

Genesis Bible Study – Session 1

“And God Said...” (Genesis 1:1 - 2:25)

The Bible’s opening verse is an unpretentious, matter-of-fact statement: “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.” (*Gen. 1:1*) “Genesis” (as per the title) is a book of origins and genealogies carefully written to show that universe and its inhabitants are not autogenerated, that is, self-made. Chapter ten v. 4 establishes a pattern of ten “generations” or genealogies which give structure to the Book of Genesis (*2:4-26; 5:1-8; 6:9-9:29; 10:1-11:9; 11:10-26; 11:27-25:11; 25:12-18; 25:19-35:29; ch. 36; 37:1-50:26*). The creation account of chapter 1 (*1:1-2:3*) forms “the substratum of the whole.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, pp. 36-37) All things find their origins in God.

“Instead of encountering a host of deities,” in marked contrast with other ancient cosmogonies, “the reader meets the one God.” (Hamilton, p. 24) This God in Hebrew is called *Elohim*. (Significantly, in the more narrowly focused chapter two, he is treated with the revealed name *Yahweh Elohim*, commonly translated “the Lord God”) (*2:4ff; cf. Exod. 3:14*). Superficial comparisons with pagan myths – along with theories that the Genesis account derives its material from them – flounder on several scores. The most studied example is the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, which boasts more differences than similarities. It opens with a *theogony*, something of a “family tree” of the gods, whereas the God of the Bible is not the product of primordial sexual pairing. He is already present “in the beginning”: “from everlasting to everlasting you are God.” (*Ps. 90:2*)

God required no pre-existing material. The verb *bara’*, “create”, takes none other than God as its subject throughout Scripture. Christian doctrine has always taught creation from nothing (*ex nihilo*), which contradicts any notions – both mythic and scientific – that the material universe has always existed. As a scientific concept, an eternally existing universe traces back to the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC); and modern evolutionary theories search for naturalistic causes in an infinite regression. Again, the *Enuma Elish* has great entertainment value in its description of a cosmic battle between Marduk and the serpentine sea-goddess Tiamat, whose defeated corpse the Babylonian god-king fileted like a fish as he fashioned the universe. Yet “one cannot miss the fact that the Scripture writer in this opening declaration is repudiating that very concept” (Hamilton, p. 32). The Biblical record is clear: the world has a definite beginning.

Whereas ancient man fashioned their gods after themselves, and modern man would prefer to believe that he is self-made (clinging to improbable evolutionary theories and existentialist philosophies), true religion is revealed. “Traditional scholars firmly hold to the doctrine of a speaking God, thus, they affirm that God had revealed the creation account to someone.” (Livingston, p. 150) *Elohim*, unrivalled and unimpeded, does all things according to his good pleasure. One can be certain God instructed Adam, the first man formed from the *’adamah* (“ground”) (*Gen. 2:7*), accurately as to the facts of his origin and the sense behind his purpose.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430) confessed that: “all that you made is good, and there are no substances that were not made by you.” (*Conf. VIII.12*) Augustine had converted from the Manichean heresy founded by the Persian mystic Mani (d. AD 277), part of a wider pseudo-Christian movement known as Gnostic Dualism. Dualists teach that the universe is governed by “good” and “evil” principles corresponding to spirit and matter. The Manicheans identified certain material substances as evil. The Apostles’ and Nicene Creeds repudiate these heresies by affirming God “the Father” to be the “maker of heaven and earth”. This means both spirit and matter (or, as Victor P. Hamilton explains, a “merismus, a means of expressing totality through antonyms, p. 33).

The disordered state of the cosmos after God's initial act of creation (Heck, p. 14) is described alliteratively as *tohu wabohu* ("empty and void"). The Spirit of God was "hovering over the face of the waters" (1:2) – the participial verb *rachaph* signifying life rather than an environmental gust. Thus both the second and third persons of the Holy Trinity are present and cooperative in the act of creation (*Ps. 104:30; John 1:1-3; Col. 1:16*). God sets to ordering the uninhabited void by separating (days 1-3) and inhabiting (days 4-6). Every act of creating the natural world begins with the verbal clause "and God said..." (*Gen. 1:3*) He creates through his word (*cf. 2 Cor. 4:6*)

Each phase is recorded as having taken course over six days: "there was evening and there was morning". "The burden of proof is on those who adopt another meaning [for day]"; "to take the word *day* to mean era or epoch does not help. It forces us into a difficulty in understanding how vegetation could precede the sun by thousands or millions of years." (Heck, p. 40) (Or, for that matter, how flying creatures could develop before land creatures.) Exodus 20:22 is but one outside reference to confirm that "in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them..." It should not confuse that God could allow the daily cycle of light and darkness to predate the sun – not least in light of the description of the heavenly city in Revelation: "they will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light" (*Rev. 22:5*). Naturally *Elohim* names and identifies his creatures while relating an account of his creative acts to man.

Water, air, and land animals are first given the blessing of procreation: "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters in the seas, and let birds multiply on the earth." (*Gen. 1:22*) Land animals are classified under "beasts", "livestock", and "creeping things" (*vv. 24-25*) – practically speaking, that is, dangerous creatures, domesticated animals, and pests. Such anthropocentric classifications anticipate the creation of man who is to "have dominion" over them all (*v. 28; cf. Ps. 8:6-8*). Within a Biblical worldview the concept of "dominion" entails care and not harmful exploitation.

There is complementary relationship between Genesis 1-2. "Most of the information in 2:4-25 is an amplification of 1:26-29. Chapter 1 is concerned with the world, while ch. 2 is concerned with a garden; one is cosmic, the other is localized..." (Hamilton, p. 23) Moses, the author of Genesis along with the first five books of the Bible (known collectively as the "Pentateuch"), employs the relational name *Yahweh Elohim* throughout ch two. Here the details surrounding man's creation are given alongside the geographical information relating to Eden. (*2:5-14*) Chapter two makes explicit the point that humans receive all legitimate marks of their identity from the creator.

In both man is created in the "image" and "likeness" of God (*Gen. 1:27*). Joel D. Heck interprets the *imago dei* as intelligent thought, advanced communication, "dominion over nature", and "the ability to be in a personal relationship with God" (Heck, p. 29). As shown by the etymological tie between *'ish* and *'isshah* ("male" and "female") (*v. 27; 2:23*), male-female polarity makes each a "helper corresponding to" the other (*v. 18*). This is true, Pope John Paul II taught, not only biologically but socially as well (*TOB 9:5*). Through marriage, instituted for the purposes of procreation (*1:28*) and exclusive companionship (*cf. Is 62:4; Mark 10:6-12*), man and woman exercise mutual interdependence on one another as well as on God (*cf. 1 Cor 11:11-12*). God's electing to create the first woman out of man's "flesh" (*Gen. 2:23*) illustrates this interdependence.

Indeed, "Humans are not only dependent on their Creator, but totally dependent." (Paulson, Vol. 1, p. 166) This notwithstanding that God "rested on the seventh day from all his work that he had done" (*Gen. 2:2*). Although God would not take up the act of creating anew for some time, he never stopped being intimately involved in the affairs of creation (the doctrine of *creatio continua*, or *providence*) (*cf. Ps. 103; John 5:17*). There are no independently running laws or processes.

Genesis Bible Study – Session 2

“Demonic Logic” (Genesis 3)

“The tree of life was in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil... And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, ‘You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.’” (*Gen. 2:9, 16-17*) These words – tucked in the middle of Genesis ch. 2 – are foreboding. They clarify the relationship(s) between Adam, Eve, and God as it was to differ from that to the rest of creation (*1:28*): “God is not a fish to them – he and his commands are not under their dominion – and humans actually need to be taught this” (Paulson, Vol. 2, p. 166).

However, mankind has never been lord over himself. Gerard O. Forde explains Bl. Dr. Luther’s Heidelberg Theses 14 and 15, which refer back to the narrative of Genesis chs. 1-3. “Even before the fall, Luther insists, free will had no capacity to remain in the state of innocence, but rather only in a passive capacity.” (Ibid., p. 56) Theology that seeks to establish free will – including Decision Theology, according to which people are saved through a “decision” or free choice in God’s favour – is disallowed by this narrative. If the first human pair using their supposedly “free will” seized upon the first opportunity to transgress God’s command (*3:11*), no better use of “free will” can be expected afterward. (*cf. Rom. 7:7-8*) (*AC II*) Marco Barone cites Augustine in this support: the “fact that the holy and righteous Adam fell is clear evidence that ‘free will is sufficient for evil, but is too little for good, unless it is aided by Omnipotent Good.’” (Barone, pp. 20-21)

Chapter three antagonizes one of the “beasts of the field” over which mankind was to “exercise dominion” (*Gen. 1:28*) which makes its own bid for control over humanity. “Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made.” (*Gen. 3:1*) The adjective ‘*arum*’ in other contexts is translated as “prudent” (*Prov. 12:16; 15:18; 19:25; cf. Matt. 10:16*). (There may also be a wordplay at work, seeing it is a homograph for the word for “naked”, which Adam and Eve discover themselves to be as the result of the serpent’s craftiness. [*Gen. 3:7*]) There is no blaming the serpent’s nature for this act, since everything God made was “very good” (*1:31*). Its ability to harm people – along with that of other creatures – resulted from the fall. That the serpent plainly contradicts God’s Word identifies it (albeit in some unknowable capacity) with Satan, who was “a liar and the father of lies” (*John 8:44*), the deceiver (*Rev. 20:10*).

Conjecture ultimately fails at ascertaining why Eve, and then Adam in his turn, succumbed to temptation. Plain is the fact that Adam failed as God’s “minister” appointed to be head over the woman (*1 Cor. 11:3*) and so “preach” his Word. The exclusion of women from the Office of the Ministry is owing to the order of creation pre-fall. St. Paul appeals to the history of the matter: “For Adam was formed first, then Eve...” (*1 Tim. 2:13-14*) (With the following verse [*v. 14*], though, the Apostle does not mean to deny Adam’s culpability! [*Rom. 5:12-14*]) As well, the curse pronounced upon Eve (*Gen. 3:16*) should not be translated as “your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you,” as though to ascribe a wicked origin to distinct gender roles and female submission in marriage (*Eph. 5:24, 33*); a more sensible translation reads “against (‘*eth*) your husband” (*cf. Gen. 4:7*). No patriarchal conspiracy is to blame for male-female conflict, but mutual disregard and subversion of ordained rôles. (The antidote is 1 Corinthians chs. 12-13.)

True, that is, revealed religion hinges not upon inward-focused searches for the divine (Enthusiasm) but, on the contrary, on outward boundaries demarcating creature from Creator as well as differing orders of creation from one another. Luther thus explains God’s prohibition: “the tree (of the

knowledge of good and evil) was ‘not deadly by nature; it was deadly because it was stated to be so by the word of God... Adam had need of this command concerning the tree... that there should be an outward form of worship and an outward work of obedience toward God.’” (Maxfield, p. 153) In his Confessional writings Luther further elucidates: “enthusiasm clings to Adam and his descendants from the beginning to the end of the world. It is a poison implanted and inoculated in man by the old dragon, and it is the source, strength, and power of all heresy... Accordingly, we should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through his external Word and Sacrament. Whatever is attributed to the Spirit apart from such Word and sacrament is of the devil.” (*SA III.VIII.9*) The fell after listening to his own inner voice (*Is. 14:12-14*), and now tempts mankind as a wrongful source of spiritual counsel. (*Gen. 3:13*).

The serpent begins his interface with the woman by sowing doubt, asking, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” (*3:2*) She will not be misled by a misquote (*v. 3; cf. Matt. 4:6*). Satan though, never capable of originality, proceeds along his historic pattern from conveniently spinning God’s Word to flatly contradicting it: “You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good from evil.” (*3:4-5*) The prospect of becoming one’s own god seems too good to pass on. All false religion is a bid for illusory freedom, ranging from the Bacchic festivals of the pagan world to Western expressive individualism. “For the knowledge of good and evil, which man obtains by going into evil, is as far removed from the true likeness of God... as the imaginary liberty of a sinner is from the true liberty of a life of fellowship with God.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 95)

Adam and Eve do not find themselves “empowered” by their decision; instead, “the body ceased to be the pure abode of a spirit fellowship with God” (*Ibid.*, p. 96). Their newfound shame arising from their nakedness (*Gen. 3:7, 10*) means from that point onward the “flesh” and “spirit” are opposing forces (*Gal. 5:17; Rom. 8:5, 12-13*). Without doubt this “spiritual” death was the fulfillment of the threat “the very day in which” the fruit was eaten (*Gen. 2:17; 3:3*). On the other hand, “physical” (temporal) death also became inevitable (*3:19; Rom. 6:12; 1 Cor. 15:21-22*).

The respective curses pronounced on each guilty party (*Gen. 3:14-19*) follow the inverted hierarchy which the serpent attempted to establish (beasts-woman-man). Scripture indicates “the form and movements of the serpent were altered, and... its present repulsive shape is the effect of the curse pronounced upon it, though we cannot form any accurate idea of its original appearance.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 99) In an ironic turn, the final curse pronounced indirectly upon Satan, the tempter (*Matt. 4:3*), reads as a blessing upon humanity. “Genesis 3:15 traditionally has been viewed by Christians as the first word of promise – in a prophetic sense – of deliverance from sin” (Hamilton, p. 44), that is, what is called the “first Gospel” (Greek *Protoeuangelion*). The image of human-serpentine combat recommends dynamic translations of the single verb *shaphak*: “He will crush (*y^eshuphka*) your head, and you will strike (*t^eshuphkennu*) his heel.” (*Gen. 3:15 NIV*)

God in his Triune counsel (“one of us”) sends Adam and Eve away, not to greener pastures (*3:23-24*). Yet: “The expulsion from paradise, therefore, was a punishment inflicted for man’s good, intended, while exposing him to temporal death, to preserve him from eternal death.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 107) He takes the opportunity to demonstrate the manner in which their guilt would be atoned for: the word “skins” is used to emphasize the fact that animals were put to death to clothe mankind (*v. 21*). The reader finally encounters the cherubim already at work imposing its frightful presence “every which way” (*v. 24; cf. Ezek. 17-21*) to bar mankind from contact with God. (Somewhat fittingly, ch. 3 with its theme of inversion had begun with a beast!)

Genesis Bible Study – Session 3

“A Tale of Two Cities” (Genesis 4:1 - 6:8)

Genesis chs. 1 to 2 were dominated with direct actions of God; in the opening verse of ch. 4, man and woman are the agents of the verbs. “Now Adam knew (*yada* ‘) Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain” (*Gen. 4:1*). The end product of these actions turns out to be anything but “very good” (*1:31*). Pace Hamilton (pp. 57-58), who seeks “dual emphases” on both law and grace (i.e. Gospel) in both chs. 3 and 4, the dour themes of wickedness and separation stand at the fore.

In what will become a well-established pattern in Genesis, the name of Eve’s first child comes out of a wordplay: “I have gotten (*qaniti*) a man with the help of the Lord.” (*Gen. 4:1*) The name “Cain” comes from the verbal root *qanah*, “to get” or “possess”; its noun form indicates “possession”. Thus, from the time of his birth, Cain believed himself to be God’s gift to man. Following this vein, the etymology behind Abel’s name also bears explaining: “Abel” is a homograph for the Hebrew noun *hevel*, famously translated as “mere breath” or (as an abstract concept) “vanity” (*Eccl. 2:11, 15; 3:19; 4:4; 6:7-9; Is. 49:4*). The disparity between the two brothers is carried out in their respective vocations: Cain inherits his father’s career as a “man of the ground” (*Gen. 4:2*) while Abel accepts the humbler position of a keeper of livestock. Yet, in what will become a well-set pattern in the divine reckoning, the younger son is favoured (*25:23; 48:17-19*).

This pattern provokes a response of envy, jealousy, rivalry, and persecution. Augustine of Hippo characterizes all human history as a tale of two cities, as it were: “The first founder of the earthly city was, as we have seen, a fratricide; for, overcome by envy, he slew his own brother, a citizen of the Eternal City, on pilgrimage in this world.” (*Civ. Dei. XV.5*) The point of divergence begins fittingly with the First Commandment touching worship of the true God. Both bring an offering (perhaps simultaneously on respective altars). “And the Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard.” (*Gen. 4:4-5*) The difference of offerings – livestock versus produce – does not explain Abel’s acceptance and Cain’s rejection, as both are legitimate offerings: “Even the Hebrew word for Cain’s ‘offering’ is the same as for the ‘cereal offering’ of Leviticus 2.” (Hamilton, p. 58) The author of Hebrews explains that Abel’s offering was made “by faith” to illustrate that “without faith it is impossible to please God.” (*Heb. 11:4-6*) Augustine once more weighs in: Cain “gave to God something belonging to him, but gave himself to himself. This is what is done by all those who follow their own will, and not the will of God; that is, those who live with a perverted instead of upright heart, and yet offer a gift to God.” (*Civ. Dei. XV.7*)

The Lord rejecting Cain’s offering displays the vanity behind his worship; he reprimands the elder brother with these rhetorical questions: “Why has your face fallen? If you do well, should you not smile?” (*Gen. 4:6-7*) He then employs a warning using similar words with which he earlier diagnosed the strained relationship between husband and wife (*3:16*) – that is, sin having its desire “against (‘*eth*) you, but you must rule over it.” (*4:7*) The sequel furnishes proof positive that Cain is not equal to the task. Original sin, already given exercise by the rebuff to his pride, is now ready for work. The “evil desire” is Cain’s own and produces death when yielded to (*cf. Jas. 1:13-14*). Moses frames Cain’s murderous crime in unrelenting fashion as he twice identifies Abel as “his brother” (*Gen. 4:8*). The method of killing is not known, though it must have used primitive if any outward instruments. Like Adam and Eve before him, Cain is given an opportunity to confess his guilt (*3:9-13; 4:8*); different from them, Cain, rather than shifting the blame, feigns total ignorance. The evidence is brought to bear on the case in poetic fashion: “The voice of your brother’s blood

(*dami*) is crying to me from the ground ('*adamah*')” (v. 10; cf. *Heb. 12:24*). (In singular construct form “blood” indicates the literal evidence (the plural *damim* is used for the abstract “bloodshed”). “Because the earth has been compelled to drink innocent blood, it rebels against the murderer, and when he tills it, withdraws its strength, so that the soil yields no produce; just as the land of Canaan is said to have spued out the Canaanites, on account of their abominations” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 114) (*Lev. 18:28*). In addition to life as a “fugitive”, the murderous Cain fears being killed in turn by the first person he meets on the road— however, God here first forbids retaliation (*Gen. 4:14; 9:5-6; Deut. 32:35; Rom. 12:19-21*), in this case by providing Cain with some “mark” of protection.

Contrary to what one might expect, the first genealogy that follows introduces the descendants of Cain. The wives of these earlier patriarchs proceeded from the union of Adam and Eve for, in addition to their known sons, it is stated that they “had other sons and daughters” (*Gen. 5:1-4*). Verses 17-25 of ch. 4 chronicle the founding of the first city. “The powerful development of the worldly mind and of ungodliness of the Cainites was openly displayed in Lamech, in the sixth generation.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 117) Lamech adds sin to sin: murder, bigamy, and at the root of all the sin of pride, displayed in a poetic flourish celebrating his crime (*4:23-24*). Other major cultural and technological triumphs such as music and smeltery are credited to the descendants of Cain. Only names adorn the genealogy of Seth, who (as it were) replaces Abel.

