; 21:18:7).

By the time Israel enters Canaan, the Simeonites will have become the weakest tribe in Israel (Num. 26:14), and Moses passes them over in his blessing of the Israelites (Deut. 33). Many

¹⁹⁹ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16—50*, p. 469.

²⁰⁰ Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18-50*, p. 647.

²⁰¹ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16—50*, pp. 474-475.

scholars believe that the Simeonites were those primarily responsible for the pagan prostitutes brought into the camp of Israel (Num. 25). This view is based on the fact that when Moses took a census of the people before entering Canaan, every tribe had grown in numbers, whereas Simeon had lost more than fifty percent of their tribe since the first census 38 years earlier (Num. 1 and 26). They may have lost the most people in the plague that Yahweh sent upon Israel for their sins (Num. 25).

The Simeonites are not given a separate tribal inheritance (Jos. 19:1-9) but only a few cities scattered though the southern portion of Judah (Jos. 19:1-9; 15:20-63). Later, the Simeonites lose their tribal identity completely among the other tribes (1 Chr. 4:27, 38-43).

Although the Levites also receive no tribal territory (Num. 18:20-24; 26:62; Deut. 18:1-2; Josh. 18:7), they receive redemption from Yahweh by standing with Moses when the Israelites worship the golden calf at Mount Sinai and by executing those who sinned (Ex. 32:26-28). Yahweh uses their natural inclination toward violence to serve His righteous will. After their idolatry at Mount Sinai, the people lose the right to be priests (Ex. 19:3-6), and Yahweh gives the Levites the unique blessing of becoming the priesthood of Israel (Num. 3:5-13; 18:6-32). Moses later blesses them and charges them with leading and instructing Israel in Yahweh's Law (Deut. 33:8-11; Mal. 2:4-5). Moses and Joshua give the Levites 48 cities in which they will live among the other tribes (Num. 35:1-8; Josh. 21:1-40) to instruct the people in the worship and will of Yahweh (Num. 35:1-5; Lev. 23:32-34). Yahweh declares Himself the Levites' inheritance (Deut. 10:9).

Even though the first three tribes suffer punishment for their sins, they still retain a place in the chosen family and enjoy the benefits of the Abrahamic Covenant.

49:8-12 It is to Judah that Jacob gives the firstborn headship title because of his willing sacrifice for the brothers and his leadership. Though Joseph receives the double land portion, Judah receives the headship and title of ruler/king over the other tribes (1 Chr. 5:1-2). Jacob uses a play on words, stating, "Judah (*Yehudah*), your brothers will praise (*yoduka*). Your hand (*yadeka*) will be on the neck of your enemies." Usually Yahweh is the object of praise in the Bible; only three other times man is said to be praised (Job 40:14; Pss. 45:17; 49:18), but these refer to achievement rather than essence that prompts praise. Just as it was prophesied that the brothers would bow down to Joseph (37:7, 9; 42:6; 43:26; 43:28), now they will bow down to Judah as the leader of the tribes (Gen. 35:22; 43:3-10; Judg. 1:1-2; 3:9; 20:18; 1 Chr. 5:1,2; 28:4; Ps. 60:7).

Judah is compared to a "lion cub" that has seized its prey and dares anyone to try to take it (Num. 23:24; 24:9). The "scepter" and "ruler's staff" were the symbols of royalty, command, and the right to rule. This right to rule will not depart from Judah and will always be with his descendants. Based on Deut. 28:57, the children come out from between the feet. Feet are a frequent euphemism for the genitalia (Judg. 3:24; 1 Sam. 24:3; Isa. 7:20).

This ruling scepter will stay with Judah "until it comes to Shiloh." The Hebrew word *shiloh* is very difficult to understand in this context, with four major possibilities that require the fewest changes to the text to understand the meaning.²⁰² First, it is assumed there is no grammatical corruption of the word and that it could be left as is and translated without emendation, "until he comes to Shiloh"—until a Judean ruler controls Shiloh. Shiloh was an important location of the

²⁰² See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16—50*, pp. 477-478.