Thus one group boasts whatever glory and achievements it may, using these as proof of its superiority and rights of persecution over the other (triumphalism). Martin Luther appropriated Augustine’s tale of two cities – although now under nomenclature of rival “churches”: “the professor noted that the text bears ‘the essence of our teaching’ and ‘has to do with our conviction concerning justification.’ The true church ‘walks in this trust in God’s mercy while the other church not only does not have this faith but also persecutes it, maintaining that ‘it will please God because of its works.’ Like Cain, the hypocritical church grows angry when reproved” (Maxfield, p. 161)

The obscure narrative of 6:1-4 has excited much curiosity. Traditional interpretation of the passage identifies the “sons of God” with the Sethites, considered more “godly” than their counterparts, the Cainites. The much-overlooked theory that “sons of god” refers to dynastic rulers, and the “daughters of men” as lower-class women collected harem-style, has much to commend it – not least the scattered Old Testament passages which apply divine titles to earthly kings (*Ps. 82:6; cf. 2 Sam. 7:14*). “Still interpreting the [*beni-ha’elohim*] as kings, it is also possible to regard that designation not as a direct appropriation from the pagan titulary but as a genuinely theistic expression honoring these potentates in their office as the ‘sons of God’.” (Kline, p. 193) (*cf. Rom. 13:6*) An apocalyptic teaching which interprets the “sons of God” as angels (*cf. Job 38:7*) interbreeding with human women has Jesus’ word against it, that angels do not marry (*Luke 20:36*). The intertestamental Book of Enoch, which drew much fantastical inspiration from the idea of angelic intercourse and reproduction, is not an authoritative source. Whatever the actual case, Hamilton acknowledges: “The sin is not sexual violation, but the establishment of an illicit marital relationship in which the two partners cannot possibly become one flesh.” (Hamilton, p. 63)

The offspring of these illicit intermarriages “are called Nephilim ‘because of their tyranny and oppression.’” (Maxfield, p. 164) Indeed, the name derives from the verb *naphal*, “to fall”, or in a different verbal form “cause to fall”. The Lord goes so far as to express regret at having created man, and resolves to wipe out not only him but all creatures; this destruction is to come after a period of 120 years (*Gen. 6:3, 6-7*). Through all of chs. 1-6, only a certain Noah is introduced as having “found favor (*chen*, translated elsewhere as “grace”) in the eyes of the Lord” (v. 8).

Genesis Bible Study – Session 4

“The Deluge” (Genesis 6:9 - 9:17)

Noah was first introduced under the genealogy of Adam (*Gen. 5:28-32*) which follows the line of descent through the latter’s third son, Seth. As Adam’s aggrieved wife, Eve, observed: “God has appointed (*shath*) for me another offspring instead of Abel, for Cain killed him.” (*4:25*) Noah’s name is also prophetic, being derived from the Hebrew *nucha*, “rest” or “relief”, as per his father’s words: “this one shall bring us relief”. The beginning of Noah’s career is marked with a repetition of the formulaic introduction: “These are the generations...” (*6:9*); after this narrative pause Moses resets the stage: “Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold, it was –” no longer “very good,” as it had been at creation, but “corrupt, for all flesh had corrupted their way on the earth.” (*vv. 11-12; cf. 1:31*) God discloses his destructive resolve (*6:7-8*) to Noah along with a specific action plan.

The flood (or Deluge) is the final culmination in the cycle of apostasy and judgment which began with ch. 3: “a judgment of such universality and violence as will only be seen again in the judgment at the end of the world; and, on the other hand, an act of mercy which made the flood itself a flood of grace, and in that respect a type of baptism” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 141). (*1 Pet. 3:21; cf. Gen. 9:11; Matt. 24:36-44; 2 Pet. 3:5-7*) Meredith G. Kline’s thesis (that the obscure narrative opening *Gen. 6* deals with a Cainite aristocracy which, in the Deluge, met its final reckoning) gains traction: “At the flood, which terminated the first great historical epoch, the royal mandate may be seen fulfilled after a figure ... the marriage ordinance was desecrated and the extension of dominion was sought by violence rather than through godly labor. But though they exalted themselves against the heavenly King, their breath was in their nostrils and their regal aspirations to divinity perished in the same waters of divine vengeance which bore the righteous king” (Noah) “into his new world”. (Kline, 200) This view jettisons the idea that the Deluge was intended to exterminate an inferior breed of humanity – to the contrary, it is the best and noblest in man’s nature that, apart from divine grace (*chen*), merits only judgment (*Gen. 6:3; Ps. 103:15-16; Rom. 3:12*).

The earth would endure without its ruling caste descended from the first murderer (*Gen. 4*). Taking their place will be Noah’s three sons – Shem, Ham, and Japeth (*6:10*). They are named after an accounting of Noah’s righteousness, himself further described as *tamim*, “blameless,” literally “perfect” or “spotless” (*Job 36:4; cf. Jas. 3:2*). (However, the Church Father Jerome [d. AD 420] would point out in rebuttal of the heretic Pelagius that Noah was not without sin [*Gen. 9:21-22*].) The reader notices that Noah has already been accounted righteous in a fashion similar to Abram (*15:6; Rom. 4:9*). Righteous Noah performs God’s will (*Gen. 7:5*) without question or complaint.

God’s resolve to “make an end of all flesh” does not entail obliterating his own created order; far from it, the world following the flood will continue in the laws of reproduction and seasonal succession which have been established in the beginning (*1:11-13, 15-16; 8:22*). By “two of every species” the text indicates (as though it were necessary to do so) a male-female pair (*6:19*). To this general instruction is later added the specification that Noah is to take “seven pairs of clean animals... and seven pairs of the birds of the heavens also” (*7:2-3*). As to the monumental task of constructing the ark: the intricate measurements (*6:14-16*) give evidence that this is no fairy-tale. The feasibility of the ark’s design has been proven by sound scientific calculation and research. Lawyer John W. Montgomery in *The Quest for Noah’s Ark* observes: “Some may feel that the Ark was too large for early man to have attempted. A survey of the ancient world shows in fact the very

reverse” – simply behold the Great Pyramids! (Montgomery, p. 53) Literary research also as stories of a universal deluge can be found in every ancient culture – from China in its eastern boundary, stretching North and West respectively in Norse and American Indigenous folklore, to say nothing of the monumental Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Honest readers of Scripture have little trouble deducing, from among the other possibilities, that “both the biblical and Mesopotamian literature hark back to events that were common knowledge in the ancient world, and each developed its own literary account and interpretation of these events. The biblical account, however, preserved the true interpretation of the events” (Livingston, p. 147). Only *a priori* commitment to incompatible views of human origins (i.e. Evolutionism) fosters doubt over the historicity of Noah’s Ark. (In a friendly debate, this pastor once had his opponent concede the point!)

The total time from Noah’s entry into the ark (7:6) to his disembarkment brings him into his six-hundred-first year of life (8:13). The description of the ark floating “on the face of the waters” (7:18) with no land in view may be a callback to the uninhabitable primal state of the earth (1:2). The floodwaters having “prevailed and increased greatly” (7:18) parodies humanity’s original mandate to “be fruitful and multiply” (1:28). The latter verb *ravav*, “increase” or “multiply”, in description of the deluge is paired with an impersonal verb “prevail”, forming a striking contrast with the organic *para*, “be fruitful”, taken from the context of creation.

Yet, even after this total destruction, God’s order ultimately prevails. After more than a century of preparation Noah, his three sons, and their respective wives endure the flood (making a total of eight, a number which will receive great theological import; cf. *Gen. 17:12; John 20:16; 1 Pet. 3:20*). From these three families the various human “races” trace their origins (*Gen. 10-11*). Sexual reproduction within the bonds of monogamy remains the express norm (1:24; *Mark 10:6-9*) by which humanity is to be preserved in perpetuity. The words “God remembered Noah” (8:1) usher in a new era of promise, as Moses will later and often catalogue God’s act of “remembering” (cf. *19:29; 30:32; 42:9; Exod. 2:24; 6:5; Num. 10:9*) in terms of much-needed help and effective relief. After a period of 150 days (including 40 days of continuous rain), the waters abate; but Noah, enclosed within the ark, could not have seen with his own eyes the tops of the mountains (*Gen. 8:4-5*). Prompted by what may be a mixture of ingenuity and divine inspiration he sends birds on a “scouting” mission. Meanwhile, God is described as having sent a “wind” against the waters (in a manner similar to the parting of the Red Sea [*Exod. 14:21*]). The dove which returned carrying an olive branch (*Gen. 8:11*) to herald the end of God’s watery vengeance on the earth has captured the minds of artists as a symbol of peace.

The ark came to rest on Mount Ararat (v. 4), the site in modern-day Turkey where its remains have been repeatedly confirmed by science as well as historic witness, a place strictly hallowed by the Muslim national government. Noah first consecrated the site by offering a sacrifice (doubtless one of the purposes behind taking seven of each “clean” animal [7:2]). The “pleasing aroma” (8:21) indicates the Lord’s acceptance, and what follows is more speech from him. “What God has once said to Adam... he now says to Noah” (Hamilton, p. 69). He reestablishes man’s dominion over “every beast of the field,” etc.; reinstates the command to “be fruitful and multiply”; repeats the forbidding of private taking of human life (in a memorable chiasmic poem); and, in new order, establishes a “covenant” that “never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood” (9:1-12). Also part and parcel with a covenant is a visible sign: in this case the rainbow, a natural phenomenon tied to rainfall, takes on supernatural significance (vv. 12-17). The rainbow is in place “for God’s benefit” (Hamilton, p. 69), who will no longer be provoked by human sin to global destruction – not until the appointed end of this present creation (8:22; *2 Pet. 3:8-10*).

Genesis Bible Study – Session 5

“More Babelling” (9:18 - 11:26)

“Far from being a hair-raising but irrelevant story sung around campfires in generations to come, the deluge story relates profoundly to successive generations.” (Hamilton, p. 68) The middle of ch. 9 marks off a new phase in the narrative of Genesis, however, with its own spin on the genealogical formula: “These three were the sons of Noah, and from these the people of the whole earth were dispersed.” (*Gen. 9:18-19*) Chapter ten has been properly called the “Table of Nations”. Note the tally reaches 70 in total. In contrast with the names of the pre-Flood patriarchs (for which no symbolic meaning is to be found), those belonging to the post-Flood world give their names to identifiable lands and people-groups (e.g. Cush, Egypt, Canaan, Ophir, Eber – “Hebrew”). This fact is just one more definitive answer to scholars who “think that the Book of Genesis contains only legendary material. Those who are familiar with legends, however, will have difficulty seeing the characteristics of legends on the pages of Genesis. Genesis reads like the historical narrative that it is. It gives specific names, places, events, and ages ... It gives the table of nations in chapter ten, which corresponds well with the territories that different people inhabited.” (Heck, p. 33)

Paul, in his speech at the Aeropagus, alludes to the divine sanction for the “allotted periods and the boundaries” (borders) (*Acts 17:26-27*) assigned to each nation. The existence of individual nations and patrimonies is a gift from God protected by the Ninth Commandment (*Exod. 20:17*) – however these may change and alter over the course of history due to such factors as immigration, intermarriage, and international diplomacy (or, more commonly, failures thereof). Moreover, “The unity of language of the whole human race follows from the unity of its descent from one human pair” (Keil-Deilitsch, p. 172) Common descent from Adam and Eve (*Gen. 5:1ff*) instills an equal dignity in every member of the human race. Evolutionary theories of human descent are rooted in and inescapably push forward an opposing anthropology, namely, racism. Charles Darwin’s racism (already evident from the full title of his opus *The Origin of the Species*) deserves more academic attention: “After Darwin ‘proved’ that all humans descended from apes, it was natural to conclude that some races had descended further than others.” (Ham/Ware, p. 22)

Each genealogy from each of Noah’s three sons, together with their unnamed wives, concludes with a similar formula: “These are the sons of... by their clans, their languages, their lands, and their nations.” (*10:5, 20, 31*) This dispersal, with particular attention to language differences, is accounted for in the Tower of Babel incident recorded in detail later (*11:1-9*). There is no continuity error: “we may have the same here” (as in chs. 1 and 2) “a general account of the origins of languages... followed immediately by a more specific account of the origins of that phenomenon.” (Hamilton, p. 77) Chapter eleven opens so: “Now the whole earth had one language and the same words.” (*v. 1*) The name “Babel” may be an ancient precedent for Babylon, an empire founded in that same vicinity (as attested by the Greek Herodotus’ *History*). More likely, in yet another play on words, the tower may be named for the Hebrew term *balal* (“confusion”); and hence the origin of the English “babble” for speech devoid of meaning. The Triune God sees fit to thwart this first attempt at global empire-building to keep utopian nightmares in check: “nothing that they propose to do will be impossible for them.” (*11:6-7*) As with the founding of separate nations (families), the confusion of “tongues” (Greek *glossa*) does not indicate that the global diversity of language and expression is itself an evil. Rather, “God deprived them of the ability to comprehend one another ... The differences, to which this event gave rise, consisted not merely in variations of sound... but had a much deeper foundation in the human mind.” (Keil-Deilitsch, p. 174)

At this point it bears to explain the meaning behind the names of Noah's sons. Like Noah's, at least one of them assumes a prophetic function. *Shem* means "name", in the abstracted sense "fame" or "reputation". Japeth is thus explicitly connected with the adjective *yapeh*, which in verbal form carries the concrete meaning of "falling out", "opening", or – to Noah's purposes in blessing him – "enlarging" (9:27). In other contexts the word is conceptualized as "beautiful" (*Eccl. 3:11*) Augustine (who, mind, is far from reliable in his etymological conclusions!) ties the name Ham to the Hebrew noun *cham*, meaning "heat". The African bishop explains in this wise: "Noah's middle son, separating himself, as it were, from both the others, and keeping his position between them... can only stand for the hot breed of heretics. They are hot, because they are on fire... with the spirit of impatience; for that is characteristic fervour in the hearts of heretics." (*Civ. Dei. XVI 2*) Luther treats the legacy of Ham in corresponding terms: "from Ham, as a source of ungodliness and wickedness, the false and lying church takes its origin." (Maxfield, p. 168)

How did Ham bring about this state of affairs for himself, his brothers, and their posterity? The maxim holds true that history repeats asserts itself. Moses carefully preserves the statement that "Noah began to be a man of the soil ('*ish ha'adamah*)" after the order of Adam and Cain (4:2). Also in close imitation of them, Noah makes bad of the new beginning very quickly. "He drank of the wine and became drunk and lay uncovered in his tent." (9:21) Ham disrespectfully reports his father's indiscretion to Shem and Japeth (v. 22), thus falling short of the demands of filial love. Such a crime deserves grave punishment (*cf. Prov. 30:17*). "The brothers, on the contrary, with reverential modesty covered their father with a garment... and thus manifesting their childlike reverence as truly as their refined purity and modesty." (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 156). Noah eventually comes to and realizes he has been disgraced. Then, acting in the stead of God, and for the first time, the reader sees a minister pronounce a curse and blessings. Ham is cursed in the person of his son Canaan: progenitor of the Phoenicians who occupied the Promised Land before the Exodus. "The Canaanites were partly exterminated, and partly subjugated to the lowest form of slavery, by the Israelites, who belonged to the family of Shem" (*Ibid.*, p. 158) (*cf. 1 Ki. 9:20-21*).

There are clear parallels between the antediluvian and postdiluvian worlds, as the same two groups emerge in conflict. "Luther saw Ham's motive in moving east to build a tower at Babel expressed in the words of Genesis 11:4, 'Come, let us build for ourselves a city and a tower' ... The city and tower were not being built for God or the church of God but to 'suppress the church.' The tower was to be a place of worship, for Satan's way is to adorn himself with the tile of God and 'have superstition regarded as religion' ... 'Thus, here in the midst of Babylon, [Ham] makes himself a kind of god and sets up a church for himself'" (Maxfield, pp. 168-169). The character of Nimrod gains notoriety for Ham's line (10:9) in similar fashion to Cain's descendant Lamech (4:23-24). Shem, by way of contrast, bears the "name" he has been given. It is his line that produces Abram (v. 26), with whose humble yet faithful exploits the bulk of Genesis will occupy itself.

Counterfeit religion always identifies itself by godless ambition. Steven D. Paulson refers to the Tower of Babel incident in the Outlaw God podcast, episode titled "God in the Belly of the Virgin": "It is not you going up that is going to matter, it is God coming down. And, in point of fact, if you look at Scripture, the number of times where God is coming down in Scripture is always the crucial thing. Genesis 11 talks about the Tower of Babel. Humans are trying to build this tower that moves up into heaven – this is, transcend – but God actually comes down; and when he comes down, he sees this, and it really makes him mad. He does not want humans to transcend to him – it's quite the opposite." Most insidious is mystical "theology" with its esoteric babbling, which seeks God "naked" as opposed to God "clothed" in his Word. (Cf. Kauffman, s.v. "Mysticism")

Genesis Bible Study – Session 6

“The Exaltation of the Father” (11:27 – 12:20)

One notices from the record of Shem’s descendants a decrease in lifespan. Shem, the eldest son of Noah, attains to the age of 600 – five centuries after the Flood (*Gen. 11:10-11*), while Terah eight generations later perishes at the age of 205. His death while sojourning in the land of Haran the first incident recorded in the lengthy narrative concerning his son, Abram (*vv. 31-32*). A single chain of reality connects the antediluvian and postdiluvian patriarchs, both of whom decrease in life expectancy after original sin first corrupted humanity (*chs. 3-4; Rom. 5:12-17*). Adam is said to have “fathered a son in his likeness” (*Gen. 5:3*) intentionally contrasted with the “image” and “likeness” of God in which Adam and Eve were initially created (*1:26-27*). Ever increasing moral degeneracy prompts the Lord to declare (in words that can be taken variously), “My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh” (*6:3*). Yet there is nothing ambiguous about the diagnoses of “original sin”: “every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” and “the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth.” (*v. 5; 8:21; cf. 1 Cor. 2:14*)

Abram’s family originates in “Ur of the Chaldeans” (*Gen. 11:28, 31; Acts 7:2-4*) – “Chaldeans” (*Kasdim*) being the ethnic ancestors of the Babylonians, this is consistently the Biblical term by which they are identified (*1 Ki. 24:5, 10; Neh. 9:7; Is. 23:13; Jer. 37:10; Ezek. 23:23*). The opening scene is set in ancient Mesopotamia. Abram’s span of life can be dated to the Middle Bronze Age, ca. 2220-1500 BC (cf. Livingstone, pp. 17-18). The record is clear that Terah and his family were idolaters who “served other gods” (*Josh. 24:2*); the true, original monotheism practiced since Adam had been abandoned at some unknown point in all of the three lines of descent from Noah, even that of Shem. New Testament figures, particularly Stephen the first martyr in his speech before the Sanhedrin, make use of the fact. Abram’s fame and blessing are due neither to accumulated merits nor to family distinction, but rather owe all to a unilateral divine choice (election) (*Gen. 12:1-3; cf. Deut. 7:7; 26:5*). Moreover, “with the choice of Abram the revelation of God to man assumed a select character, inasmuch as God manifested Himself henceforth to Abram and his posterity alone as the author of salvation and the guide to true life; while the other nations were left to follow their own course according to the powers conferred upon them, in order that they might learn that in their way, and without fellowship with the living God, it was impossible to find peace to the soul, and true blessedness of life” (*cf. Acts 26:27*).

Ever since the so-called *Protoeuangelion* (“initial Gospel”) had been pronounced, that the “seed” of Eve would crush the serpent’s “head” (*Gen. 3:15*), “[a]ttentive readers will have been wondering who this serpent crusher will be”. Christopher J. H. Wright narrows the search in ch. 12, from whose opening verses “we know it will be the one of the seed of Abraham. A son of Abraham will be a blessing for the sons of Adam.” (Wright, p. 213) God’s chosen vessel at this stage in history is Abraham – that is, Abram, whose given name (a compound of *’av rum*) means “exalted father”. He is not the last person whose naming expressed high hopes on the part of the parents. However, Abram and his wife Sarai (“princess”) are later characterized as “childless” (*15:2*). Yet God can move mountains, and once again he exercises blessing through the natural family bond (*cf. 1:28; 1 Tim. 2:15*). “Here... however, we have the launch of God’s redemptive mission. The word blessing links it with the creation narratives that precede it. The work of redemptive and restorative blessing will take place within and for the created order, not in some other heavenly or mythological realm beyond it or to which we can escape. It is creation that is broken by human sin, so it is creation and humanity together that God intends to mend.” (Ibid., p. 212)

Abram receives his first “call” in Haran; in increasing terms he is called to leave “your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.” (*Gen. 12:1-3*) Synonymous terms are piled up in three to emphasize the sacrifice to be made. Though his family may abide in obscurity while others have been founding nations and empires, Abram’s departure is noteworthy: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going.” (*Heb. 11:8*)

Details about Abram’s family have been recorded. Haran predeceases both his father Terah and his brothers; his son Lot, Abram’s nephew, assumes his position within the family (*Gen. 11:27-28*). Abram and Nahor take their respective wives. The land – also called Haran – to which they emigrate, and in which place Terah takes his own leave of the world, may either have been ruled over by Nahor’s father-in-law (*Gen. 11:29-32; cf. Ps. 49:11*) or brother (if not the same person). All speculation aside, the location serves as a midpoint *en route* to the land of the Canaanites (*12:7*). “The reference to the temporary stop in Haran confirms our assumption that Abraham took the traditional route between these two locations by travelling up the Euphrates and then descending into Canaan from the north.” (Provain-Longman-Long, p. 168) As holds true with Adam and Eve, Noah, and his descendants, tied as the records of their lives are to real-world locations and events, Abram and his family are neither “murky figures from an ancient and undecipherable past” nor “parabolic characters... from which any generation may extract timeless truths to be applied to its age.” Contrariwise, Hamilton cites Geerhardus Vos: “If according to the Bible they [the patriarchs] are real actors in the drama of redemption, the actual beginning of the people of God... then the denial of their historicity makes them useless.” (Hamilton, p. 84)

Providentially, Abram departs with his nephew Lot and their retinue. Abram, aged seventy-five (*v. 4*), makes several stops. They first pass by a living landmark, the “oak of Mamre” at Shechem, then to further south in the direction of Bethel (*vv. 6, 8*). These locations frame the geographical centre of what would become the nation of Israel; these are strategic places for the Lord to reaffirm the promise: “To your offspring I will give this land.” (*v. 7*) “Each time Abraham sets up an altar, as if he is claiming the land for the Lord who sent him there.” (Provain-Longman-Long, p. 158) Beyond this political significance, Moses is likely concerned for the religious implication: trees and hills are not proper objects or locales for worship (*cf. Deut. 12:1-7*).

From the Negev Abram and his wife Sarai are forced by circumstance to “sojourn” in Egypt (*Gen. 12:10*) Not for the last time this ancient empire would, for good or for ill, serve as a refuge with its abundant stores of bread. But all this was to count little. “Whilst the famine in Canaan was to teach Abram, that even in the promised land food and clothing come from the Lord and His blessing, he was to discover in Egypt that earthly craft is soon put to shame when dealing with the possessor of the power of this world” (Keil-Deilitzch, p. 197). “Abram was not only to receive blessing, but to be a blessing; not only to be blessed by God, but to become a blessing, or the medium of blessing, to others.” Furthermore, as will quickly be demonstrated through Abram’s interrelations with world leaders such as Pharaoh (*vv. 10-20*), “the blessing and cursing of men were to depend entirely upon their attitude toward him” (*Ibid.*, p. 193). Pharaoh is brought to his knees when he dishonours Abram and his comely wife (*v. 12*), the latter of whom consents to sexual slavery in the interest of saving her husband’s skin. He tells the half-truth that Sarai was his half-sister (*20:12*). Deception would become a generational sin distinguishing Abram’s family; yet grace seems to abound (*cf. Exod. 20:6*). Pharaoh acknowledges that Abram’s indiscretion does not diminish his importance to Almighty God. He does not lay a hand on either (though by this point Sarai had suffered enough), allowing this stranger to leave a humbler if wealthier man.

Genesis Bible Study – Session 7

“This Means War” (Genesis 13 - 14)

Over the course of chs. 13-14 of Genesis, the second and third incidents in Abram’s career escalate from a minor squabble to a skirmish of epic proportions. Somehow, the humiliating defeat of the Elamite (Persian) king Chedorlaomer at the hands of a lackland ageing man and his 318 household retainers (*Gen. 14:14-16*) did not enter their history books. Amraphel, king of Shinar (*v. 1*), is not the famous Babylonian Hammurabi (d. 1750 BC) of the Hammurabi Code (cf. Livingstone, pp. 25-26). (There is just as little to suggest that Ramses II “The Great” [d. 1213 BC] was the Pharaoh of the Exodus [*Exod. 4-11*] despite enduring claims in popular culture and second-rate scholarship). “The war, which furnished Abram with an opportunity, while in the promised land of which as yet he could not really call a single rood his own... is circumstantially described, not so much in the interests of secular history as on account of its relation to the kingdom of God.” Among the nine lost city-states mentioned, first comes the king of Shinar, who boasts some connection with Ham’s tyrannical grandson Nimrod (*Gen. 10:6-10*). Tradition credits Nimrod with the failed Tower of Babel project of ch. 11. “We have here a prelude of the future assault of the worldly power upon the kingdom of God established in Canaan” (Keil-Deilitzsch, pp. 201-202).

The initial lines of conflict run between Abram’s retinue and those of Lot: “the land could support both of them dwelling together... and there was strife between the herdsmen of Abram’s livestock and the herdsmen of Lot’s livestock. At that time the Canaanites and the Perizzites were dwelling in the land.” (*13:6-7*) Hamilton deduces from this editorial note that: “Getting along with the family is more difficult than getting along with those outside the family.” (Hamilton, p. 93) The mere fact, however, is to be of much consequence for both Abram and Lot, who are and remain foreigners (*14:13*). One also bears in mind that “Abram returns to Canaan not because the famine is past, but because he has worn out his welcome in Egypt” (*Ibid.*). The living is hard!

God’s mandate for Abram to leave his “kindred” and “father’s house” (*12:1*) evidently did not extend to his nephew Lot, a fact Moses has taken pains to mention (*v. 5; cf. 11:27*). As the reader might expect, he holds some significance to the narrative. Lot has been the victim of some undue character assault by scholars (cf. Hamilton, p. 93), though the text of Genesis passes no harsh judgment. When given the ultimatum devised by his uncle Abram to either settle the land north or south of where they were (*13:8-9*), his preference for the choice yet heavily contested land in the Jordan Valley (*vv. 10-12*) was simply reasonable. The Septuagint (Greek) text of the Old Testament describes it as “paradise”. Low estimation of Lot’s character has been used as a convenient device to explain his desperate, if indiscreet, resort while under threat of the Sodomite mob (*19:4-8*). All this understood, the point is made that Lot did not know what he was bargaining for: “Now the men of Sodom were wicked, great sinners against the Lord.” (*13:13*) A contrast is set up with Abram’s lot, in which he “built an altar to the Lord” (*v. 18*). The exact location of his settlement, the grove of Mamre, was at the time of writing a known landmark near the Israelite city of Hebron.

Here the Lord confirms through another word to Abram his word that: “all the land you see I will give to you and to your offspring forever.” (*vv. 14-17*) In this promise there is no suggestion of chilialism (“millennialism”), which purports a thousand-year earthly rule of Jesus Christ in tandem with a Jewish reclamation of Israel. (*cf. Rev. 20:1-6*) For “this applied not to the lineal posterity of Abram, to his seed according to the flesh,” (*cf. Rom. 9:6-13; Gal. 3*) “but to the true spiritual seed, which embraced the promise in faith, and held it in a pure believing heart ... Through Christ the

promise has been exalted from its temporal form to its true essence” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 200). The Dispensationalist heresy brands itself as such for its claim to salvation outside of Christ. The utter necessity of communion with Christ has been properly extolled in the dictum of Cyprian of Carthage (d. AD 258): *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“outside the Church there is no salvation). Christ himself is the promised “offspring” or “seed” (*zara’* – note the singular) to whom the land is offered (*Gen. 12:7*); he in turn declares *ha’ ’erets*, now encompassing the whole earth, to the “meek” (*Matt. 5:5; cf. vv. 13-14*). To borrow Hamilton’s words, “These promises are absolute and not conditional. This emphasis shifts promises away from the idea of reward (something earned) to the idea of a gift (something unsolicited).” (Hamilton, p. 85)

A war ignites in the Dead Sea valley (or, the Salt Sea) some degrees south of where Abram settled. (*Gen. 14:1-6*) An alliance of four vassal kings rises against their liege, Chedorlaomer, king of Elam: a nation founded by one of Shem’s sons, a brother to Assur (Assyria) and Aram (*10:22*). Coming to the aid of Chedorlaomer are four strong monarchs; in the “fourteenth year” of his reign, perhaps already a year into the rebellion, he decides to quell it (*14:5*). “The army moved along the great military road from inner Asia, past Damascus, through Peraea,” a location which Franz Deilitzsch places “on this side of the Jordan among the Canaanitish tribes... some to the west of Jerusalem, in the valley which was called after them”; also in terms of geography, “Ham was possibly the ancient name of Rabba of the Ammonites” (*Deut. 3:11*) (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 203-204). The mention Amalekites and Amorites (*Gen. 14:7*) cements this as a conflict among Canaanites who were later tagged for extinction (*Josh. 24:8; 1 Sam. 15:3*). The uncommon stature of the Rephaim, suggested by their name derived their name from the Hebrew *raphah*, to “stretch” or “slacken”, finds confirmation in their last survivor: the giant-king Og of Bashan (*Josh. 12:4*).

Abram’s involvement in their affairs, however, is confined to righteous concern for his kinsman. He is in alliance with the Amorites and receives word from Mamre, the namesake of the land which he was occupying, that Lot has been captured (*Gen. 14:13-14*). This incident serves as a milestone in character development. “Abram could ignore Lot’s plight and regard it as his just punishment, thus playing it safe; or he could go to Lot’s rescue and risk possible heavy losses of valuable servants. Abram chose the later [sic.] course of action.” (Livingston, p. 249) Abram is singled out as “the Hebrew” (*Gen. 14:13*), a descendant of Eber (*10:24-25*) with Noah’s son Shem as his progenitor (*vv. 21-22*). Perhaps the reader has not left Shem behind; but the main exploits in this chapter are Abram’s. His minuscule army proves that the bigger they are, the harder they fall. He despoils the despotic Chedorlaomer, having “brought back all the possessions, and also brought back the kinsman Lot with his possessions, and the women and the people.” (*14:16*) Among the liberated captives is the king of Sodom; he tries (and fails) to ingratiate this wonder-worker Abram, who will be in no man’s debt save God the “Possessor of heaven and earth” (*vv. 21-23*).

This title, “Possessor (*qoneh*) of heaven and earth”, has been suggested by a mysterious figure: Melchizedek (*vv. 18-20*). The king of Salem (*Shalom*, “peace”) bears what may be the regnal name *Melchizedek*, which in any case stands for “king of righteousness”. Intertestamental Jewish and early Christian interpretation has identified Melchizedek as none other than Shem, who has acceded to the throne over a city which the same commentators identify with Jerusalem. A parenthetical comment shows Melchizedek to be a “priest of God Most High” (*’El ’Elyon*), an orthodox title clearly parallel to that of v. 20 (thus not a separate Canaanitish divinity). According to the author of Hebrews, he is mentioned in this context without regard to Shem’s (or any) given name, nor to kinship ties, to give a sense of literary eternity and universality, and thereby a likeness to Christ, who “continues a priest forever” after the “order of Melchizedek” (*Heb. 5:6-7; 7*).

Genesis Bible Study – Session 8

“Complications of Birth” (Genesis 15:1 - 18:21)

The Hebraic clause “after these things” (*'achar hadd^evarim*) is a commonly used construct in the Old Testament. Evidently it connects the following narrative with the preceding. Abram has just emerged from a skirmish with the head of a terrifying military alliance, King Chedorlaomer of Elam (*Gen. 14*). Perhaps in keeping with this theme the Lord appears to Abram, introducing himself with perhaps the first divine metaphor in all Scripture: “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” (*15:1*) Abram has up till this point complied in silence to the Lord’s demand (*12:1*) and quietly waited on his promises (*12:2-3, 7; 13:14-17*). Yet now he puts in a word of his own (though not without a reverent address): “O Lord God, what will you give me, for I walk childless (*holek 'ariri*) ...?” (*15:2*) “Abraham is both patient and impatient; once relaxing then fretting; once passive, then manipulative.” (Hamilton, p. 90)

The prompt to “Look up at the stars” (*v. 5*) connects this narrative to that of ch. 13, in which Abram at the Lord’s urging lifted up his eyes (*13:14*) to behold the “Promised Land” from the westerly vantage point of the future site of Hebron (*v. 18*). This goes to show (contra Keil-Deilitzsch, pp. 209-210) that the initial “vision” has not lifted Abram from the realm of perceptible reality; the land he once beheld is real, just so the stars, and as follows the sacrificial vessels with which the Lord first “cuts” a covenant with Abram. Moses adds dative of agent “in a vision” (*15:1*) to serve as a literary device not used before in the hurried travelogue of ch. 12 to alert the reader that this event merits more space – and attention. Abram’s explanatory remark that Eliezer of Damascus will inherit his house (a person not mentioned anywhere else) further serves to slow the pace. God reassures Abram in unequivocal terms that the fruit of his own loins will be his inheritor (*vv. 2-3*). Later he will need to further specify the heir would come by Abram’s wedded wife (*17:18*).

Moses transitions to the covenantal rite with a covenantal formula replete in the Old Testament: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you up out of (x) to (y)” (*cf. 15:7; Exod. 3:8; 20:2; Lev. 11:45; Num. 15:41; Deut. 4:20; Jos. 24:17; 2 Sam. 7:6, 7; Jer. 2:6*). The relationship is established as one of unilateral protection (the meaning of “shield” [*Gen. 15:1*]) and undeserved gifts. Scholars label such an agreement between unequal parties a “suzerain” (Livingston, p. 156). Abram is not testing God by asking the question, “How am I to know...?” (*v. 8*) followed by a full description of the rite, namely, an outward confirmation of the word of promise (*vv. 8-11*). To quote Luther on the Sacrament of Holy Baptism: “it must be external so that it can be perceived and grasped by the senses and thus brought into the heart” (*LC IV.30*). Abram’s utter lack of agency in this arrangement is shown not only in the Hiphil form of the verb *'aman* (“to believe”), which expresses “that state of mind which is sure of its object, and relies firmly upon it” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 212) (*v. 6*). It is further expressed in that “a deep sleep fell on Abram” during the entire rite (*vv. 12-21*) (he is not even in the act of falling asleep the subject!) The sleep, like the severing of animal carcasses, was real. Authors of Scripture certainly wrote about things of which they had no firsthand knowledge, even under direct inspiration when not quoting report (*cf. John 17*).

God appoints material signs of his activity: here, such common household objects as “a smoking fire pot and a flaming torch passed between the pieces” (*v. 17*). “The intent of the ritual could hardly be more daring. God is unilaterally obligating himself to Abraham and his seed to the degree that God places himself under a potential curse. Should this God of promise prove to be unreliable, then may his fate be dismemberment.” (Hamilton, p. 95) Or, death by execution (*Ps. 22; Is. 53:6*)!

The rigmarole that will occupy the next two chapters begins with a recapitulation: “Now Sarai, Abram’s wife, had borne him no children.” (*Gen. 16:1*) Her slave Hagar may even have been acquired through the excursion into Egypt (*12:10-20*); whatever the case, some time has elapsed since her beauty could be considered devastating, and she has surpassed the age of childbearing. Sarai appeals to an existing legal provision that she may claim any children of Hagar’s for her own and her husband’s (*v. 2*). Like Adam before him (*3:6*), Abram succumbs to her ill counsel – for admittedly, divorced from faith, her logic was irrefutable. Hagar is given the titular honour (not to mention the marital obligation) of being Abram’s “wife” (*vv. 3-4*); yet, through the act of bigamy, seeds of rivalrous contention are sown (*cf. Pr. 30:23*). Sarai takes an ugly turn from scheming to callous, driving out her slave Hagar. This act takes on prophetic significance (*Gal. 4:21-31*).

It is “the angel of the Lord” who meets Hagar in her first exile (*Gen. 16:7*). (The Hebrew *malak-YHWH* is anarthrous in the construct chain). When translated with the definite article, “the angel of the Lord” has been interpreted to be a pre-incarnate form of Christ. Such an interpretation is almost assured in select contexts (*Exod. 3:2-6; Zech. 3:1-2; cf. Jos. 5:13*). As surprising as it is that Hagar is distinguished as the first person treated to such an audience, even more so is her giving a name to the Lord: “You are a God who sees (*El Roi*)” (*Gen. 16:13*). This title (not unlike Yahweh itself) is relational. Seemingly glorious pursuits do not prepare one to behold the face of God (*cf. Exod. 33:17-23*); rather, “Luther... commented theologically on God’s paradoxical revelation of himself in affliction: Hagar, in viewing God turned away from her, realizes that there in his back he is showing her his face.” (Maxfield, p. 55) Hagar, having found herself in the Lord’s unmerited favour, and given a blessing similar to Abram (*Gen. 16:10-12; cf. 17:20*), also gives the well its name (*v. 14*). In the Ancient Near East, the designation “wild donkey” here applied to Hagar’s son Ishmael may not have had negative connotations; the legendary king Gilgamesh eulogizes his companion Enkidu as “the driven mule, the wild ass of the open country”. (*cf. 49:14*)

Chapter seventeen constitutes “a reconfirmation by God to Abraham of his promises, especially on the heels of the less-than-happy results of Abraham’s cohabitation with Hagar” (Hamilton, p. 95). Disobedience does not nullify the validity of God’s salvation plan: “For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable” (*Rom. 11:29; 2 Tim. 2:13*) At the same time, that Abram, Sarai, and Hagar come under his rod shows the weight of human responsibility. Each had vainly asserted their own agency in the face of God’s sovereignty. Circumcision is here instituted (*Gen. 17:1-14*) as an Old Testament “sacrament” incorporating the recipient into a new people. “If circumcision’s significance were merely the cutting or marking of some part of the human body” (as would be the case if it were a mere “identity-marker”) “then something such as cutting one’s hair or piercing one’s ears, or even branding... would have sufficed. Circumcision, however, ‘requires a cutting of the part of the body through which God’s promise will be fulfilled’” (*Ibid.*, p. 96). By this point Abram is ninety-nine (*Gen. 17:1*); Ishmael has been born and attained to the age of thirteen (*v. 26*).

Both Abram and Sarai receive a change of name. Abram (*’av ram*, “exalted father”) becomes Abraham (*’av raham*, “father of many”); Sarai becomes Sarah, simply a different variation. (*vv. 5, 15*) Isaac’s name becomes prophetic: it is an imperfect conjugation of the *zachaq*, “he laughs”. Abraham resigns under protest, though, asserting Ishmael’s legal right to his inheritance (*v. 18*). The Lord promises to visit Abram and his wife, effectively closing all further discussion on the matter (*v. 21*). The visit of three men at Abraham’s tent by his dwelling in Mamre (*18:1-8*) is an early instance of the Son of God taking incarnate form. The purpose of this encounter is twofold: to reaffirm the date of Isaac’s birth (as well as make an example of Sarah’s unfaith) (*vv. 9-15*) and to disclose his plans regarding Sodom and Gomorrah (*vv. 16-21*). Their day of reckoning has come!

Genesis Bible Study – Session 9

“Sodom and Gomorrah” (Genesis 18:22 - 19:38)

As previously concerning the Tower of Babel, “the geographical milieu of our story is placed outside the land of Palestine.” (Hamilton, p. 75) Of equal importance with the geographical association with that incident is the economic tie. The tower had been constructed with brick and bitumen “for mortar” (*Gen. 11:3*); these materials were mined in the Dead Sea valley (currently underwater) in which Sodom and Gomorrah once stood. These cities more than likely grew prosperous from the arrangement. Urban corruption would excel on a historic scale – so much so that the Lord plays as though he himself (who knows all things through divine omniscience) needs to verify the bad report for himself! An “outcry” has come up to him (*18:21*) that would, again, take on historical significance in prophetic literature (*Ezek. 16:49*) as well as apostolic (*Jude 7*). While Ezekiel intends to draw parallels between the crimes of Gentile peoples and that of their contemporary Judah, the Genesis narrative cites the Sodomites’ cardinal offense as being against the created order of marriage (*Gen. 19:5; cf. 1:28; 2:23-24*). The near connection, as well, between sexual libertinism and imperialism has been well documented by concerned parties.