tabernacle during the judges, but it was not an important political center, and it is spelled differently. Second, it could mean “ruler” and is a corruption of “his ruler.” “Until his (the) ruler comes.” It could come from the Egyptian word *sr* for “prince,” which is written *siara* in an Akkadian text. It fits the Egyptian setting of Jacob’s blessing but seems unlikely in the context. Third, a strong possibility, it could be broken into two words that mean “until he comes whose it is”—until the owner of the scepter comes, being a reference to the Davidic dynasty if not to the Messiah. However, it makes for a poor poetic line, and it is hard to explain how the corruption would have come about. Fourth, and most likely, no change is made to the consonants, but the vowels are repointed, as vowels did not exist in the original written Hebrew. “Until tribute is brought to him” creates a good poetic line and points to further rule over the nations mentioned in the next line (Ps. 72:8-11; Isa. 2:2-4). Ezekiel alludes to this interpretation in his prophecy in Ezek. 19 and 21:27. The third and fourth options are the most likely understanding. In all the views, the prophecy looks forward to a Davidic king and even to the Messiah (Num. 24:17; Dan. 7:13-14; Rev. 5:6). This is the first clear prophecy concerning the coming of the Messiah. This Judahic king will rule not only over Israel but over all the peoples or nations (Gen. 17:16; Ex. 15:16; Deut. 32:8).

The imagery of wine was associated with the blessings and fullness of life (Gen. 27:28; Deut. 7:12-14; 33:26-29; 2 Kgs. 18:32; Ps. 104:13-15; Prov. 3:9-10; Joel 2:19, 24; Jer. 31:12). This king is connected to wine in three different ways. Connecting the Messiah to wine showed that His reign (“binding his foal to the vine”) and character (“eyes will be dark from wine”) would be characteristic of the blessings of Yahweh. The symbol of wine would become one of the two signs (wine and grain) of the Messiah (Jn. 2:1-11; 18:1-8; Matt. 26:27-29).

The first connection is that he will tie his donkey to the vine. While horses were seen as military strength in flat terrain, the donkey was seen as a symbol of royalty in the mountainous regions of the ancient Near East (Judg. 10:4; 12:14) since horses were useless in the mountains. When King Solomon (who came from Judah) was made king, David had him placed on a donkey and paraded throughout the city to demonstrate his kingship (1 Kgs. 1:32-40). Later, Jesus did the same when the people of Israel declared Him King (Zech. 9:9; Matt. 21:1-11). No one would tie his donkey to a vine because the donkey would eat up the vine. The idea, therefore, is that the vineyards are so abundant that a donkey eating the vine would not matter. Thus, the abundance of life and joy will be characteristic of this kingship (donkey).

The second connection is that his garments would be washed in the blood of grapes. This once again carries the idea that the wine will be in such abundance that he will be able to wash his garments in it. Also, he will be clothed in the abundance of life and joy.

Third, his eyes will be dark from wine, meaning that his eyes will be filled with an abundance of life, joy, and blessing. His teeth being white as milk means that his words will be sweet and filled with blessings, in connection to Yahweh promising Israel a land flowing with milk and honey (Ex. 3:8; 33:3; Lev. 20:24; Num. 14:8; Deut. 6:3; 11:9; 26:9, 15; 27:3; 31:20; Josh 5:6; Jer. 11:5; 32:22; Ezek. 20:6, 15).

“The sense of the imagery is that wine, the symbol of prosperity and blessing, will be so plentiful that even the choicest vines will be put to such everyday use as tethering the animals of burden and vintage wine will be as commonplace as wash water. Verse 12 returns to the

picture of the king of Judah. His eyes are darker than wine and his teeth whiter than milk. He is a picture of strength and power.”²⁰³

Judah is the tribe that later camped on the east side of the tabernacle, which is the position of authority. They led the other tribes in the march through the wilderness (Num. 2:1-3; 10:14) and in the conquest of the land of Canaan (Judg. 1:1-3). Judah also produced the Davidic line, which made up the monarchy (2 Sam 2:1-11; 5:4-5). Later, when Israel divided into two nations, Judah remained loyal to the Davidic line and made up the majority of the southern kingdom (1 Kgs. 12:20). Through him came David and the Messiah, Lion of the Tribe of Judah (Rev. 5:6).

What is interesting is how this passage was fulfilled historically, in a way that the Bible does not record. At the time of Christ, Herod the Great was ruling over Judea (37-4 BC) and passed the rule to his son Archelaus (4 BC–7 AD) after his death. Though these two were not fully Jewish in their bloodline, they still had Jewish blood. Archelaus was such a sadistic ruler that the Romans removed him from power and replaced him with a full-blooded Roman procurator named Caponius. At this time, the legal power for the Sanhedrin was limited, and the right to adjudicate the capital cases and pronounce the death penalty was taken away. Thus, there was no longer a Jewish ruler who ruled over Israel with the scepter. When this happened, the members of the Sanhedrin covered their heads with ashes and their bodies with sackcloth and cried out, “Woe unto us for the scepter has departed from Judah and the Messiah has not come!”²⁰⁴ They believed that the Word of Yahweh had failed, for the scepter had left Judah and Messiah had not come. Little did they know that Jesus was growing up in the city of Nazareth.

49:13 Zebulun is said to be the harbor of the sea and a safety to ships. This is odd since Zebulun inherited land inland and not on the coast (Josh. 19:10-16). It could be the idea that Zebulun would profit from the sea (Deut. 33:19) since it was located on the western trade route that went through Israel from Mesopotamia to Egypt. Other than being listed as a tribe that fought in many of the battles of Israel, very little is mentioned about Zebulun in the Bible.

49:14-15 Issachar will be a strong donkey or servant to others, specifically a slave to other nations—probably the Canaanites. Issachar became an agricultural tribe in the lower Galilee region including the valley of Jezreel, which was a pleasant and productive farming area. Other than being listed as a tribe that fought in many of the battles of Israel, very little is mentioned about Issachar in the Bible.

49:16-18 Dan would be a judge in Israel, and his military victories will benefit the entire nation. This was partially seen during Samson’s life. However, Dan also led Israel into idolatry (Judg. 18:30; 1 Kgs. 12:28-29; 2 Kgs. 10:29), thus the reference to the serpent (Gen. 49:17). The judgment on Dan for this is seen in Revelation, when the twelve tribes are listed for sealing and Dan is completely omitted from the list of the twelve tribes. (Rev. 7:5-8).

49:19 Gad is told that his descendants will experience a troubled life but that they will always strike back. Under Moses and Joshua, Gad, along with Manasseh and Reuben, asked to settle on the east side of the Jordan River (Num. 32:1; Deut. 3:12-17; 29:8; Jos. 22:8). The Gadites, among others, joined the fugitive David and supported his becoming king (1 Chr. 12:1-15, 37-38). The Gadites also shared in, and were subject to, David’s administration (2 Sam. 23:36; 24:5; 1 Chr. 26:32).

²⁰³ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis,” In *Genesis–Numbers*, p. 277.

²⁰⁴ *Babylonian Talmud*, Chapter 4, folio 37. See also Augustin Lemann, *Jesus before the Sanhedrin*, 1886.

49:20 Asher would enjoy some of the most fertile soil of Israel in the lowlands of the Mount Carmel range north along the Mediterranean coast. Other than being listed as a tribe that fought in many of the battles of Israel, very little is mentioned about Asher in the Bible.

49:21 Naphtali would enjoy the admiration and praise of the other tribes in a special way (Judg. 4, 5). Other than being listed as a tribe that fought in many of the battles of Israel, very little is mentioned about Naphtali in the Bible.

49:22-26 The blessing on Joseph is the longest, most complex, and most grammatically obscure. In the first line, Joseph is compared either to a fruitful vine or a wild donkey. If a fruitful vine, the idea is that Joseph is pictured as a healthy and fruitful vine growing by the wall (Ps. 1:3; 92:12-14; Jer. 17:7-8). But the problem is that the Hebrew word “son” nowhere else refers to a plant, and the noun translated “branches” (in the Hebrew it is “daughters”) in the third line is a plural form, whereas its verb is singular. Since in all the other oracles in Genesis 49 the son is compared to an animal and not a plant, Joseph being compared to a wild donkey seems likely. Remember as with the blessing on Ishmael, comparing him to a wild donkey (Gen. 16:12) is a good thing and symbolic of an individualistic lifestyle not confined by social convention (Jer. 2:24; Hos. 8:9). The reference to “wild donkey” is also a pun on the name of his son Ephraim.²⁰⁵ The imagery of archers standing against Joseph is an allusion to the opposition he faced throughout his career, but the attacks against him failed because of Yahweh’s intervention. In Gen. 49:25, the title *El Shaddai* is used of Yahweh once again (Gen. 17:1) in connection to providing blessings of the breast and womb. As mentioned before, it is clear from its context that it carries the idea of Yahweh being the source of fertility and life (Gen. 17:1-8; 29:31; 30:22-24; 35:11, 16-18; 43:14). *El Shaddai* is used here as a word play between *shadu* (mountain) and *shad* (breast).