Abraham, for his part, refused to be enriched through his previous dealings with Bera, the king of Sodom (*14:2; 21-22*). Now, Abraham undertakes to intercede on behalf of the city’s doomed inhabitants. Lot, for his part, “frequently reproved them for their sexual misconduct” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 233) (*2 Pet. 2:7-8*) The mere presence of a righteous individual is a standing rebuke which an immoral society neither can nor will tolerate. Luther soberly observes about his own day and age, “the more we cry out and the more earnestly we exhort people to repent, the worse our opponents become”, though after having upheld Abraham’s intercessory prayer as an example of Christian charity exercised in patience: “since the punishment cannot be averted, love prays that God may delay it, if perhaps some still may be converted.” (Maxfield, p. 204) Abraham’s concern for the salvation of non-Hebraic peoples contrasts with Jonah’s attitude (*Jon. 4:1-4*). Paul repeats Jesus’ injunction to the Church to “pray for those who persecute you” (*Matt. 6:44-45; Rom. 12:14*).

The Lord’s exchange with Abraham is interlaced with self-conscious confessions of his unworthiness (*Gen. 18:30-32*) which, nonetheless, does not mitigate his boldness in prayer (*cf. Luke 18:1-8*). “This would indeed neither be permissible nor possible, had not God, by virtue of the mysterious interlacing of necessity and freedom in His nature and operations, granted a power to the prayer of faith, to which He consents to yield” through his absolute power which he orders in favour of goodness (Keil-Deilitzsch., pp. 222-223) (*cf. Jas. 5:16-17*). Even so, the Lord’s final ultimatum to spare the city for the sake of five righteous persons (*Gen. 18:33*) highlights the thoroughness of the twin cities’ corruption. Their sin is mortal.

Lot greets the angelic visitors in appropriate fashion, that is, bowing (*Gen. 19:1-2*); but unlike Abraham, who immediately recognized the Lord as his visitor with the singular address “Lord,” (*18:3*), Lot employs the plural. Perhaps this anecdote is used by the author of Hebrews as incentive to “show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (*Heb. 13:2*). “The two travellers... (for such Lot supposed them to be, and only recognized them as angels when they had smitten the Sodomites miraculously with blindness), said that they would spend the night on the street... as they had been sent to inquire into the state of the town. But they yielded to Lot’s entreaty to enter his house; for the deliverance of Lot, after having ascertained his state of mind, formed part of their commission” (Ibid., p. 223).

It does not take long for the entire population, “all the people to the last man”, to take notice of Lot’s angelic visitors (*Gen. 19:5*). The Hebrew *yada* ‘, “to know” (as well as *boa* ‘, “to go in” [*12:15; 16:4*]) is a well-known Biblical circumlocution for sexual intercourse (*4:1, 25; cf. Luke 1:34*). In one parallel encounter it is paired with the verb *’alal*, “abuse” (*Jud. 19:22, 25*). Regardless of consent, the sort of relations desired by the men of Sodom “both young and old” (*Gen. 19:4*) is illegitimate: “Using the creation account in Genesis as a foundation, the Old Testament teaches that sexual behavior is ‘very good’ only within the context of marriage between one man and one woman. All sexual behavior outside of this context is rebellion against God’s purpose for sex ... in no place does Scripture ever speak of homosexual behavior in a positive way” (Eckstein, p. 164) “Therefore God also gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another” (*Rom. 1:26-27*). The simplicity of Paul’s terms flatly condemns adult same-sex relations, and refute the unfounded notion that Scripture authors have only pederasty in mind (*cf. Lev. 18:22*).

Lot, for attempting to barter his daughters for his male visitors (*Gen. 19:8*), has earned criticism from interpreters; however, a poor estimation of Lot’s character *in toto* is hardly necessary to note the repugnance of his desperate measure. Peter remembers him as “righteous” (*1 Pet. 2:6*). It also bears to note Lot’s reckoning as being righteous – as with the case of Noah and Abraham (*Gen. 6:9; 15:6*) – stands even in spite of his (de)merits. Before the men of Sodom proceed with their wicked resolve, God intervenes, striking them with blindness (*19:9-11*). Moses adds to the wide array of all-inclusive terms (“great and small”) – this time to show the mob’s powerlessness.

After this demonstration of divine authority, the angels hastily enjoin Lot to escape with his entire household; none is to be left behind. However, Lot’s sons-in-law scoff at the warning of impending doom, and are left behind of their own accord. (*vv. 12-14*) Two details in connection with Lot’s escape are worthy of note: firstly, that the man himself, his wife, and daughters need to be rescued from the same fate only by the hand of God – literally “seized (*yach^eziqu*) by the hand” (*v. 16*); secondly, concern for righteous Lot is enough to spare one of the neighbouring cities (Zoar) in which he seeks refuge (*vv. 17-23*). The Lord’s endurance seems to know no bounds; yet what immediately follows is a twofold judgment. The ESV correctly renders the Hebrew prepositional clause “the Lord rained... fire from the Lord (*yahweh... me’eth yahweh*) out of heaven” (*v. 24*). Luther readily concludes (contrary to the Rabbis) that this verse designates plurality within the Godhead. Jesus (the second “Lord” mentioned in this passage) uses the all-encompassing destruction as an object lesson in the final judgment (*Luke 17:28-32*). Lot’s wife serves as the example of godless self-preservation in her looking back (*v. 32; Gen. 19:26*). She is lost forever, as a “pillar of salt” remains today a common feature of the Dead Sea environment.

The motif of aberrant sexual behaviour tragically persists in Lot’s household after the rescue. Lot altered his plans – and not without major consequence. Residing in the hills outside the bounds of society, his daughters conspire to “go in” and “lay with” their father as a stand-in for their husbands (*vv. 30-38*). This incestuous union adds to the Table of Nations (ch. 10) two more, whose very names bear record to the breach of morals: “Moab” translates as “from the father”, while the Ammonites derive their name from *Ben-ammi*, “son of my people”. The Moabites caused trouble for the Israelites (*Num. 22-25; cf. Deut. 23:3-6*), their ultramontane neighbours following the Exodus. (Still, God brings good out from bad beginnings, as the book of Ruth would show.)

Genesis Bible Study – Session 10

“Abraham’s Last Trials” (Genesis 20 - 22)

Moses returns to Abraham as his subject with a travelogue. Abraham was last seen at his lodgings “by the oak of Mamre”, a landmark near Hebron (*Gen. 13:18; 18:1*). There he lived at the behest of Mamre the Amorite (*14:13*); moving forward, a policy of forming alliances with non-Hebrew kings will continue with Abimelech “king of Gerar” (*20:1-2*). “Abimelech” – which translates as “My Father is King” – just may, like Pharaoh or Caesar, function as a dynastic title rather than personal name (*cf. Jud. 9*). It is lamentable that Abraham’s dealings with the local leadership have gotten short shrift in most traditions of Biblical interpretation. Yet noteworthy is the fact that they stand on either side of the birth of Isaac, whose sacrifice in ch. 22 garners all the attention. Luther would contend that living in God’s world constitutes just as serious a trial for Abraham as the near-death of his son. Both require mortification, a pattern for all believers. Just as “Abraham... actually dies seven times because of his mental suffering over the demand to sacrifice his son” (Forde, p. 100), he must learn concurrently what it means to honour the familial and civil estates.

As earlier with Pharaoh in Egypt (*12:10-19*), Abraham begins this diplomatic venture on the wrong foot. All it takes this time is the half-truth that “She is my sister.” (*20:3*) This was apparently a standing agreement made in a similar vein as the giving of the Fourth Commandment (*12:13; Eph. 6:3*) Gladly, the Lord intervenes before the conjugal act can be performed – Abimelech is even honoured as a conversation-partner with God (*vv. 3-7*) – and protests his “innocence.” “That Abimelech, when taking the supposed sister of Abraham into his harem, should have thought that he was acting ‘in innocence of heart and purity of hands,’ i.e. in perfect innocence, is to be fully accounted for, from his undeveloped moral and religious standpoint, by considering the custom of the day.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 239) This state of affairs betrays a moral degradation equal to that of the antediluvian world (*6:1-4*). Even so, Abimelech as a government official remains accountable to a (natural) moral law (*cf. Rom. 2:14-15*) (*LC I.209*); Abraham’s defense that “there is no fear of God in this place” (*Gen. 20:12*) is an exaggeration. Luther repudiates the heresy of political absolutism by offering this commendation: “Abimelech upholds Abraham in his prophetic office. This Philistine king is an example of how the godly prince, as opposed to the tyrant, supports the ministry of the word.” (Maxfield, p. 81) Abimelech recognizes his error, taking pains to honour the estate of marriage in the person of Sarah, with a gift of servants, livestock, and silver.

This approach is similar to Pharaoh’s, but the motivation is quite different, as Abimelech instead invites Abraham to dwell “where it pleases you” (*vv. 14-16*). “Toward the end of his lectures on this narrative, Luther noted how all three holy orders are represented in the characters of this account: Abraham is an example for preachers, Sarah for the mistresses of households, Abimelech for rulers ... Abimelech respects Abraham as a prophet of God, while Abraham in turn upholds civil authority by his oath to the king. His oath is a ‘living witness’ against those who disparage civil matters” (Ibid., pp. 81-82). Abimelech holds Abraham to account with this oath: “that you will not deal falsely with me or with my descendants” (*21:23-24*), though again it is shown that Abraham’s sins do not impugn his validity as a minister of God (*20:7*). Abraham immediately benefits from his reputation as an honest man, when he settles a dispute over a “well of water that Abimelech’s servants had seized” (*21:25-34*). The two parties proceed to solidify their alliance in the most serious manner, by “cutting” (Hebrew *karat*) a covenant, which ritual involved the slaughter of animals. As a further act of testimony, Abraham plants a tree – not for purposes of worship – and invokes God by a new title: the Everlasting God (*El ‘Olam*).

At the middle of this record of Abraham's "secular" pursuits, the reader encounter Isaac's birth along with the conflicts it ignites. "Luther explained at this point that the passage reveals the trials of marriage and home life ... The world is a place of trials – tentation. This is precisely why the world and the holy orders God has established in it are the place where God alone creates true monks like Abraham and Sarah out of the nothingness of human sin and idolatry." (Ibid., p. 106)

"The Lord visited Sarah as he had said, and the Lord did to Sarah as he had promised. And Sarah conceived and bore... a son" (*Gen. 21:1-2*). The word *paqad*, "visit," will in Scripture take on ministerial connotations (*Ps. 109:8; Luke 7:16*). Such a belaboured description of the natural process of conception and childbirth – though, in this as well as other instances (*1 Sam. 1; Luke 1-2*), stimulated by a miracle – also serves to highlight the doctrine of *creatio continua* (*Gen. 1-2; cf. Col. 1:17*). God has predetermined the name of the child: Isaac, which means in Hebrew "he laughs" (*yizchaq*). It was earlier fulfilled touching Sarah's scoffing of God (*18:12-15*), and now joyous laughter (*21:6-7*). Isaac is circumcised and receives his name on the eighth day, as per the Lord's instructions (*17:12; cf. Luke 1:59-60*). The text designates Sarah's servant Hagar as "the Egyptian", indicating that neither she nor her son Ishamel contribute to the lineage of Abraham (*12:2-3*) to be continued through Isaac (*Gen. 21:14*). God makes the resolve his own: to "cast out the slave woman and her son, for the son of the slave woman shall not inherit with the son of the free woman." (*Gal. 4:30*) Once again, neither blood descent nor earthly legalities guarantee one's standing before God. Nonetheless, as before (*Gen. 16*), he makes provision for Hagar through the mediation of his angel (*21:15-21*); and now the name Ishmael ("he hears") here takes on its own significance.

The transition clause "after these things" (*22:1*) is ambiguous. At the time of the sacrifice of Isaac, he could have been of any age that could be considered a "youth" (Hebrew *na'ar*) (*v. 5*). The reader is told abruptly: "God tested Abraham" – the Septuagint translates the verb as *peirazein*, "to tempt" (*1 Cor. 10:13; Jas. 1:13*). Context determines that, indeed, God is not tempting Abram toward evil but testing his faith in an inimitable way. "In chs. 18-19, we met the loquacious Abraham, trying to make God reconsider, asking questions demanding answers, becoming audacious. By contrast, here he is silent, passive, following directions." (Hamilton, p. 97) This plain reading demonstrates Abraham's character development. God in the act of speaking ramps up the dearness of the sacrifice: "Take your son, your only son Isaac, whom you love, and go... and offer him there" (*v. 2*) As with his initial call (*12:1*), Abraham is without the benefit of knowing the exact location. So great is the patriarch's confidence in the Lord, that he proclaims to his servants without a hint of reserve: "I and the boy will go over there and worship and we will return (*nashuvah*) to you." To Isaac, the partner in an intimate conversation between father and son, he says enigmatically: "God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering." (*vv. 7-8*) The author of Hebrews under divine inspiration explains Abraham's mind-set: "He considered that God was able even to raise him from the dead, from which, figuratively speaking, he did receive him back." (*Heb. 11:17-19*)

As the action unfolds, Isaac, on whom the wood had been laid, is now laid on the wood! Abraham is stopped only by the intervention of "the angel of the Lord", who commends him personally. James reminds the reader that Abraham's faith – which produced this act – would have been of no value had he conceived of faith in merely intellectual terms apart from the fruit of obedience (*Jas. 2:18-23*). God restates the promise that through Isaac "shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (*Gen. 22:17-18*); then, in a well-established pattern in Genesis, Abraham gives the place its name ("Moriah" derives at the participial form of the verb *ra'ah*, "to provide" [*v. 14*]). A "ram, caught in a thicket by its thorns" (*v. 13*) is provided; this substitutionary offering to God (*thusiasterion*) points forward to the atonement to be made by Jesus Christ (*1 John 2:2*). (cf. Scaer, p. 91)

Genesis Bible Study – Session 11

“The Family Tree” (23:1 - 25:18)

Genesis ch. 22, which occupies itself with Abraham’s traumatic test of faith (what Luther termed *tentatio*, “temptation” or, in his native German, *Anfechtung*) when he is asked to sacrifice his only son Isaac (22:1-2), concludes on a note of assurance that the line of Abraham will continue through the same Isaac (vv. 17-18). It is disclosed through an unknown source that a suitable wife is to be found within the family of Abraham’s brother Nahor (vv. 20-24; cf. 11:29).

These sundry details, themselves of much consequence, are immediately followed by a record of Sarah’s death and burial arrangements (23:1-18). “Commenting on the agreement Abraham made with the Hittites for a burial spot for Sarah, Luther noted that ‘Moses was quite verbose’ in his description of the contract. The Holy Spirit describes both the politeness of the Hittites and the modesty of Abraham’s request in order to show that ‘he requires and thinks highly of such virtues’ ... the professor wondered aloud ‘why Moses has so much to say about such unimportant matters.’ Then he answered himself: ‘There is no doubt, however, that the Holy Spirit wanted these things to be written and to stand out in our doctrine; for nothing insignificant, nothing purposeless is put before us in holy scripture’” (Maxfield, p. 36). Abraham, predeceased by his wife, sets a pattern for faithful mourning which entails public funerary rites (cf. Ezek. 24:1-18; 1 Thess. 4:13).

Abraham negotiates at some length with the Hittites living east of his sojourn in Mamre (v. 17), among whom he remains a *ger*, or “resident alien” (Provain-Longman-Long, p. 168). “Though some of these people were in Palestine, their center [sic.] of power was in Anatolia (Turkey).” By the time of Moses, this people-group consolidated into a world-class empire to rival the Egyptians. (Livingston, p. 29) Their high regard for Abraham is displayed in the use of titles such as “prince of God” (v. 6), all of which builds up to the offer of a choice burial chamber at no charge. “This was a turn in the affair which is still customary in the East; the design, so far as it is seriously meant at all, being either to obtain a present in return which will abundantly compensate for the gift, or, what is still more frequently the case, to preclude any abatement in the price to be asked.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 255) Abraham repeatedly protests and purchases the field owned in Machpelah at full price from one Ephron (vv. 7-16); this is consistent with his earlier dealings with the king of Sodom, he refuses to any the opportunity of saying later “I have made Abram rich.” (cf. 14:24)

Moses signals that death is near for Abraham as well, recalling his initial blessing (24:1; cf. 12:3) as well as employing covenantal language (v. 7; cf. 15:7) in his exchange with the servant entrusted with carrying out his wishes. Seeing that a wife – Rebekah by name – has been “born to Bethuel the son of Milcah, the wife of Nahor” (24:15), Abraham binds Isaac with an oath that he will not marry a Canaanite (v. 3). Abraham’s servant takes the symbolic action of swearing this oath with his hand under the thigh – perhaps coming near to the spot where showed the sign of circumcision. According to a different theory, “This custom... the so-called bodily oath, was no doubt connected with the significance of the hip as the part from which the posterity issues... and the seat of vital power; but the early Jewish commentators supposed it to be especially connected with the rite of circumcision.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 257) (cf. 46:26; 47:29) The problems arising from romantic attachments outside the faith cannot be overstated (1 Sam. 11:1-8; 1 Cor. 7:16-17) “Inspired by his master’s faith, the servant too places the search in God’s hands” (Hamilton, p. 99) So weighty is the matter that, even in the event that a suitable wife is not found, Isaac is forbidden from returning to his ancestral home among the Chaldeans (Gen. 22:8; cf. 11:32).

By way of course, Nahor's family remains in the Mesopotamian region which now bears the name of another of Abraham's brothers (v. 10). The servant prays to the Lord, the "God of my master Abraham" for success (24:12), appealing to his "steadfast love" (*chesed*): a word replete in the Old Testament for God's faithfulness. As with other affairs in Scripture, matters of selection are left to the hand of providence (cf. *Mark 11:1-7; 14:13*). Rebekah appears. In the Garden of Eden, the reader was left to surmise Eve's desirability from Adam's poetic flourish (*Gen. 2:23*). Here, Moses is quite verbose in describing Isaac's prospective wife: "The young woman was very attractive in appearance"; "a maiden (*b^ethulah*, a term which connotes virginity) whom no man had known" is a redundancy. (24:16) She fits the bill (so to speak) as the daughter of Bethuel, Abraham's nephew (v. 15). Rebekah volunteers for no easy task, watering ten camels in total (vv. 20-21), yet in the process ensuring the Lord has prospered the servant's task with "steadfast love and faithfulness". She becomes the recipient of a wealthy token of gratitude. This manages to catch the greedy eye of her brother Laban, whose assent is required for betrothal. (vv. 22-33)

The servant gives an about-face with the men in charge of Rebekah's affairs (vv. 34-49). Reiterating his dealings with her and Abraham in full detail underscores the importance of this endeavour, helping to expand the marriage between Isaac and Rebekah into the longest chapter in Genesis. (Hamilton, p. 99) Laban, for all his vices, recognizes the hand of God in the affair, together with his brother Behthuel (v. 50-51). Scriptural marriage is not constituted by the mere assent of a couple, subject to cancellation with any whim of emotion. Furthermore, the relationship between Isaac and Rebekah stands over and against the example both of his father Abraham and his son Jacob, besmirched as they are by polygamy. Theirs is a match made in heaven. The men in her life may be enriched through the encounter (vv. 52-55), but neither the gifts of silver and gold jewelry nor the revelry hold sway over Rebekah; she hastens to cheerfully meet her groom (v. 58), though not without receiving a blessing (v. 60). They give the standard blessing that her descendants multiply (the Hebrew word for "ten thousand", *ravav*, is related to the word "multiply" [1:28]). Then the rite concludes with words reminiscent of the angel's blessing upon Isaac (22:17). The idiom "possess the gate of one's enemies" means to conquer, as city gates served as a natural setting of military conflict (cf. *Ps. 127:5*). The concluding formula beginning with the word "thus..." highlights the importance of the preceding narrative: "Thus the servant took Rebekah and went his way." (v. 61) Isaac is found in the Negev, that is, the southern border of the promised land. Use of the word "meditate" as a synonym for prayer may be an archaic feature of this narrative, though some also theorize that Isaac is laying the question of his marriage "before God in solitude" (Keil-Deilitzsch, pp. 260-261). Modestly Rebekah "enveloped herself in a veil, as became a bride when meeting a bridegroom" (Ibid.) (cf. *Song 5:7*). Love is shown to be the result (rather than the cause) of this arranged marriage; and as well, "Isaac was comforted after his mother's death." (*Gen. 24:67*)

Abraham's great age of 175 (not to be exceeded in later generations) is mentioned alongside his marital relations after Sarah. Keturah gives birth to the Midianites (*Num. 31; Jud. 6*). While provision is made for his other children, it is Sarah's son who inherits the blessing. (25:1-6) Abraham's landed estate consists, in total, of his burial chamber in Machpelah and a well in Gerar (21:25). Abraham's legal heirs – Ishmael and Isaac – reunite to bury him; the rite is described poetically as "gathered to his people" (25:7-11). A record of Ishmael's posterity follows (25:1-18). He had married an Egyptian (21:21) and, as promised by the angel of God (v. 18), became the father of a great nation divided into twelve princes and spanning the territory of modern Arabia. The word *naphal*, "fell", connects him at least linguistically with the Nephilim: the "mighty men... of renown" (6:4). Ishmael affords this distinction "in the presence of all his brothers".