49:27 Benjamin earned a reputation for bravery and skill and furiousness in war (Judg. 3:15; 19:16; 20:16; 2 Sam. 2:15-16; 1 Chr. 8:40; 12:2; 2 Chr. 17:17). Ehud, Saul, Jonathan, and Paul came from the tribe of Benjamin. During the time of the judges, Benjamin was attacked by all the other tribes after the injustice done to a Levite’s concubine in a Benjaminite city (Judg. 20). Since Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, was in Benjamin’s territory, Benjamin was drawn closer to Judah (1 Chr. 8:28), and after the division between the northern and southern kingdoms, Benjamin stayed with Judah (1 Kgs. 12:21; 2 Chr. 11).

49:28 The twelve sons of Jacob would become the twelve tribes of Israel. However, Joseph would be represented by his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, making thirteen tribes all together. Thus, the twelve tribes would become a “baker’s dozen.” Since Levi would later become the priesthood and would not be given a land allotment, they were not usually counted among the twelve tribes, politically speaking. However, there were times that Yahweh included Levi in the listing of the twelve and so adjusted the list of who was included. This was done in one of two ways. Sometimes Yahweh combined Ephraim and Manasseh into one name and listed them as Joseph. Other times He was judging a tribe for their sins and completely left that tribe out of the listing, replacing it with Levi to maintain the number twelve (Rev. 7:5-8). The twelve tribes are listed twenty different times in the Bible in different orders and sometimes with certain tribes omitted (Gen. 29-35; 46; 49; Ex. 1; Num. 1:1-15; 1:20-43; 2; 7; 10; 13; 26; 34; Deut. 27; 33; Josh. 13-22; Judg. 5; 1 Chr. 2:1-8, 12-27; Ezek. 48; Rev. 7).

²⁰⁵ See Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16—50*, pp. 484-485.

“Within Jacob’s words to each of the sons (after Judah), the theme of blessing has been evident in two primary images. First, the reverse side of the blessing is stressed in the imagery of the victorious warrior. The defeat of the enemy is the prelude to the messianic peace. Second, the positive side of the blessing is stressed in the imagery of great prosperity and abundance. Behind such imagery of peace and prosperity lies the picture of the Garden of Eden—the Paradise lost. The focus of Jacob’s words has been the promise that when the one comes to whom the kingship truly belongs, there will once again be the peace and prosperity that God intended all to have in the Garden of Eden.”²⁰⁶

49:29-33 Jacob reminds his sons that he wants to be buried with his forefathers in the land of Canaan and then lies down in his bed and dies. Jacob’s insistence on being buried in Canaan shows that he understands where he truly belongs.

“He [the narrator] is interested in the fulfillment of the promises made to Abraham, promises of land, descendants, covenant, and blessing to the nations. In the very first chapter, he declares his blessing on mankind. The story of Jacob is dominated by his quest for blessing. Now at the end of his life that quest is completed. He looks back on God’s promises to him and declares that ‘El Shaddai appeared to me... and blessed me’ (48:3). He observes that he has received more from God than he ever anticipated, ‘I never expected to see your face; now God has showed me your descendants as well’ (48:11) He reflects on the fulfillment of the promises. He and his father s have acquired a permanent holding in the land of Canaan (48:4), both the burial place at Macpelah (49:29-32; 50:13) and land captured from the Amorites (48:21-23). As for descendants, he has twelve sons of his own and he adopts his grandsons Ephraim and Manasseh too. Similarly, Joseph lives to see his grandchildren (48:12-20; 50:23). After many a close scrape with death he can look back on life in which ‘God... has guided me from then until now’ whose ‘angel... rescued me from every evil.’

However, the experiences of Jacob and Joseph are merely a foretaste and pledge of the glory to come, just as the believer’s experience of the Spirits a guarantee of a greater inheritance (Eph 1:13-14). Genesis portrays all the major patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, as endowed with the gift of prophecy, but none give on their deathbed such a detailed review of Israel’s future, as Jacob does; only Moses, the greatest of the prophets, surpasses Jacob in this respect. In blessing Ephraim and Manasseh, Jacob declares that these two tribes will become ‘a people’ and ‘full of nations’ (48:19). Then in chap. 49 he speaks of what will happen ‘in the latter days,’ that is, in the distant future, when the tribes have settled in Canaan and have come into their inheritance there. He mentions the kind of land they will inherit (e.g., suitable for viticulture, or by the sea). He traces the rise of the great tribes of Judah and Joseph (49:8-12, 22-26), the decline of Reuben and Simeon (49:3-7), and the oppression of Issachar, Dan, and Gad (49: 14-19). This long prophecy climaxes with the prediction of superlative blessings on Joseph that will ensure his prosperity in every sphere of life ‘thanks to the strength of the Mighty One of Jacob, thanks to the shepherd of the Stone of Israel’ (49:24-26).”²⁰⁷

50:1-14 Joseph weeps over his father’s body and then instructs to have him embalmed. This is odd considering this an Egyptian rite and not connected to Semitic practices. However, this

²⁰⁶ John H. Sailhamer, “Genesis.” In *Genesis–Numbers*, pp. 278-79.

²⁰⁷ Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16–50*, pp. 491-492.

shows how highly regarded Jacob and Joseph were in Egypt since embalming was reserved only for the most privileged and powerful in Egypt.

Joseph asks Pharaoh's permission to take his father back to Canaan to be buried there. Joseph mentions that Jacob made him swear an oath and that Jacob had already prepared the tomb to avoid offending Pharaoh concerning his desire to be buried in Canaan rather than Egypt. Joseph then takes his father back to the land of Canaan and has him buried there. The elaborateness of the burial probably had more to do with the fact that Joseph was an Egyptian official than with the renown of Jacob.

“The record of Jacob’s burial in the land is important to the purpose of Genesis. God had promised the land to Abraham and had given the patriarchs small portions of it. The faith of these men that God would fulfill His promises and do for their descendants all that He had promised is obvious in their view of Canaan as their homeland. They counted on the future faithfulness of God who had proved Himself faithful to them personally during their lifetimes.”²⁰⁸

50:15-21 Joseph’s brothers became afraid again of what he would do to them for their selling him into slavery. They feared that the only thing that had prevented him from taking vengeance on them was his respect for their father. Notice that the first time Joseph told them he had forgiven them, they hadn’t yet asked for forgiveness. They remind Joseph of Jacob’s request that Joseph forgive them, and they implore him to act like their father’s God (Ex. 34:7; Ps. 32:1, 5; Mic. 7:18). Joseph assures them again that he has truly forgiven them (Gen. 45:5-8). This time Joseph states concisely how Yahweh operates as a sovereign God over a fallen world. What people intend for evil, Yahweh uses for good and to accomplish His purposes. Yahweh is so sovereign that all things—both the good things of His creation and the evil hearts and wills of humans—He orchestrates into accomplishing His purposes. The Bible does not totally answer the questions of how or why He does this, just that He does. But it does adamantly stress over and over that He is a good God who has our best interest in mind and that the redemption of humanity and creation is His ultimate goal as He works within an evil and fallen world. Notice that Joseph does not claim that Yahweh had a different plan to get him to Egypt but their evil desires messed it up so Yahweh had to work with what they were doing to get Joseph to Egypt. Instead, he says that God ordained this path to Egypt and they simultaneously chose to sell him into slavery. Here, the sovereignty of Yahweh and the free choice of man come together in a way that the Bible again does not attempt to explain but merely states that they are both true.

“The statement about the brothers’ evil plans and God’s good plans now opens up the inmost mystery of the Joseph story. It is in every respect, along with the similar passage in ch. 45.5-7, the climax to the whole. Even where no man could imagine it, God had all the strings in his hand. But this guidance of God is only asserted; nothing more explicit is said about the way in which God incorporated man’s evil into his saving activity.”²⁰⁹

“The idea that God overrules the plans of the wicked to achieve His own purposes of good is of course an assumption pervades Scriptures (Prov. 16:9; 19:21). Indeed, it seems to suggest that, through the suffering of the righteous Joseph at the hands of his wicked brothers, life was brought to the world... This principle of salvation finds its clearest expression and

²⁰⁸ Thomas L. Constable. *Notes on Genesis*, p. 252.

²⁰⁹ Gerhard von Rad. *Genesis*, p. 432.

ultimate fulfillment in the life, death, resurrection, and exaltation of our lord (Mark 10:45).”²¹⁰

The amazing thing about Joseph is that he had truly put himself under the sovereignty and providence of Yahweh. No matter how badly he was treated or what was done to him, he believed strongly in the promises of Yahweh (Gen. 12:1-3) and that Yahweh could bring about His will through any circumstances.