Genesis Bible Study – Session 12

“The Older Shall Serve the Younger” (Genesis 25:19 - 26:33)

“These are the generations of Isaac, Abraham’s son...” (*Gen. 25:19*) The *toledoth*, “generational” formula, as everywhere else in Genesis, assumes the right to introduce or expand upon previously unexplored details in the text. Those who would contend that the narrative from 2:4 onward offers a contradictory or otherwise conflicting account to the preceding, as much as they wish to be consistent, must assume some absurd stance here. Abraham’s final years have been already treated (*vv. 1-18*); yet the birth of his grandsons through Isaac, Esau and Jacob, though given literary treatment after the record of his death at the age of 175, precedes it chronologically by some fifteen years. Isaac has attained to the age of sixty when his wife bore his children. (*v. 26*)

Rebekah gives birth to two boys when she is forty. The obvious differences in their physical traits indicate that they are fraternal twins: one is “all red (*'admoni*), all his body like a hairy cloak”, while the other grows to be a “smooth man.” (*25:25; 27:11*) One is holding the heel of the other, “not a gesture of friendship” (Hamilton, p. 110). This incident furnishes the younger twin’s name: *ya'aqov*, a verb meaning “he grabs the heel” (*v. 26*); the even less desirable, abstracted meaning of “one who usurps” would prophetically describe Jacob’s career. Esau will also be known as Edom, more obviously derived from the Hebrew word for “red” (*v. 30*). This will not be the only Biblical record which holds twin boys in competition for the honour of the firstborn (*cf. 38:27*).

That Esau is described as a “man of the field” (*v. 27*) may echo the original honour bestowed on Cain, a “man of the ground.” (*4:2*) Moses waxes interpretive for the reader’s full benefit here: “Isaac loved Esau because he ate of his game, but Rebekah loved Jacob” (*25:28*); and later, “Thus Esau despised his birthright.” (*v. 34*) Rebekah’s preference enjoys divine sanction, as “in her distress” she had “inquired of the Lord.” The reply comes in poetic form (perhaps by mediation of her father-in-law or, as Luther theorizes, Melchizedek): “Two nations are in your womb, and two people from within you shall be divided; the one shall be stronger than the other, and the older shall serve the younger.” (*v. 22*) Clearly, Isaac himself has never claimed rights over God’s election, not even regarding his own sons. Maxfield elucidates on the primacy of God’s Word over human authority: “Thus Luther solved the ethical problem the narrative poses: for while the law ordained that Esau had the rights of the firstborn, God overruled the law and established Jacob over Esau. In doing so, he established the limitations of human powers in all three holy orders” (church, family, government) “as subject to God and his word” (Maxfield, pp. 95-96).

Given that Esau “despised” his birthright (*vv. 29-34*), Jacob, who extorted it from him for sustenance (a bowl of lentil stew), claims no moral high ground. The *opinio legis* – the view according to which God’s election need be made on the basis of prior (or later) merit – would spin this narrative in such a way to give Jacob some credit. But it does not work that way (*Eph. 1:4*). Word, not worth, elected Jacob. “Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated.” (*Mal. 1:2-3; Rom. 9:13*) Luther finds in this a cause for comfort in *The Bondage of the Will (Serv. Arb. V.xi)*. “But the point really is, in fact, God must be honored and revered as supremely merciful toward those whom he justifies and saves, supremely unworthy as they are, and there must be at least some acknowledgement of his divine wisdom so that he may be believed to be righteous where he seems to us to be unjust. For if his righteousness were such that it could be judged by human standards, it clearly would not be divine... ‘O the depths of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How incomprehensible are his judgments and how unsearchable his ways!’” (Kolb, p. 65) (*11:33*)

The Blessed Doctor does not deny a rôle to human responsibility within the created order: “he observed that the thoughts of ‘those who refer everything to predestination and thus do away with all the activities and means God has ordained’ and say, ‘If these things must happen, they will happen of necessity even without work on my part,’ are ‘wicked and impious because God wants you to make use of the means you have at your disposal.’” (Ibid., p. 28) Robert Kolb cites Luther lecturing on Genesis ch. 27, the incident in which Jacob wisely flees his brother’s murderous rage (27:44-45) rather than tempting God to protect him (*cf. Matt. 4:5-7*). The same principle applies well to the narrative which occupies ch. 26 as Isaac seeks to preserve his family in the midst of another famine. The scenario is reminiscent of Abraham’s sojourn in Egypt (*Gen. 12:10-20*).

Yet, “as he was the seed to whom the land of Canaan was promised, he was directed not to leave it.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 270) In later centuries, after Israel is established as a kingdom, the Lord would enjoin them using the same words: “Do not go down to Egypt” (26:2), in the prophetic context forbidding military alliance with Egypt (*Is. 30:1-7*). This time the chosen family is directed to Philistine Gerar, apparently still ruled by one Abimelech and administered by one Phicol, who bear the same names as appeared in connection with Abraham (*cf. 21:22*). “The identity is favoured by the pious conduct of Abimelech in both instances ... it would be all the easier to conceive of this in the case of the same king, on the ground of his advanced age.” (Ibid., p. 271) Isaac, for his part, repeats the indiscretion of his father, either not knowing about it or supposing that he would fare better (26:6-11) Abimelech, wise from experience, confirms his suspicion when he observes Isaac and Rebekah “laughing” (the Piel participle, *m^etsacheq*, indicates flirtatious conduct only acceptable between a married couple). Uncovering the deception, he orders the family’s protection.

The record of Isaac sowing and reaping “a hundredfold” (v. 12) within the boundaries of Canaan follows a thread intertwined with this narrative, one which reapplies the original Abrahamic blessing (vv. 3-4) to Isaac. The Lord credits his father Abraham with perfect obedience to his “commandments, statutes, and laws” (v. 5). Given Abraham’s examples of poor conduct (repeated for emphasis by his son Isaac), such language would surely be unwarranted if taken apart from the doctrine of justification by faith (*cf. Ps. 32:1; Rom. 4:13-14*) (*Ap IV.272-274*).

Isaac comes into his own dealings with the Philistines (Latinized, and known since Roman times, as “Palestinians”). Historians identify them with the “Sea People” who devastated the Hittite empire in the twelfth century BC (Livingston, p. 43). There exists a likelihood that “an earlier, smaller wave of Philistine immigrants to the Levant took place before the larger one” (Provain-Longman-Long, p. 167). This ethnic group would in later centuries oppress Israel, antagonizing her first two kings (*Jud. 13-16; 1 Sam. 4ff*) – conflicts foreshadowed within Isaac’s lifetime by this statement: “the Philistines envied him” (*Gen. 26:14*). They stop up the well Abraham had dug, which belonged to Isaac by treaty right (21:25-32). Instead of protesting, Isaac proceeds to dig more wells successively (26:17-23), naming them in dubious honour of the conflicts elicited at every stop. He eventually settles many kilometres south of Gerar (possibly Gaza). Later Biblical expression uses Beersheba (which “belongs to Judah” [*1 Ki. 19:3*]) as the southern extremity of the Promised Land, Dan as the northern (*1 Sam. 3:20*). In Abrahamic fashion, Isaac dedicates an altar for worship after the Lord appears to him (26:23-25). History repeats itself a final time, however, when Abimelech’s company seeks out Isaac; they remain unaware of the ill conduct of their subjects (*cf. 21:26*) and pledge their continual goodwill toward their spiritual benefactor (26:28). After they forge a new “pact” and “covenant”, the reader is told that the company “departed in peace.” (v. 31) This diplomatic venture prompts Isaac, to call the place “Shibah” from the Hebrew *shava*’, “oath”. “Therefore the name of the city is Beersheba to this day.” (v. 33)

Genesis Bible Study – Session 13

“Jacob’s Ladder” (Genesis 27 - 28)

Esau’s exploits are given much briefer treatment than those of his brother, Jacob (*Gen. 26*); on a transitory note it is mentioned that “When Esau was forty years old, he took Judith the daughter of Beeri the Hittite to be his wife, and Basemath the daughter of Elon the Hittite, and they made life bitter for Isaac and Rebekah (*watiheyyan morath ruach*, “were a spirit of bitterness.”) (*vv. 34-35*) The Hittites (literally, “daughters of Heth” [*27:46*]) boasted a culture that resembled that of the family in some measure: “The Hittites had a levirate marriage arrangement much like the Hebrews, and built casement walls, which were also used by Hebrew kings. Their covenant forms were much like those described in the Old Testament.” (Livingston, p. 29) However, underappreciated differences can spell disaster (as exemplified by Samson’s faux pas in his marriage to a Philistine woman [*Judg. 14*]). Esau also commits the awful blunder of bigamy.

Isaac fully intends to go forward with the rite of blessing, following both the law of primogeniture and his own high regard for Esau. Keil theorizes: “Isaac was then in his 137th year, at which age his half-brother Ishmael had died fourteen years before; and this, with the increasing infirmities of age, may have suggested the thought of death” (Keil-Deilitzsch, pp. 273-274). Rebekah, the reader has been informed, “went to inquire of the Lord” concerning the fate of her children while still in her womb (*25:22-23*). The expression “inquire of the Lord” in other Biblical contexts implies some mediating agent (i.e. a prophet or priest, or by aid of the obscure Urim and Thummim device) (*Num. 27:21; 1 Sam. 9:9; 28:6; 1 Ki. 22:6-9; Jer. 21:1-2*). Since no theophany is mentioned, and more to the point, ever with the enthusiasts in mind, Luther theorizes that Melchizedek (Shem) or perhaps even Abraham was the mediating minister to this oracle. However it came about, it is uncertain whether Rebekah disclosed the word of prophecy with Isaac, or whether she kept the matter to herself. Also, to the question of “whether she is acting from self-interest” (Hamilton, p. 111) in hatching the scheme of ch. 27, the counterquestion may be asked: What has she to gain?

Perhaps the point is that God works alongside his creatures to bring about his will. Noting that a great source of Isaac’s pleasure in Esau comes from his superior ability to hunt (*Gen. 25:26; 27:2-4*), Rebekah involves Jacob in a grand deception, in which he is called upon to secretly prepare “two young goats” from their own pasture for a “delicious” meal (*v. 9*). The tactic seems to be to keep the belly full and the mind empty. Rebekah has also anticipated the problem of Isaac, now poor of eyesight (*vv. 1, 12*), feeling for his favoured son with his hands; ever prudently she makes use of the skins from the slaughtered goats, which “she put on his hands and on the smooth part of his neck” (*v. 16*). Her agency (and ultimate responsibility [*v. 13*]) in the endeavour is further highlighted: “And she put the delicious food and the bread, which she had prepared, into the hand of her son Jacob.” (*v. 17*) Isaac unwittingly – but no less efficaciously! – performs his part as the minister of blessing; he can neither revoke nor overturn the divine performative speech (*v. 36*).

Jacob’s dealings with Isaac proceed as planned, though there are further suspicions that require dispelling (*vv. 18-25*). When asked how he managed to get back so soon, Jacob gives a hypocritically pious reply of which Esau seems likewise capable. Isaac demonstrates poetic brilliance in his blessing, inspired by “the smell of my son”, “the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed!” Here, for the first time in Abrahamic family history, it is necessary to grant one son supremacy over his brothers – but there is nothing new in the concluding remark: “Cursed be everyone who curses you, and blessed be everyone who blesses you!” (*vv. 27-29; cf. 12:3*)

Also, for the first time since Cain and Abel in ch. 4, the fuel for sibling conflict is laid when Esau comes with off-putting immediacy after Isaac blesses Jacob. Although Isaac's conduct during the entire affair is human, it is a testament to his character that he refrains from violently cursing the deceiver. "Even (*gam*) he shall be blessed." Esau, himself no half-wit, observes: "Is he not rightfully named Jacob" – context draws out the abstracted meaning of *ya'aqov*, "he who cheats" – "For he has cheated me two times." (v. 36) Isaac does however reserve a blessing to indulge Esau's tender plea. It is indeed a blessing, if an uncharacteristic one: "Behold, (away) from the fatness of the earth shall your dwelling be, and (away) from the dew of heaven on high." "This is generally the condition of the mountainous country of Edom [Idumea], which... is thoroughly waste and barren in the western" (Ibid., p. 277-278). Esau will live by his "sword" that is, an unproductive existence, seizing the means of living through violent means. The manner of living described plays into the conclusion: "you shall break his yoke from your neck." Certain egregious examples from later history may or may not represent fulfillments of his prophecy: the Edomites plundered the land of Judah after its conquest by the Babylonians (*Ob. 10-11*).

Jacob, having used the means at his – and Rebekah's – disposal to attain the blessing that was his by divine right, must seek out his next rung on the ladder to success elsewhere. His mother once more has his back. She steers him in the direction of his uncle Laban, who is living in Aramea (perhaps a corruption of "Haran" [v. 43; cf. 11:31]). Nahor, Jacob's great-uncle, has since assumed dominion of the land, having named its lead city after himself (24:10). There in Paddan-Aram (literally, "the plain of Aram") Jacob will take shelter with his avaricious uncle Laban (who will also prove himself a twin in the art of treachery). Jacob does not flee in secret, however; Isaac even affords a second chance to bless him as well as repeat the prohibition against marrying a foreigner (28:1-4). He, as the succeeding bearer of the standard of faith, is to take a wife from his own kinfolk. Esau, meanwhile, only adds to his iniquity by taking yet another wife from the power brokering Ishamelites – instead of the Canaanites, in mere token obedience to his father. (vv. 6-9)

En route to Haran from his home at Beersheba, Isaac "came to a certain place" and sleeps on a rock for a pillow. (vv. 10-11) Hamilton surmises from Jacob's holy fear (v. 17): "The divine presence is sufficient to score the point" – that is, that "[e]thically there is no question about the impropriety of Jacob's behaviour" – also bearing in mind at "no juncture does God take Jacob to task. There are no lectures, no fulminations by God... On the contrary, Jacob found the gift of... a divine purpose: in vv. 13-15 he receives the same covenantal promise made to Abraham" (Hamilton, pp. 112-113). His dream of angels perpetually ascending and descending on a ladder may represent the scale of moral development; using such interpretive framework, Bernard of Clairvaux observes: "the man is not good at all who does not wish to be better; and where you begin not to care to make advance in goodness there also you leave off being good." (*Ep. XXVIII*).

Jacob exclaims that this site is "the house of God" and names it accordingly: *Beth-El* (vv. 17-19). He marks the location with a stone memorial, an established Israelite custom (v. 22; cf. 31:45-53; *Jos. 4:1-9*; 2 *Sam. 18:18*). However, the Israelites were later commanded to abandon the expectation that divine oracles or favours would abound in that location when true worship was centralized (*Deut. 12:1-7*; 2 *Chron. 3:1*). Idolaters would flock to the wooded hill of Bethel following Jeroboam's apostasy, who set a golden calf there to rival the Temple at Jerusalem (1 *Ki. 12:25-33*; 2 *Ki. 23:15*; *Am. 5:4*). The simple fact that God once inhabited a place (or, for that matter, his Spirit inhabiting a saint [1 *Cor. 6:19*]) does not warrant manmade worship practices surrounding those places or persons (*Ap XII.144-145*). The same can be said of rigid adherence to liturgical rituals or customs (*Mark 7:1-13*; *John 4:23*; *Rom. 14*; *Col. 2:16-19*) (*AC XXVII.41*).

Genesis Bible Study – Session 14

“Housekeeping Matters” (Genesis 29 - 30)

While at the stone memorial at Bethel, Jacob vows to give “a full tenth” (KJV “tithes”) back to God of what he gives him (*Gen. 28:22*). This is a clear reference to future property, since Jacob is fleeing for his life with nothing to his name besides a rightful (if ill-gotten) claim to his father’s inheritance (*25:34*) and the Abrahamic blessing (*27:29*). Jacob proceeds in faith to lands unknown: “to the land of the people of the east.” He relies on a well as a sign of civilization. (*29:1-2*) Notice the ethnic marker used to put distance between Jacob and his relatives living in Paddan-Aram. (Jacob himself will be memorialized as “a wandering Aramean” when the Lord commands the offering of firstfruits and tithes [*Deut. 26:1-15*]. Far removed from any sense of irony, this is to remind every Israelite that he continues in utter reliance upon God.) As well, eastward movement and settlement in Genesis consistently symbolizes people-groups moving away from God’s promise toward self-fulfillment (*3:24; 4:16; 11:1-2; 13:12; 25:18; 28:9*). Worship in the Jerusalem temple was to face west (*Ezek. 8:16*). One notable exception to this rule is God’s placing a garden “in Eden, in the east” for Adam to “work and keep” (*Gen. 2:8*). Jacob is also going to work – and not to mention find a wife – but neither pursuit will be the pleasant affair intended for Adam.

The first people Jacob encounters pronounce the familiar names of Haran, Nahor, and his own uncle Laban (*29:4-5; 10*). Rachel’s involvement with the shepherds’ business (*vv. 6-10*) furnishes the opportunity for her first meeting with Jacob (*vv. 11-12*). It also happens to be the only reference in Genesis to a woman serving in a legitimate vocation outside the domestic sphere (Tamar once played the rôle of a cult prostitute [*38:13-26*]). In view of this fact, Christian tradition might have mistakenly assigned to Rachel the symbolic rôle of a model of the “contemplative” life in contradistinction to the (socially) “active” life of Leah, her sister. Keil remarks that the stone covering the well’s being “large” “does not mean the united strength of all the shepherds was required to roll it away, whereas Jacob had rolled it away alone” but rather, that authorization in the presence of the entire group (including Rachel!) was to be sought before moving it. It also points to the design of the cistern, being such that the mouth covered sufficient space that the flocks could drink directly from it rather than requiring laborious drawing. (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 284)

In what appears to be love at first sight, Jacob makes a public spectacle of his affection: “Then Jacob kissed Rachel and cried out, and raised his voice (*wayyisha ’eth qolu wayyeb^ak*)” (*v. 11*). Laban, for his part, extends a more formal kiss of greeting, though forgetting himself enough that he runs to meet his nephew (*vv. 13-14; cf. Luke 15:20*). Laban recognizes his kin with familiar words: “my bone and my flesh” (*cf. 2:23*) – words which, given such a reference, may indicate prior approval to marry into his household. Jacob, ever the shrewd negotiator, asks Rachel’s hand in exchange for seven years of unindentured service to Laban. The disparity between Rachel’s and Leah’s desirability is given in that the elder sister’s “eyes were weak” (*29:17*) “since bright eyes, with fire in them, are regarded as the height of beauty in Oriental women.” (Ibid., p. 285) Laban approves Jacob’s request with underwhelming enthusiasm (*v. 19*). Moses preserves the sentimental remark that “Jacob served seven years for Rachel, and they seemed to him but a few days because of the love he had for her.” (*v. 20*) He is in for a disappointment, however, when Laban switches Leah for Rachel on the night of their consummation (*vv. 21-25*); the ruse seems possible as “Leah was heavily veiled” for the occasion (Hamilton, p. 113). It is only after the deception that Laban protests “it is not the custom in our country, to give the younger before the firstborn.” (*v. 26*) Setting aside any possibility of truth in this, Jacob must now recognize himself in the mirror. (Ibid.)

Jacob suffers through the weeklong proceedings of Leah's wedding (*cf. Jud. 14:15*) – perhaps to avoid social disgrace – before receiving Rachel. Thus commences a strained relationship with his two wives and his father-in-law. “The narrator wants us to note, however, that Jacob did not let his unfortunate plight do him in. He dutifully agreed – without complaint or a word of resentment – to work seven more years for Rachel.” Carl D. Evans concludes, “the storyteller puts Jacob, time and time again, into situations of strife and conflict that test the patriarch's character.” (Evans, pp. 128-129) Along with polygamy in general, the Mosaic law specifically forbids taking “a woman as a rival to her sister, uncovering her nakedness while her sister is still alive.” (*Lev. 18:18*) Laban provided both his daughters with maidservants: Zilpah to Leah, Bilhah to Rachel (*Gen. 29:24, 29*); Jacob will take them to be his concubines, adding to the conflict as well as the total number of his children: twelve sons and at least one daughter, Dinah (*30:21*). “This bigamy of Jacob must not be judged by the Mosaic law... or set down as incest, since there was no positive law on the point in existence then. At the same time, it is not to be justified on the ground, that the blessing of God made it the means of the fulfillment of his promise” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 286).

Interpreters take note that Leah names three of her first four children with mention of the Lord (*29:31-35*). “Leah... was not only proved by the four sons, whom she bore to him in the first years of her marriage, to be the wife provided for Jacob by Elohim, the ruler of human destiny; but by the fact that these four sons formed the real stem of the promised numerous seed, she was proved still more to be the wife selected by Jehovah, in realization of His promise, to be the tribe-mother of the greater part of the covenant nation.” (Ibid., p. 288) Indeed, Judah (from the Hebrew *yadah*, literally “to know”, taken here in the abstracted sense “to praise”) is destined to be the ancestor of the Messiah, siring a lordly line (*49:8-10*). Rachel, desperately conscious of her barrenness, begs for Jacob essentially to take the place of God (*30:1-2*). He makes the same fiat as his grandfather; he sires two sons by her servant Bilhah (*vv. 3-8*). During the interval of time Leah had “ceased bearing children”, Zilpah fills the rôle for her as well as for Jacob. (*vv. 9-13*).

Although God compensates for the lack of love shown Leah, the reader is told significantly that he “remembered” Rachel and “opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son” (*vv. 22-23*). The name she gives her son – Joseph, from the Hebrew *safar* (“to write in a scroll”, “to add”) – shows that she is not yet content. Rachel had previously resorted to mandrakes (*vv. 14-17; cf. Song 7:13*), a root with alleged virtues of increasing fertility, and which she extorted from Jacob. For these she barter off Jacob's intimacy... yet only for nature to take its proper course once again.

After this miraculous birth, raising Jacob's count of sons to eleven, he is satisfied to quit Laban's land for his “own home and country.” Laban, though, is not content with letting his nephew go empty-handed; but unfortunately for him, Jacob does not exercise Abraham's hard scruples over receiving favours even when earned (*cf. 15:21-23; 23:1-16*). Here is also the first reference to Laban's dubious practice of divination. The two negotiate a new contract which will determine how much yield to which Jacob is entitled over the following six years (*30:25-36; 31:41*). In doing so, Laban must have supposed Jacob to have taken losing odds: he asks for the black lambs sporting a notorious recessive trait, as well as the spackled and spotted goats. Interestingly, Jacob, who had been inept at governing the issue from his wives, seems to display remarkable agency in enlarging his flocks. Jacob peels almond sticks, producing white stripes among the blackish bark and places them at the cistern where the livestock would copulate (*v. 37-38*). This may be an example of the long-accepted belief that “whatever fixes their attention in copulation is marked upon the young” (Ibid., p. 293). This narrative concludes with these words: “Thus the man” – in a land not his own, and under scrutinous eyes – “increased greatly (*m^a'od m^a'od*)” (*v. 43; cf. 12:2*).

Genesis Bible Study – Session 15

“Apocalypse Now” (Genesis 31 - 32)

“God’s work,” Gerhard von Rad keenly observes, “descended deeply into the lowest worldliness and there was hidden past recognition.” (Hamilton, p. 114) Indeed, the exploits of the preceding chapters bear the stench of humanity, and further depths of depravity will be achieved in Genesis; yet through such unworthy means as treachery, polyamory, jealousy – and now, superstitious practice (*Gen. 31:37-43*) – the initial promise (*12:1-3*) passes through the hands of Jacob.

Gerard van Groningen shifts the focus from man’s work to God’s in describing that blessing: “The promise of prosperity and well-being had been made to Abraham... to Isaac... and to Jacob ... The patriarchs, in spite of various adversities, were recipients of this covenantal promise.” (Van Groningen, p. 447) The narrator observes “the man increased” (*w^ayiphrots ha’ish*) (*31:43*) – this time the verb *parah* “be fruitful” serving as a throwback to 1:28, while the generic designation “man” identifies Jacob with his predecessors tracing back to Adam. Yet not only the beginning but also the end comes into sight – Jacob is about to meet his reckoning with his uncle Laban in ch. 31 and twin brother Esau in chs. 32-33. Luther views the former threat through an apocalyptic lens, casting Jacob in his flight as typical of the Church: “The persecution of the gospel in the world is akin to Jacob’s mistreatment by his father-in-law, Laban. Despite the world’s usury and greed and stinginess toward the true church and its ministers, the wealth of such ‘Labanites’ eventually will be dissipated. But Luther promised his students, ‘One day you young men will see the children of greedy men in want and begging and, on the other hand, the promise of the Holy Spirit fulfilled’ ... An apocalyptic sense of crisis and confidence in its divine eschatological resolution emerge from Luther’s oral commentary on Jacob’s departure” (Maxfield, pp. 197-198).

Laban’s own sons accuse Jacob, in effect, of robbing their inheritance (*31:1*) – a hefty charge answerable, with sufficient truthfulness, by the fact that God had guaranteed Jacob’s fortune and wizened him to Laban’s ill disposition in addition to a record of faithful service (*vv. 4-12*). He calls his wives Rachel and Leah to flight, who themselves feel scorned (*vv. 14-16*). The narrator, piling terms, assures the reader that Jacob had all by right: “his livestock, all his property that he had gained, the livestock in his possession that he had acquired in Paddan-Aram...” However, the underhandedness of the affair does not pass unnoticed (*v. 20*). Rachel’s theft of her father’s idols – that is, “gods” (*v. 19; cf. vv. 30, 32*) – and concealing them in her camel’s saddle adds more unsavory detail. Somehow it takes three days for word of Jacob’s flight to reach Laban, and it takes the requisite seven days for him to catch up (*vv. 22-25*). Before any bloodshed, God intervenes in a dream – not for the last time – for his people’s protection (*cf. 20:3; Matt. 2:12, 13*)

During the verbal confrontation, the reader is aware that there is one thing in Jacob’s possession he does not enjoy with the Lord’s blessing: Laban’s stolen gods (*vv. 32-35*) which Rachel conceals with a lie about her physical condition: “Laban might refrain from making further examination, less from fear of defilement, than because he regarded it as impossible that any one with the custom of women upon her should sit upon his gods.” (Keil-Deilitsch, p. 298) Jacob, for his part, calls Laban’s bluff (*vv. 26-28*) with the protest: “If the God of my father, the God of Abraham and the Fear of Isaac, had not been on my side, surely now you would have sent me away empty-handed. God saw my affliction and the labor of my hands and rebuked you” (*v. 42*). Here for the first time the standard, and most highly personal, designation “God of Abraham” appears in tandem with the objective attributive “Fear of Isaac” (*cf. Exod. 3:6; Matt. 22:32; Acts 7:32*). Such a creedal

affirmation is introduced significantly at the vindication of Jacob. Laban receives this word of rebuke though showing anything but contrition, simply resigning himself to the new reality that he is no longer able to provide for his daughters and grandchildren (*vv.* 43-45). The covenant he proposes is one only in the legal sense: an outstanding case in Genesis which demarcates two families both linguistically and religiously (*vv.* 46-50). The stone monument they raise (ingloriously called a “heap”) rests upon a foundation of mutual distrust. Thusly, before Jacob receives the name “Israel”, as posterity will know him, his conscience is preserved from false religion – just as Abram left behind his own father’s house and idols (*12:1; Jos. 24:2-3*).

En route back to Canaan, escorted by a military band (*machaneh*, “encampment”) of angels (*Gen. 32:1-2*), Jacob nonetheless feels himself as though out of the frying pan and into the fire. He hopes he has not completely burned the bridge spanning the Jordan river (*vv.* 9-10). “Although twenty years have passed, Esau still resents Jacob’s bold moves – at least Jacob thinks so. To that end Jacob lays out another stratagem. Not yet convinced that his security is not in himself, but in God, the carnal Jacob goes into action.” (Hamilton, p. 114) Jacob’s prayer for protection from the well-deserved wrath of Esau betrays that he knows who the true God is, though still operates according to the *opinio legis*. In this Jacob is hardly the first in his family (*cf.* *16:1-6; 17:18; 25:18; 26:1-4*). But in a cinematic struggle (*vv.* 11-30) on the “ford of Jabbok” (a wadi that still today runs into the Jordan known in Arabic as the *Zarqa*, or “Blue”), it is not his brother but God himself who runs afield. It is here Jacob once for all time comes to grips (so to speak) with his own salvation: “God could of course, simply have showed his glory and destroyed Jacob there and then by applying the law in all its ferocity. But he had another purpose than the law entirely. He wanted to exercise Jacob’s faith in the gospel, stretch, confirm, and increase it, and so God enters the fight as the preacher who will not preach until forced to.” (Paulson, pp. 311-312).

That his combatant was no creature but the Creator himself, Jacob “must have already suspected, when he would not let Him go until He blessed him; and it was put before him still more plainly in the new name that was given to him with this explanation, Thou hast fought with Elohim and with men, and hast conquered.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 304). Nevertheless, when asked what his name is, the angel declines, in line with what he later informed Moses: “I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as God Almighty, but my name Yahweh I did not make myself known to them.” (*Exod. 6:2-3*) Instead of revealing his own name – which would mean disclosing an identity Jacob ought to know from his prior activity on behalf of Abraham and Isaac – he bestows upon Jacob a new name: Israel (from the verb *sarah*, “to strive”; also the root of *sar*, “prince”). The bewildered patriarch exclaims: “For I have seen God face to face, yet my life has been delivered.” (*Gen. 33:30*) He evidently has in mind the longstanding knowledge that, as God would later make clear to Moses, “man shall not see me and live.” (*Exod. 33:20, 23; cf. 3:6; Is. 6:4; John 1:18; 1 Tim. 6:16*) Standing in the Lord’s counsel, however, qualifies one as a prophet (*Jer. 23:22; Isa. 41:8*). This privilege is afforded Jacob in exceptional ways.

During the course of Jacob’s conflict, the man “touches his hip socket, and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him.” (*Gen. 32:25*) This move is not a cheat, as though a loss was feared, but an indication that the interlocutor was no mere mortal. It may be that Moses is responsible for noting that “the people of Israel do not eat the sinew of the thigh that is on the hip socket, because he touched the socket of Jacob’s hip on the sinew of the thigh.” (*v.* 31) “The remark is applicable still,” Keil observes in his own time. (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 307) The custom is never given divine mandate in the Mosaic Law but quoted in the Babylonian Talmud (*Chul. 7b*) as part of the Mishna (intertestamental Jewish traditions, or *halakah [cf. Mark 7:1-13]*).

Genesis Bible Study – Session 16

“A Meeting and Parting of Ways” (Genesis 33)

Having beheld the “face of God” at *Peniel* (v. 31 maintains the archaic spelling *Penuel*), he now “lifted up his eyes and looked, and behold, Esau was coming, four hundred men with him.” (33:1) This meeting becomes, in the mind of Jacob, an analogue to the events of the night prior in which he has “seen God face to face,” and as he explains, “yet my life has been delivered.” (32:30) Before this historic encounter with God-in-flesh at the ford of Jabbok, Jacob had hoped to “see” and “appease the face of [his] brother” (28:20). He now exclaims upon meeting Esau: “For I have seen your face, which is like seeing the face of God” (33:10). “The thought is this: In thy countenance I have been met with divine (heavenly) friendliness... Jacob might say this without cringing, since he ‘must have discerned the work of God in the unexpected change in his brother’s disposition towards him” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 308).

In keeping with his resolve of the previous day (32:13-20), Jacob brings forward his wives, children, and livestock as a peace-offering, with himself at the head of a grand procession. “Note the difference between pre-Peniel Jacob, who brings up the rear of the company (“Pass before me” [32:16 RSV]), and the post-Peniel Jacob, who leads the procession to Esau” (Hamilton, p. 116-117). Then as follows, in the grandest gesture of all, he himself kowtows (*yishtachu* ‘*artsah*, quite literally, “stooping (as if to drink) the ground”) a significant seven times as his brother’s “servant.” (33:5) (In the Hebrew numerology, seven represents completeness: in this case, complete submission. The number obviously gains such significance patterned after the creation week [2:2].) In a speech that recalls the incident at Bethel some twenty years prior (28:20-22), Jacob humbly acknowledges that God is the party responsible for his hard-won and kept prosperity (33:10-11).

In possible fulfillment of his own paternal blessing (26:40), Esau has risen above circumstance. “Even if there was still some malice in Esau’s heart, it was overcome by the humility with which his brother met him, so that he allowed free course to the generous emotions of his heart; all the more, because the ‘roving life’ which suited his nature had procured him such wealth and power, that he was quite equal to his brother in earthly possessions.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 308) Esau notices the division of Jacob’s retinue in two camps (32:7-8; 33:8) and inquires as to what lies behind it. Jacob is out to find “favor” (*chen*). Esau’s acceptance of the tribute would be the result, not the cause, of this unmerited favour (v. 10). The contrast with Laban is stark: what the latter sought to demand (wrongfully) as his right, even under threat of violence (31:29), Esau is freely offered by a reconciled party. The proper gesture had been already given in abundance when Esau “ran to meet him and embraced him and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept.” (33:4)

Esau, contented with his lot, accepts lordship status over Jacob (vv. 8, 13) as well as some unspecified token from his (material) blessing (v. 11). Naturally it does not lie within his power to transfer the Abrahamic (spiritual) blessing (27:29) which during the centuries preceding Christ entailed possession of the land of Canaan. Fittingly, his older brother Esau settles in Seir (vv. 14-16) named in honour of Seir the Horite (36:20). Interestingly enough, the orthography of *Seir* is identical with the Hebrew term for “hairy.” Given Esau’s hairy appearance (25:25), the coincidence may be providential. At all events, the Lord would later acknowledge through the mouth of Moses before the Israelites enter the Promised Land, “I have given Mount Seir to Esau as a possession”; therefore he gives them the stern instruction, “I will not give you any of their land, no, not so much as for the sole of the foot to tread on” (*Deut.* 2:4-5).

When the nation of Israel did enter the land of Canaan under Moses' command, the Amalekites (descended from Esau [*Gen. 36:12*]) were the first to put up a resistance (*Num. 24:20*). The larger Edomite nation evidently subdued and absorbed the native Horites, about which little else is known, as they spread over Mount Seir at the southern tip of the Dead Sea (the area today mostly covered by the nation of Jordan). The Horites are commonly identified as troglodytes, that is, cave-dwellers. Following the Babylonian conquest of Judah (early 6th century BC), the Edomites settled the land immediately south (*cf. Ob. 10-12*) and there came to be known as the Idumeans. As a final bit of minutia: King Herod the Great (72-4 BC) and his son Herod Antipas, Tetrarch of Galilee (b. 20 BC), famous antagonists of Christ Jesus, were Idumeans and trace their descent from Esau.

For the time being, Jacob proceeds as Esau's bondservant, tethered to his brother as he moves in that direction. However, his nomadic lifestyle is not akin to his trading and raiding kinfolk, who need to be reminded that "that the nursing flocks and herds are a care to me. If they are driven hard for one day, all the flocks will die. Let my lord pass on ahead of his servant, and I will lead on slowly..." (*33:12-14*) Providence is at work propelling Jacob/Israel in the direction of his father Isaac, still dwelling in Hebron. This incidental separation, in the mind of the reader, portends a permanent division that is about to occur. Jacob will undergo a series of great trials in chs. 34-35 before eventually returning to his father's house; in any case, he will not reach Seir as intended ("these words... were not a willful deception for the purpose of getting rid of Esau" [*Ibid.*, p. 309]). There will be a parting of the ways in due course: one on benign terms, though a separation nonetheless (*cf. Matt. 8:18-22*). Jacob's stay in *Succoth* (named for the plural form of *shekinah*, a temporary residence, or "booth") demonstrates the fact that that he remains a pilgrim destined for the land promised to Abraham and Isaac (*13:15; 15:7; 17:18; 26:3; cf. 47:9*).

In the list of Esau's descendants of ch. 36, the reason cited is similar to the parting which took place between Abraham and Lot in ch. 13: "he went into a land away from his brother Jacob. For their possessions were too great for them to dwell together. The land of their sojournings could not support them because of their livestock." (*36:6-7*) (The editorial note "Esau is Edom" may suggest that Moses drew his genealogy from an Edomite source.) As previously noted, seemingly haphazard circumstances will propel Jacob's family forward to the land promised them. After an unknown interval of time spent in Succoth, they settle in the domain of Shechem and his father Hamor (*vv. 18-20*). There he takes care to erect an altar "and called it El-Elohe Israel" ("God, the God of Israel") to remove any question about his religious adherence.

Paul, using the religious disparity between Jacob and Esau (*Rom. 9:6-13*), repudiates the false view that salvation is conferred by blood descent from Abraham rather than through sharing the faith of Abraham. Another corrective is given by Louis A. Brighton. The *Concordia Commentary on Revelation* offers a theory as to why the list of the Twelve Tribes of Israel in Revelation 7:58 differs from any similar list in the Old Testament. "The 144,000" "servants of our God" (*vv. 3-4*) "are described in OT terms, as the twelve tribes of Israel. But it is not uncommon for NT authors to refer to the church of Jesus Christ, both Jews and Gentiles, in OT language ... Paul says that the believers in Jesus, both Jews and Gentiles, are the true Israel of God and true sons of Abraham." (Brighton, p. 188) "It is clear that a redefined list of the twelve tribes of Israel is used... a list that has been cleansed of any association of apostasy and idolatry [i.e. Ephraim and Dan]; a list that emphasizes faithfulness to God, hence the inclusion of Joseph and Levi; and in particular a list that focuses on the Messiah because of the placement of Judah." (*Ibid.*, p. 192) (*cf. 1 Ki. 12:28-33*)

Genesis Bible Study – Session 17

“Brotherly Conflict” (Genesis 34 - 35)

Jesus warns his disciples in the Sermon on the Mount: “Do not give to dogs what is holy, and do not throw your pearls before pigs” (*Matt. 7:6*); and Paul enjoins the Corinthians, “flee from idolatry . . . I do not want you to be communicants with demons.” (*1 Cor. 10:14-22*) The travelogue of chs. 34-35 not only charts the movement of Jacob’s family from Paddan-Aram back to Canaan. It furnishes object lessons in narrative prose about the dangers of desecration, deceit, and idolatry. The narrative begins with v. 18 of the preceding chapter: “And Jacob came safely (*shalem*, “peacefully” or “whole, entire”) to Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan” (*33:18*). The various shades of meaning in that Hebrew term will come into play after Jacob purchases some land in the territory under the charge of Hamor (*Chamor*, literally “ass”) and his Hivite son Shechem.

However, after a seemingly peaceful exchange, trouble waits at the hands of the prideful prince. Of all the daughters Jacob is likely to have had, only Dinah is mentioned (*30:21*) as having been born to Leah. Doubtless the ensuing incident accounts for this. A plain reading of the text suggests it would be naïve to think that Dinah completely innocent in the affair; for reasons that are not clear she “went out to see the women of the land” (*34:1*), inevitably thrusting herself under Shechem’s gaze. In short order “he took her and lay with her” (v. 2) – the verb *shakav* (“to lie”), unlike *yadah* (“to know”), never denotes violent rape. The impression is that he seduced rather than violated her. Indeed, the genuineness of Shechem’s affection is expounded on several points (vv. 3, 8, 19); furthermore, his later submission to the debilitatingly painful process of circumcision (vv. 18-24) rules out any possibility of a mere act of power on Shechem’s part. The moral degradation of the antediluvian “sons of God” (*6:1-2*) has been surpassed by Shechem, regarded as a stud among the “women of the land” and in any event accustomed to getting his way. Taken together, all these considerations highlight the reality that intimacy occasioned by a burst of affection fails to constitute a Biblically endorsed marriage. (“Love” does not make it okay!)