“Abraham had two sons but they did not get on together. Isaac had two sons, but they parted forever. Not until Jacob’s twelve sons was the future firmly established. But precisely because they were a large number was there a danger of disunity and division. In the event there was dissension among them, so that they hated and persecuted the best of them. But eventually there was a complete reconciliation, not through the arbitration of a third party, but through the inner transformation of those who hated, for which the sufferer had waited and now in brotherly love acknowledges.”²¹¹

“The story of Joseph illustrates patient faith and its reward. It ends the book of Genesis and brings its theme to a literary climax... But the story of Joseph shows us that the road to victory, dominion, mastery, and judicial authority, is through service, the humble service of a slave. Through service and suffering, God purges and destroys indwelling sin in the believer (not completely, but sufficiently), builds character in him, and fits him for the mastery of the world.”²¹²

50:22-26 Yahweh blessed Joseph with long life, just as He had Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob before him. He even got to see his children to the third generation, which is a mark of Yahweh’s favor (Job 42:16). As with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at their deaths, Joseph’s last concern is the fulfillment of the Abrahamic promises (Gen. 24:1-7; 28:1-4; 47:29-31). And just as his forefathers had, Joseph desires to be buried in the Promised Land as well. So he makes his brothers promise that they will take his bones to the land of Canaan when Yahweh brings them out of Egypt into the Promised Land. (Gen. 15:13-16; Ex. 13:19).

Yet despite the promises of Yahweh and all the amazing ways that He has provided for and blessed the family of Abraham, the book ends on a depressing and untimely unfulfilling note with the death of Joseph and his body being placed in a coffin outside the land of promise. Though Joseph has risen to power, it has been in Egypt rather than Canaan, and the twelve brothers have not become their own great nation and a blessing to the world (Gen. 12:1-3). The promises of Yahweh are yet to be fulfilled, and so the reader waits to see how this family is brought out of Egypt and into the Promised Land.

“But whereas Genesis goes on to tell of the faithful execution of the wills of Abraham and Jacob, here we simply read that ‘they embalmed him and he was put in a coffin in Egypt,’ the only coffin mentioned in the OT. The story is thus complete and incomplete. The next installment must await the rise of a king who did not know Joseph (Exod. 1:8).”²¹³

²¹⁰ Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16—50*, p. 493.

²¹¹ Benno Jacob. *Das Erste Buch Der Tora Genesis*. p. 942.

²¹² James B. Jordan. “Rebellion, Tyranny, and Dominion in the Book of Genesis.” *Christianity and Civilization* 3 (Summer 1983), pp. 67-68.

²¹³ Gordon J. Wenham. *Genesis 16—50*, p. 491.

“The Book of Genesis, like the Old Testament in microcosm, ends by pointing beyond its own story... Joseph’s dying words epitomized the hope in which the Old Testament, and indeed the New (cf. Rev. 22:20), would fall into expectant silence: *God will surely visit you.*”²¹⁴

“The story of Joseph illustrates patient faith and its reward. It ends the book of Genesis and brings its theme to a literary climax... But the story of Joseph shows us that the road to victory, dominion, mastery, and judicial authority, is through service, the humble service of a slave. Through service and suffering, God purges and destroys indwelling sin in the believer (not completely, but sufficiently), builds character in him, and fits him for the mastery of the world.”²¹⁵

²¹⁴ Derek Kidner. *Genesis*, p. 224.

²¹⁵ James B. Jordan. “Rebellion, Tyranny, and Dominion in the Book of Genesis.” *Christianity and Civilization* 3 (Summer 1983), pp. 67-68.

Conclusion

The narrator begins Genesis with the proclamation and demonstration of the ultimate sovereignty of Yahweh as creator and king of all things in the universe. Unlike the pagan gods, He is completely transcendent and all powerful over His creation. As the author of the sky, land, and humanity, He has absolute authority over them and to do what He wills with them. Likewise, Yahweh demonstrates His sovereignty by subduing the chaos, forming and filling His creation with order, function, and meaning. Thus, Yahweh can declare all things in His creation good, unlike the pagan gods' accounts.

Yet the focus of the creation account is not on creation but on the formation of humanity out of the land. It is to humanity that Yahweh gives the unique gift of being made in His image and the authority to rule and subdue the creation in His name (i.e., in His character, according to His likeness). Though transcendent, Yahweh chooses, out of His love and desire to have a relationship with humanity, to create a garden tabernacle in His creation in order to enter creation and dwell with humanity. It is into that garden tabernacle He places humanity, where they will be His priests in a covenant relationship. He then gives them the command to be fruitful and multiply, to expand the garden—to fill the earth with His image and character—and to rule and subdue in His name, which would be their act of worship (work and till). These commands and blessings become the basis for everything that is developed throughout the rest of the book of Genesis, the Torah, and the Bible. Yahweh is a relational God who enters a covenant relationship with humanity in order to bless them—this is the essence of His character. Even when humanity violates their covenant with Him, He will pursue them endlessly in their rebellion in a desire to bless them and redeem them.

However, humanity chooses to become autonomous from Yahweh by seeking their own will and determining right and wrong for themselves. The result of their rebellion against the Author of the good creation is that sin, corruption, and chaos enter His creation. Now their relationship with Yahweh, each other, and creation become broken. Death and emptiness are brought into creation, and humanity is separated from Yahweh, the garden tabernacle, and the tree of life. There is no more shalom. In Genesis 3-11, the narrator develops humanity's dark heart and constant desire in their autonomy to rebel against Yahweh. Thus, they bring more and more chaos and death into His creation. As a result, Yahweh must bring judgment on their actions to maintain His creation and righteous will. Ultimately, he confuses their language and scatters humanity so that they cannot unite in their rebellion. Even after this, Yahweh continues to pursue them and show them grace as He restores and blesses them.

It is from this scattered people that Yahweh chooses Abraham, to make him into a great nation so that He can bless him and the whole world through him (Gen. 12:1-3). Yahweh reveals Himself to Abraham and teaches him what it means to be the image of Yahweh. Yahweh makes a covenant with Abraham that is not based on the obedience of humanity, like in the garden, but on His own character and His commitment to His people. Through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob's twelve sons, who would become the nation of Israel, Yahweh will restore the garden tabernacle that humanity once had with Yahweh as He blesses them with fruitfulness in their descendants and in their grain and flocks.

This family, however, is also saturated in the sin of the fall and must be redeemed from their autonomy as well. Even so, Yahweh will redeem them and use them to bless and redeem others despite their sin. In Genesis, this finds its culmination in Joseph's rise to power, which Yahweh

uses to save Jacob's family and the surrounding nations (Gen. 34:5-11; 50:20) and the formation of the tribes of Israel (Gen. 48-49).

“Behind all the events and human plans recounted in the story of Joseph lies the unchanging plan of God. It is the same plan introduced from the very beginning of the book where God looks out at what he has just created for man and sees that ‘it is good’ (*tob*, 1:4-31). Through his dealings with the patriarchs and Joseph, God had continued to bring about his good plan. He had remained faithful to his purposes, and it is the point of this narrative to show that his people can continue to trust him and to believe that ‘in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose’ (Rom 8:28).”²¹⁶

At the end of Genesis, Yahweh has proven Himself faithful to His chosen family, yet at the same time the promises of nationhood and land are still unfulfilled. Israel is in Egypt, not Canaan, and they are under the rule of the Egyptians rather than being rulers themselves. Likewise, sin is rooted deep in this family. And even though Yahweh has worked in their lives, changing hearts and bringing restoration, one wonders if this is enough to really restore humanity to the garden tabernacle. This is the tension between the sovereignty and faithfulness of Yahweh and the sinfulness and rebellion of humanity.

The conclusion of Genesis—with Jacob's family in Egypt—is the link to the beginning of Exodus, wherein their circumstances have grown worse, for now they are enslaved to the Egyptians and under a pharaoh who does not know Joseph or what he had done for Egypt (Ex. 1:8-11). Yet the author is quick to point out that they have also become a great multitude, just as Yahweh had promised them (Ex. 1:12). This sets the stage for Yahweh to perform His greatest act of deliverance to His chosen people in the history of the First Testament. This act of salvation (Gen. 15:13-16 Ex. 12-14), in addition to the Abrahamic Covenant, becomes the foundation to everything else that Yahweh will do for His chosen people, Israel, so that they can be a blessing to the entire world.

²¹⁶ John H. Sailhamer. “Genesis,” In *Genesis–Numbers*, p. 283.

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