Hamor therefore pleads on behalf of his son for Dinah’s brothers to consent to her marriage to his son (vv. 7-8). As far as Jacob is concerned, the unchaste prince had “defiled (*tamme*) his daughter Dinah.” (v. 5) The verbal root *tame*’ indicates the state of being “unclean”, in the ceremonial sense of something restricted from participation in public worship, from the diet, or from the general conduct of believers. (Cf. *Lev. 11*; *Num. 19:7, 11-12*; *Deut. 26:14*; *Job 18:3*; *Is. 6:5*; cf. *Rev. 21:27*) For all this, Jacob suffers in silence until he can confer with his sons about handling the situation. Private killing is forbidden by the moral law (*Gen. 8:5-6*; *Exod. 20:13*), even in a spirit of revenge (*Gen. 4:15*; *Deut. 32:25*; *Rom. 12:19*). Later, though, Jacob acts within his rights as father to his sons for whose sake he refuses to hold his peace (v. 30): “Upon learning of his sons’ macabre war of revenge, he lashes out at Simeon and Levi . . . reserving even harsher words for a later period” (Hamilton, p. 117). These two would not contain their moral outrage at Shechem’s lewdness and sacrilege. The words they use would later be appropriated by the prophets to describe hopeless moral decay: “he had committed a folly (*nabal*) in Israel . . . for such a thing must not be done” (*Gen. 34:7*; *Jer. 29:23*). Their course of action will involve the worst brand of deceit (vv. 13-16) – showing themselves in this capacity true children of both to Jacob and Laban (*27:35*; *29:25*).

Shechem sweetens his father’s offer by saying, “Ask me for as great a bride price and gift as you will . . . only give me the young woman to be my wife.” (*34:12*) “Attractive as these offers of the Hivite prince and his son were, they were declined by Jacob’s sons, who had the chief voice in the

question of their sister's marriage ... And they were quite right; for, by accepting them, they would have violated the sacred call of Israel and his seed, and sacrificed the promises of Jehovah to Mammon. But they did it in the wrong way..." (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 313) They degrade the covenantal sign of circumcision (*17:9-14*) to a sort of bargaining price. Hamor and his son gladly consent to the terms that every male among them undergo the procedure, taking their proposal to the city gate (*vv. 20-24*). They "knew so well how to make the condition palatable, by a graphic description of the wealth of Jacob and his family, and by expanding upon the advantages of being united with them" – to whose property the root *sh^alemim*, "wholeness," is modified enticingly.

From what ensues, a complete reversal of the peaceful (*shalem*) mode of entry is achieved. "On the third day, when they were sore, two of the sons of Jacob, Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers, took their swords and came against the city while it felt secure and killed all the males." (*v. 25*) From *v. 26* it would seem Dinah had already been cohabiting with Shechem. Though, in something of a cruel irony, they plunder not only the city's goods but also "all the little ones and their wives" (*vv. 27-29*). Immediately Jacob makes his feelings known: "You have brought trouble on me by making me stink to the inhabitants of the land..." (*v. 30*) Collective vengeance for a massive crime, especially on a numerically vulnerable population, was unfortunately common (*Jud. 20*).

Brighter prospects come when Jacob receives a new, more conventional, theophany: "God said to Jacob, 'Arise, go up to Bethel and dwell (*shev*) there. Make an altar there to the God who appeared to you when you fled from your brother Esau.'" (*Gen. 35:1*) In this episode Jacob is about to make good on the vow he had promised (*28:20-22*) as well as have his new name reaffirmed (*35:10; cf. 32:27-28*) – perhaps this time in the hearing of his entire family. Despite recent scandals, they exit Shechem in safety guaranteed by "a terror" that "fell upon the cities that were around them" (*v. 5*). But not everyone is clear for entry into God's presence. Jacob has been wizened to the presence of "foreign gods" within his household, as per his injunction for all to "purify yourselves and change your garments" as they approached Bethel – whose name Jacob expands to *El-Bethel*, "the God of Bethel" (*v. 3;7*), and where he erects a proper monument. Tragically, the party responsible for maintaining forbidden idol worship is none other than Rachel, who stole from her father. (*31:20*) When Laban made a search of Jacob, the latter invoked the death penalty on anyone in his household in possession of the "household gods" (*v. 32*). "Careful Bible readers have always known that Jacob unwittingly condemned his beloved Rachel to death." (Tucker, p. 151)

The memory of this solemn worship ceremony is marred by two incidents. Jacob's favoured wife, Rachel, perishes before reaching the home of her father-in-law Isaac. "When they were still some distance from Ephrath" – a landmark which would later point toward the tiny village of Bethlehem (*v. 19; 48:7; Mic. 5:2; cf. Matt. 2:18*) – "Rachel went into labor, and she had hard labor." (*Gen. 35:16*) Before she tragically expires, a second son is born to Rachel, whom she names with her dying breath *Ben-Oni*, "son of my affliction; "but his father called him *Ben-Yamin*" which could mean "son of my right hand" or "my honor." Rachel's tomb is monumentalized near the side of the road to mark the place of her burial (*v. 20; cf. 1 Sam. 10:2*). Deborah, who had served as a nurse to Jacob's mother Rebekah and seems to have joined the family along their travels, was similarly revered; they name the place of her burial *'Allon-bakuth* ("Oak of Mourning") (*v. 8*) Another parenthetical note is added: that "Reuben went and lay with Bilhah his fathers' concubine" – and Rachel's former housemaid (*v. 22; 29:29; cf. Lev. 18:8*). This incest, though given brief treatment, lands Reuben in the company of Levi and Simeon when a dying Jacob recalls their sins, and on such grounds deprives them of privileges (*Gen. 49:3-4, 5-6*). Benjamin meanwhile brings the number of Jacob's sons up to twelve, of whom a list is given in *vv. 23-26*.

Genesis Bible Study – Session 18

“An Idle Dreamer” (Genesis 36 - 37)

Chapter 36 of Genesis consists entirely of a record of Esau’s descendants (*toledoth*). Like Ishamel before him (*Gen. 25:9, 12-18*), Esau attended his father Isaac’s funeral and buried him with Jacob (*35:28*). Isaac attained to the age of 180 – having fulfilled an unexpected period of forty-three years after he bestowed his blessings on Jacob and Esau in anticipation of dying (*ch. 26*). An important lesson may be gleaned about having one’s affairs in order prior to death from this, no less than from Abraham’s costly purchase of burial ground for his wife at Machpelah (*ch. 23*). “And Isaac breathed his last... old and full of days.” (*35:29*) Having lived in Mamre, the land formerly occupied by his father Abraham, Isaac is “gathered to his people” – that is, being united in death, which in a concrete sense implies being given a fit burial alongside his father, mother, and brother (*25:8; 18; cf. 15:5; 49:29; Num. 20:24; Jud. 2:10*). The expression “slept with his fathers” employed in the history of the Israelite kings more explicitly refers to the burial rite (*1 Ki. 2:10; 2 Chron. 26:23; 33:20*) as an earthly sign of eternal welfare. The family reunion underscores the tragedy associated with Rachel’s sudden death and burial away from home (*Gen. 35:20*).

“The ‘generations of Esau’ (KJV) are introduced by a description of the final parting of Esau and Jacob. We began... with Jacob fleeing from Esau. Here it is Esau who leaves Jacob. Much like a parting earlier between Abraham and Lot (*13:5-12*), Esau and Jacob bid each other adieu, and go their separate ways amicably.” (Hamilton, p. 118) “As Esau had also received a divine promise... and this history of his tribe was already interwoven with the paternal blessing with that of Israel... an account is given in the book of Genesis of his growth into a nation; and a separate section is devoted to this, which, according to the invariable plan of the book, proceeds the *toledoth* of Jacob.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 320) Esau is identified by his surname, Edom, and thusly with the nation that took that name (*36:1*). It is specially noted that Esau “took his wives from the Canaanites” (*vv. 2-3; 26:34*) who, though occupants of the land, were excluded from the material blessing given to Abraham and his descendants (*9:25; 13:14-15; 15:18-20*). The marriages to “Adah the daughter of Elon the Hittite” and “Oholibamah... the Hivite” become symbolic of self-exclusion from the household of faith (*cf. 28:1*). In addition to joining himself with the Hittites, Esau’s marriage to one of Ishmael’s daughters (*36:3*) doubtless put him on a fast track to prosperity and political advantage. Mount Seir (*33:14; 36:9*) serves as the chief landmark of the Edomite settlement: “the mountainous region between the Dead Sea and the Elanitic Guif, the northern half of which I scalled the *Jebâl*... by the Arabs” (Ibid., p. 322).

The Edomite nation is a veritable melting-pot of cultures, integrating such peoples as the Horites (*v. 20*): original inhabitants of Seir about whom little else can be known. However, the descendants of a certain grandson of Esau, Amalek by name, founded an offshoot nation which would plague Israel from the Exodus even down to the time of King Saul (*v. 12; Exod. 17:8-16; 1 Sam. 15*) To speak of the latter period, an editorial note mentions that – in addition to *’alluphim* or “heads of familial clans” (*v. 15*) – there were Edomite kings “before any king reigned over the Israelites” (*Gen. 36:31*) Any rational scholar will bear in mind that “[t]he presence of post-Mosaic additions do not in themselves determine the authorship of the five books of the Pentateuch.” (Livingston, p. 222) The mere fact that Israel would centuries later institute a monarchy of its own had been foreordained in the Lord’s covenant with Abram (*17:6*); however, the prophet Samuel would point out that they did so with the wrong intentions in mind: “now appoint us a king to judge us like all the nations (*k^{al}-haggoyim*)” (*1 Sam. 8*). Israel, descended from Jacob, was to remain distinct.

“Jacob had left his father’s house with no other possession than a staff, and now he returned with 12 sons.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 319) So it came to pass that “Jacob lived in the land of his father’s sojournings, in the land of Canaan.” (*Gen. 37:1*) Before a proper record of his progeny can be given, however, a robust history of said progeny is given, filling out chs. 37-50. A formal list (not coincidentally totaling seventy) appears following Jacob’s final settlement in Egypt (*46:8-27*).

Of immediate interest are the exploits of Joseph, “being seventeen years old” when the lengthy chain of events begins (*37:2*). “Jacob was 130 when he came to Egypt (*Gen. 47.9*), and so must have been ninety when Joseph was born.” (Ozanne, p. 25) The fact that “Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his sons” is introduced just following an account that the same Joseph “brought a bad report” of “the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah” (2-3) – that is, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, and Asher “who were nearer his age than the sons of Leah” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 335) (*35:25-26*). Both incidents portent to bitter conflict between the brothers. The ensuing sibling rivalry is exacerbated by two incidents. First, Joseph receives “a *k^athoneth passim* (“a coat with sleeves,” i.e. such as nobles wore) (*37:3*): doubtless a coveted prize which prevented his brothers even from extending him the customary greeting of “Shalom” (*v. 4*). (Ibid.) Secondly, Joseph has two thematically similar dreams (*vv. 7, 9*) of which the meaning comes immediately plain to his brothers. Even his father is abhorred by the suggestion that “I and your mother and your brothers indeed come to bow ourselves to the ground before you” (*vv. 8, 10*) Interpreters hesitate to call these dreams divine revelations: “What distinguishes Joseph’s dreams from these is that in all the other recorded dreams in Genesis God speaks clearly to the dreamer.” (Hamilton, p. 122) However, these dreams might have inflated Joseph’s ego, nevertheless their prophetic nature is confirmed by a later series of dreams (*chs. 40-41*). Luther rightly discourages modern Christians from treating dreams and visions as revelations on par with God’s direct revelation in Scripture (*cf. Heb. 1:1-2*).

First the ire of Joseph’s half-brothers (Benjamin being an infant at the time) rises to such a pitch that they conspire to murder “this dreamer” (*Gen. 37:18-20*). But after they manage to throw him into a waterless cistern and rob him of the robe (*vv. 20, 23-24*), Judah, who assumes a leading rôle among the brothers, raises the alternative of profitably selling him into slavery (*vv. 26-28*). (Being permanently separated from his family in Egypt seems, at the time, hardly a better prospect.) The Ishmaelites’ rapid rise to virtual dominance of trade routes along the Arabian Peninsula – even as far north as Assyria (*cf. Gen. 25:18*), would likely have used their name as the default generic term for nomadic peoples in the region. “Midianite traders” is given as the more specific identifier for the people involved in the transaction (*v. 28, 36*) (who, it bears to recall, were also descended from Abraham by his third wife Keturah [*25:1-4*]). For some reason Reuben was not involved in the act of imprisoning Joseph, though he harboured plans to rescue him in secret (*v. 21-22*); however, he presumes Joseph dead on seeing at the cistern that “the boy (*na ‘ar*) is gone” (*vv. 29-30*).

A helpless goat pays with its life as the whole group engages in deception, smearing the robe with its blood and breaking news to their father in the most brusque terms possible: “An evil (*ra ‘ah*) animal has devoured him; torn to pieces is Joseph (*taroph toraph Yoseph*).” (*vv. 31-33*) Jacob puts on the customary expressions of mourning, tearing his clothes and putting on sackcloth (*cf. Job 1:20; 16:15*), and piling on top lamentations. Only the thought of death is permitted to comfort him (*v. 35*). (That is *She ‘ol*, the subterranean holding-place which indiscriminately receives dead souls. “Hades” is the Greek equivalent.) Indeed, given full awareness of the situation: “How should his sons comfort him, when they were obliged to cover their wickedness with the sin of lying and hypocrisy, and when even Reuben, although at first beside himself at the failure of his plan, had not courage enough to disclose his brothers’ crime?” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 338)

Genesis Bible Study – Session 19

“The Illusion of Control” (Genesis 38)

Judah, the fourth son of Jacob born to Leah, assumes the position of prominence among his brothers after the indiscretions of his older brothers Reuben (*Gen. 35:22*), Simeon, and Levi (*ch. 34*). From his loins will descend a dynasty of kings (*49:10; 1 Chron. 28:4*) and, by extension, the Messianic ruler of the world (*Is. 11:1-11; Rev. 5:5*). It is Judah who, years later, will negotiate on behalf of Leah’s sons with the ruler of Egypt (who, unbeknownst to them, turns out to be their half-brother Joseph in disguise). (*Gen. 44*) In many ways he fulfills the prophetic meaning behind his name, *yahudah* (“praise be to *Yah*, the Lord”); yet the conduct in ch. 38 of Genesis is far from praiseworthy before coming to the point of the initial blessing, to “Be fruitful and multiply” (*1:28*).

With Judah’s progeny in mind, the author makes a brief excursus (so to speak) from the much longer narrative concerning Joseph, fixing the reader’s attention in the land of Canaan. “The only reasonable explanation,” Donald Reford theorizes, “of the present order of the chapters must be chronological. Chapter 38 could not follow... since Judah is then in Egypt for the rest of his life” (Hamilton, p. 128). Judah separates himself from his brothers (“went down from”) in Hebron to Adullam, the “lowland” or plains. (*Jos. 15:35*) The location where Judah “pitched (his tent)” (*wayyet*) is given as Chezib, which fell under the dominion of a certain Canaanite Hirah (*Gen. 31:1, 5*). (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 339). There beyond the watchful eye of his father Jacob he marries an attractive Canaanite woman: the daughter of one Shua who, like Hirah, is not again mentioned. Without further comment he sires three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. (*v. 2-4*) This mixed marriage paves the way for more than one scandalous affair which follows. Tamar, Judah’s daughter-in-law, finds herself at the centre of it all and through dire necessity assumes a position of agency.

Tamar is chosen to be the wife of Er, Judah’s firstborn. Curiously, her parentage is not mentioned. Er, however, “was wicked in the sight of the Lord, and the Lord put him to death.” (*vv. 6-7*) Er’s brother Onan, being next in birth order, is next in line to marry Tamar in an early example of Levirate marriage (*Deut. 25:5-10; cf. Ruth 4; Luke 20:27-33*). Onan, however, understanding the implications of this law – that “the offspring would not be his” – “he would waste the semen on the ground” (*Gen. 38:9-9*), engaging in *coitus interruptus*. “This act not only betrayed a want of affection for his brother, combined with a despicable covetousness for his possession and inheritance, but was also a sin against the divine institution of marriage and its object” (Ibid., 340).

This being the only reference in all Scripture to the practice of birth control, the obvious case study in morality is worth opening. Artificial means of contraception have been falsely touted as a medical necessity; however, “to treat pregnancy as if it were a disease implies that there is something defective in the way women are created – that a woman’s fertility is a curse.” Not to mention, certainly in Tamar’s experience, “That is not a very liberating experience for any woman.” (Evert, p. 24) “Babies are a gift from God, ‘the fruit of the womb a reward’ (Ps 127:3b) ... the goddess of contraception and abortion offer ‘salvation’ not only from parental and societal responsibility, but also from being fully human; euphonicly in tune with the demonic frequency of loathing our ‘creatureliness.’” (Ristau, p. 61) Harold Ristau’s theological insights are square with Luther’s characteristic treatment of the narrative in his Genesis lectures: “The exceedingly foul deed of Onan, the basest of wretches... is a most disgraceful sin. It is far more atrocious than incest and adultery. For Onan goes in to her; that is, he lies with her and copulates ... Surely at such a time the order of nature established by God in procreation should be followed.”

The Lutheran Confessions cite the natural order against the forbidding of clerical marriage: “Our opponents reply with the silly argument that originally there was a command to replenish the earth, but now that the earth has been replenished marriage is not commanded.” (The same “clever argument” is employed today on the dubious grounds of Thomas Robert Malthus’ [1766-1834] debunked theory of overpopulation). “The Word of God did not form the nature of men to be fruitful only at the beginning of creation, but it still does as long as this physical nature of ours exists ... Where nature does not change, there must remain the ordinance which God has built into nature, and human regulations cannot abolish it.” (*Ap XXIII* 8, 9) Man and woman were given dominion – that is, freedom – over “the fish of the sea and the birds of the air” in tandem with the blessing to “be fruitful” (*Gen. 1:27-30*). Freedom to honor, not spurn, such gifts.

Onan is also punished for his wickedness (*Gen. 38:10*), after which Judah is (put charitably) slow in fulfilling his promise to wed Tamar to his surviving son, Shelah (*v. 10*). Shelah, for his part, repeats the pattern of low regard for the marital estate, as the responsibility for siring a son for Tamar and grandson for Judah has been marked as a truly grave one! (*Cf. Tob. 3:7-9*) Judah is “comforted” after the death of his wife, who goes unnamed perhaps to highlight her Canaanite heritage (*v. 12*), and he “goes up” to Timnah, a mountainous region within the territory later allotted to the tribe of Judah (*Jos. 15:10*). Tamar smells a rat; she “covered herself with a veil, wrapping herself up, and at the entrance of Enaim, which is on the end to Timnah.” (*v. 14*) To make matters worse after Judah has had his way with her, the office she impersonates is described as *q^adeshah*, literally “sacred woman,” that is in this cultural context “cult prostitute” (*v. 21*). “This was no doubt regarded as the most respectable designation for public prostitutes in Canaan.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 431) Under pretense as security for proper payment for her services, but in actuality for purposes all her own, Tamar keeps Judah’s signet ring and his staff (*vv. 16-17*).

In due time, unmarried Tamar is found to have conceived “through harlotry” (*liznunim*) (*v. 24*). Now Tamar stands under the penalty of death (stoning would be prescribed under the Mosaic Law for a harlot [*Deut. 22:20-23*]). However, she has the means of escape: Tamar incriminates Judah for his immorality, prompting him to say: “She is more righteous than I” (*vv. 24-26*). “The significant role that Judah’s daughter-in-law, Tamar, plays in preserving the ‘purity’ of the line of Judah should not be overlooked ... [Judah] has done something that Abraham did not want Isaac to do (28:1): he has married a Canaanite woman (38:2).” (Hamilton, p. 129) Tamar receives special mention in St. Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus (*Matt. 1:3*): a genealogy which parts with custom in naming certain women as well as men. Four of these five women represent less than ideal unions (*vv. 5-6*). Despite all the irregularity of Tamar’s pregnancy, the *opinio legis* yet seeks for a toehold in the rights of primogeniture. As the hand of one of her twin boys emerges, it is given the honour of a scarlet thread; but that hand retracts, allowing the “younger” one to fully emerge, whom the midwife scolds for the presumption: “What a breach (*paratsta*) you have made for yourself!” (*vv. 27-29*) Thusly his name becomes Perez, while the “elder” brother is named Zerah (“rising”).

Interestingly enough, what began for Judah as a marriage of indiscretion landed him in an unenviable situation: he is bound by fatherly duties to a woman with whom he is forbidden further intimate relations. Refusing to put an innocent party to death, and thereby setting aside his own pleasure for care of his daughter-in-law, becomes Judah’s first admirable act in the entire narrative. He becomes the antithesis to Onan. “Love is not whatever we want it to be. Love is not merely an intense feeling or the sharing of pleasure. Love is to live according to the image in which we’re made. Love is to give ourselves away, freely, totally, faithfully, and fruitfully in imitation of Christ.” Christopher West is further cited: “Contraceptive intercourse contradicts all of this.” (Evert, p. 14)

Genesis Bible Study – Session 20

“Captivity in Egypt” (Genesis 39 - 40)

Genesis 37-40, with the exclusion of ch. 38, occupy themselves with Jacob’s son Joseph. Aptly he is favored being “the son of his old age” (37:3) but also the first son born to his favored wife Rachel (30:22-24). His birth was wrought by a special visitation (remembrance) by God. Hardly is Joseph introduced as an adult of seventeen (37:2), however, before he finds himself the object of his half-brothers’ ire, tossed in a pit and ultimately sold into slavery. The extensive attention given to Joseph indicates that he is understood to be an inheritor of the Abrahamic blessing (12:1-3); “This command and promise reverberate through the rest of the Book of Genesis and beyond, and we can already see the relevance for Genesis 39 and the Joseph story.” (Longman, p. 37)

“But if this promise is God’s will,” Paulson frames the question, “why the removal of Joseph’s coat, the pit, the slavery, the bureaucracy of Egypt, and the arrival at Joseph’s door of his offending brothers? Is this the result of the divine promise? There is no other possible feeling for Joseph in the midst of his trials than that he had lost God’s favor – that God was angry, and that the promise (and so the Holy Spirit) had been removed. ‘He took his promise from me!’ But is this exclamation not a lie?” (Paulson, Vol. 3, p. 395) By way of further trial in Egypt (*chs. 39-40*) (a sort of foil for Canaan, the Promised Land), Joseph’s faith comes under attack. His turn at *Anfechtung*.

Joseph finds himself in servitude to “an Egyptian”: Potiphar, a *s^eries par^eoh*, that is “official of Pharaoh.” The term often indicates a “eunuch,” which many court officials in the ancient world were made to be in order to prevent philandering (Hamilton, p. 123) (*cf. Dan. 1; Acts 8:27*) That possibility, however, in his case is ruled out by mention of his wife. Potiphar’s office is further specified as Captain of the Guard. His high rank also places Joseph, destined to become chief steward (*Gen. 39:4-6*), in close proximity to the heights of the Egyptian political establishment. Joseph would recognize that “He is not greater in this house than I am, nor has he kept back anything from me” (*v. 9*) – terms which later in Joseph’s career would characterize his relation to Pharaoh himself (*41:40*). “Joseph seems blown about by the winds of fortune, but wherever he is, God makes him successful. And these events move him closer and closer to the center of Egyptian power.” (Longman, p. 35) Potiphar’s unnamed wife, for her part, seems to be “a victim of boredom and her own unbridled lust.” (Hamilton, p. 123) She takes notice that Joseph was “handsome in form and appearance” (the Hebrew term *y^epeh* is used twice) and sees an opportunity.

For a time, Joseph resists the advances of his master’s wife. Here the reader encounters a real-life scenario fictionalized in the Egyptian “Tale of Two Brothers” and, most famously, in the Greek playwright Euripides’ *Hippolytus*. “Joseph is a paradigm for how someone in a close relationship with God should act when tempted. Joseph understand that to agree to sleep with this woman would be a betrayal not only of her husband, who trusted him, but, more importantly, God, who, the passage emphasizes again and again, is the cause of his prosperity.” (Longman, p. 35) His conduct remains upright until the very point the temptress takes matters into her own hands – literally, seizing his clothing (*vv. 11-13*) There is a clear application though this tangled affair, as St. Paul reminds the Corinthians: “God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.” (*1 Cor. 10:13; cf. Pr. 30:20; Jas. 1:12-15; 1 Pet. 15*) More compelling than the circumstantial evidence Potiphar’s wife brings to bear, she plays upon the prejudices of her Egyptian servants: “See, he has brought among us a Hebrew to laugh at us.” (*Gen. 39:14; cf. 43:32*)

This well-concocted slur she repeats to her husband. “But as soon as I lifted up my voice and cried, he left his garment beside me and fled out of the house.” (39:18) *Nota bene*: “She said... ‘by my side,’ not ‘in my hand,’ as that would have shown the true state of the case.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 345) The author interrupts her speech highlighting the words “These things your servant did to me” (v. 19) as inciting. It may be a case of wounded pride that inclined the Captain of the Guard to act so promptly; in any case, he confines Joseph to “the place where the king’s prisoners were confined” (v. 20). All this understood, Keil raises the possibility that “Potiphar was not fully convinced of his wife’s chastity, and therefore did not place unlimited credence in what she said,” given the severe legal ramifications for adultery and attempted rape (Ibid.) as well as the aforementioned lack of concern for Hebrews. Be this as it may, the truest explanation is God’s care and protection.

The injustice demonstrates following God’s commands does not guarantee a peaceful existence nor, as Job famously observed, is suffering the proven result of wrongdoing. (Job 12:1-4) Romans 8:28 has been sorely abused to drive the contrary thesis; but context is king. “For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us.” (Rom. 8:18ff) Luther carefully read his own circumstances into this part of Genesis (*ennaratio*): “Joseph’s reward of prison reveals him as a true martyr and ‘Christ, the bishop of souls who is mindful of hell and death, is the only one who sees Joseph, the only one who cares about him.’ Yet Christ, present with Joseph, grants him a resolute heart, and the Holy Spirit is given as a gift that ‘shines forth on the outside, with the result that this grace is seen in the demeanor [sic.], the words, the face, and the gestures.’ God governs the saints in a way that they may see him from the back; he seems at first to be the devil, not God, but this is his way” (Maxfield, p. 28).

Even so, a pattern reasserts itself; he steps into a considerably enviable stewardship rôle on behalf of the chief warden (Gen. 39:20-23). All this because “The Lord was with Joseph”. “Joseph’s regal character and influence became evident when he was in prison. He became assistant to the keeper of the royal prison (Gen. 39:21-23). In that position he was able to interact with the prisoners from the royal court. This, in turn, gave him the opportunity to interpret the dreams of the butler and the baker (40:9-19). This ability to interpret dreams, which Joseph acknowledged as God’s prerogative (40:8), was the key factor in his return to the royal court.” (Van Groningen, p. 151) Over the course of his imprisonment he encounters two royal servants who had fallen out of favour with Pharaoh, each of whom have an ominous dream the same night (40:2-5). Their superstition aroused, they get more than they could have expected from Joseph: neither a seriously trained teller of fortunes nor a charlatan but already himself the recipient of prophetic dreams (37:5-11).

The dreams of these prisoners (whose offenses are not recorded as irrelevant) (40:9-13; 16-19) are united by the symbolic number three: the cupbearer’s dream foretells that he will be restored to his former status “in three days”; the baker, much to his disappointment, is about to be executed. They are also tied together by a play on words by Joseph: “in three days Pharaoh will ‘lift up your head’ (*nissah... ’eth-rosh^eka*) – from you!” he says to the ill-fated baker, who would be condemned to beheading and the ultimate disgrace of impalement. (cf. Deut. 21:23; Est. 7:9-10) This service is rendered done in hopes for escape from the executioner’s house; Joseph relates that he was “stolen out of the land of the Hebrews” (Gen. 40:14). He remembers his status as a son of Abraham. The cupbearer, however, forgets his promise (v. 23) as though to make further exercise of the patriarch’s patience. “So Joseph, the favored/elect under his crushing attack, continues: ‘But I will bear the hand of the Lord and say: ‘Thou art my God. Thy promise and Word remain forever. With this I shall console myself in the face of that horrible offense.’ Joseph had a graspable God in a wrapper – in a preached promise – and he clung to it, having nothing else to grasp.” (Paulson, p. 395)

Genesis Bible Study – Session 21

“Second to None” (Genesis 41 - 42)

Luther and Paulson assure that Joseph’s initial election by his father, not to mention the divine promise that his brothers would bow down before him (*Gen. 37:5-10*), “does not exclude but actually ensures that ‘he comes into conflict with difficulties which are put in his way as if he had neither God nor any promise.’ But the conflict, or signs, cannot remove the promise – they only leave Joseph with the feeling and thought ‘as if’ the promise were gone, but faith grasps it nevertheless ... For this reason, it was likely that Joseph was in greater danger of ignoring his preached promise when he was later made the powerful man of Egypt who could destroy his brothers at a mere sign than when he was weak in the pit; empowerment does not help faith, but hinders it.” (Paulson, Vol. 2, p. 263) Neither, of course, does faith come “from resignation”; God remains in control; “he who keeps Israel will neither slumber or sleep.” (*Ps. 121:4*) (*Ibid.*, p. 264)

Genesis chapter 41 sets the scene in Pharaoh’s chamber, “after two whole years” (*Gen. 41:1*) following the release of his chief cupbearer (*40:21*). The drama of two successive, frightening dreams unfold before the reader: first, seven “attractive and plump” cows risen from the Nile are devoured by seven “ugly, thin cows” – “but when they had eaten them no one would have known” (*41:2-4, 21*); second, seven ears of grain, “plump and good,” are swallowed up by seven ears “thin and blighted by the wind” (*vv. 5-7*). This pairing had earlier characterized Joseph’s dreams and those of the imprisoned cupbearer and baker (*vv. 5-19*) as bearing the divine stamp (*v. 32*). The reader knows what to expect even while Pharaoh exhausts the efforts of all Egypt’s magicians (*v. 8*). Joseph is the one to put their efforts to shame – though confessing that “It is not in me; God will give Pharaoh a favorable answer (literally *'omed 'al-sh'lom*, “answer in full”).” (*v. 16*)

This incident causes the chief cupbearer to remember his “offenses” (*chata'i*) and relates how a “young Hebrew” prisoner had properly divined his dream and that of the baker. (*vv. 9-13*) Respecting his station Pharaoh is addressed in the third person throughout. In his own words, “The dreams of Pharaoh are one; God has revealed to Pharaoh what he is about to do...” (*v. 25-32*) (Daniel, or Belteshazzar, a member of the Babylonian court of Nebuchadnezzar, would perform the same service with the blessing of God. [*Dan. 2; 4*]) The Hebrew title *El Shaddai* – of obscure origins but commonly translated as “God Almighty” – is invoked by Jacob throughout the Joseph narrative (*Gen. 43:14; 48:3; cf. 48:25*). Fitly so, as Luther explains the First Commandment: “In other words: ‘Whatever good thing you lack, look to me for it and seek it from me, and whenever you suffer misfortune and distress, come and cling to me. I and the one who will satisfy you and help you out of every need. Only let your heart cling to no one else.’” (*LC I 4*)

The one who holds the future providentially ordains earthly means by which to direct it. The dreams foretell seven years of plenty and seven years of famine to follow; upon the heels of this explanation Joseph proposes a plan to confront these varied prospects. He instructs Pharaoh to appoint officers to “gather all the food of these good years that are coming and store up grain ... That food shall be a reserve for the land against the seven years of famine” (*vv. 34-36*). Pharaoh in turn recognizes that the “spirit of the gods (*'elohim*)” is in Joseph: “i.e. the spirit of supernatural insight and wisdom.” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 350). He piles honours and gifts upon Joseph: his own signet ring, his second chariot, and a gold chain, promoting him to the position of grand vizier. What these signify is made plain by his words: “Only as regards the throne will I be greater than you ... without your consent no one shall lift up hand or foot in all the land of Egypt.” (*vv. 37-44*)

As the newly appointed vizier goes along in pomp, the Egyptian command ‘*abrek*, “Bow the knee!” becomes one of several details to support the authenticity of this narrative (alongside Joseph’s complete assimilation of the Egyptian language and custom [42:23; 43:32] and claim to practice divination [44:15] throughout the ruse with his brothers). It also foreshadows a fulfillment of Joseph’s own dreams in which even his father, Israel, would bow “before the head of his staff” in a proper show of reverence (47:31). That particular oddity demonstrates how respect for civil authorities is implied by the Fourth Commandment. (*Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13-17*) (*LC I 161; III 75*) Joseph indeed proves himself equal to his service when the fourteen critical years descend upon Egypt (*Gen. 41:53-57*). The bulk of ch. 47 offers a fleshed-out account of 43:56: “when the famine had spread over all the land, Joseph opened all the storehouses and sold to the Egyptians.”

At the time of his promotion, Joseph has attained to the age of thirty, having laboured a round twenty-three years in slavery to Potiphar and in prison (*ch. 40*). “The sense that Joseph’s fortunes are about to change for the better emerges from his exogamous and fruitful marriage to the Egyptian Asenah (v. 45). From this marriage come two sons, whom Joseph names Manasseh and Ephraim (vv. 51-52). The first son’s name is a reminder that God is helping Joseph forget the hurts of his past – what some today might call ‘the healing of the memories,’ or in the words of Phil. 3:13, ‘forgetting what is behind.’” (Hamilton, pp. 124-125) Ephraim, for its part, means “fruitful” (*cf. Gen. 1:28; 17:6; 35:11*) – God had blessed Joseph “in the land of (his) affliction” (41:52).

Early during the widespread famine (*cf. 45:11; Acts 11:28*) Jacob instructs his sons to “go down” to Egypt “and buy grain for us there” (*Gen. 42:2*). That Benjamin, youngest son of Jacob and full brother to Joseph, is not sent with them (v. 4) becomes a point of intrigue. The ten elder brothers come in fulfillment of the statement that “all the earth came to Egypt... to buy grain” (41:37). In their case a knowing Joseph obliges, though in an untoward manner; he puts them in custody for three days upon the suspicion that they are “spies” come to scope out “the nakedness of the land” (42:8-17). “By the coming of their youngest brother, Joseph wanted to test their assertion, not because he thought it possible that... they might have treated him as they did Joseph... but because he wished to discover their feelings toward Benjamin” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 355). Keil rightly observes that “Joseph had not intention to administer to his brethren ‘a just punishment for their wickedness towards him,’ for his heart could not have stooped to such mean revenge”. The roughness with which he treats these visitors from Canaan is consistent with his assumed position; Joseph’s true feelings are made clear to the reader as he weeps, secretly overhearing their conversation in Hebrew. (v. 24) Here are the first echoes of remorse as the brothers undergo an excruciating trial of self-examination. (*Ps. 32:3-4; 1 Cor. 11:31*)

Demanded to produce their youngest brother Benjamin, Simeon put up as security (vv. 24, 36), the brothers are further distraught at the possibility of further misunderstanding on account of the failed payment for their grain (vv. 26-28). “Their hearts fail them because they have a guilty conscience. Luther drew again and again upon this passage and finally turned his lecture to address the guilt-stricken brothers... ‘Do you ask why God does this? But why do you not rather say: “Why did we do this to God, or why did we not confess our sin?”’” (Maxfield, p. 67) They make report back to their father all the goings-on in Egypt and the necessity of their return. (vv. 29-34) as Jacob gives the opportunity to reflect on their mistreatment of Joseph. “My son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is the only one left.” (v. 38) As before upon learning of Joseph’s seeming demise (37:35), the stubborn old man steels himself for only grim days ahead: “you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol.” Reuben offers the life of his sons should he fail as recompense for the loss of two sons. Little does he know who truly holds their fate in his hands!

Genesis Bible Study – Session 22

“All’s Well That Ends Well” (Genesis 43:1 - 47:12)

The Joseph narrative beginning at Genesis ch. 37 constitutes a divine comedy in the classical sense – that is, a story which ends happily. A major element of comedy is the revelation of truth, something which occurs when Joseph reveals his identity to his eleven brothers (*Gen. 45:1-3*) after what proves to be an ordeal not only for him. This not solely for his brothers, but also for his father Jacob, who must confess: “Few and evil have been the days of my life,” something he calls “sojourning” (from the verbal root *gur*) (*47:9; cf. v. 4*). Well may he say this, as the reader keeps in mind the words of Hebrews ch. 11: “These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For people who speak thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland.” (*Heb. 11:13-14*) Nonetheless, the hard-worn Jacob/Israel lives to see the return of his favoured son Joseph, reconciliation between the brothers, and relief during the famine. (*Gen. 47:11-12*)

Presumably Joseph is able to view his brothers, together with Benjamin, the youngest, from an upper level of his dwelling (*43:16; cf. 26:8*). The author opens ch. 43 with the simple statement “the famine became great (*hara’ah*) in the land.” (*43:1*) Circumstances propel Israel, to this point reticent about sending his sons back to Egypt in compliance with the orders of “the lord of the land” (*42:30-34; 43:3-5*), to relent and send his sons back to purchase more grain along with Benjamin. (*vv. 11-14*) They are to go with “double the money” since (unbeknownst to them) Joseph had returned their initial payment in their sacks (*42:25*). Not to be missed, they are also instructed to bring as a peace-offering “a little honey, gum, myrrh, pistachio, nuts, and almonds.” Honey is one of the attractions of the land of Canaan during the Exodus (*Exod. 3:17; Num. 14:8; Deut. 31:20*). Israel accepts his lot, Judah having reasoned with his father. (*Gen. 43:8-10*) “Send the boy with me ... If I do not bring him back to you, then let me bear the blame (*chata’*) forever –” the Hebrew term meaning “to be guilty of a sin and atone for it, as in 1 Kings i. 21” (Keil-Deiltsch, p. 359). Judah assumes his destined leadership rôle. (*cf. 44:18-34; 48:8*) Israel piously commends the venture to God Almighty (*’El Shaddai*), showing an attitude emulated in prayers for the morning, evening, travel, and all other circumstances (*cf. Ps. 31:5; Jas. 4:13-15*).

Joseph’s butler negotiates on his behalf with the brothers (*Gen. 43:16-24*), releasing Simeon and explaining in the first place that there are no hard feelings about the money. Joseph, still playing his rôle as an Egyptian stranger, accounts for the affair saying: “Your God and the God of your father has put treasure in your sacks for you” (though the personal inquiry about their father [*v. 27*] hints at what later will be revealed). Next, using the commonly employed Hebrew idiom up to this point, it is depicted how Joseph “lifted up his eyes and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother’s son –” no half-brother like the sons of Jacob’s wife Leah (*35:23*), but born of his other wife Rachel (*v. 24*). He invokes the grace of God in the singular (*43:29*) and, once more, handles his emotions in secret before cordially inviting the whole company to dinner. (*vv. 30-31*) “That the text of ten draws attention to Joseph’s tears must be a way of informing the reader that Joseph is not being vindictive and that is motives, however mysterious, cannot be as sinister as they might appear.” (Hamilton, p. 126) They are seated according to rank (*cf. Luke 14:7-11*), that is, by age, something known to Joseph to the astonishment of the company (*Gen. 43:33*). At the same time Joseph commanded a fivefold portion be served to Benjamin, “that he might see whether they would envy and hate him on account of this distinction, as they had formerly envied him his long coat with sleeves, and hated him because he was his father’s favourite” (Keil-Deiltsch., p. 362). (*cf. 37:3-4*)

The charade concludes with an ultimate test: in a deceptive fashion similar to the previous incident with the grain money, he now frames Benjamin in the theft of a silver cup made more costly by its (alleged) use in fortune-telling (44:1-13). On behalf of his brothers, Judah steps up to placate the wrath of Joseph. (vv. 14-34) As part of the ruse, the latter will hold no one to account with his life but the seemingly guilty party: Benjamin, in whose sack “the cup was found” (v. 17; cf. v. 9). Judah, in a well-established pattern for Genesis, relates the whole history of the affair. Recognizing of Joseph’s exalted position as grand vizier of Egypt (v. 18; cf. 45:8), he refers to Jacob as “your servant my father”. He makes full account of his father’s preference for Benjamin, as well as his grief at the loss of the equally beloved Joseph. Judah goes so far to state that their father will die of grief if Benjamin too is lost: “I fear to see the evil that would find my father.” (44:34) Judah’s moving speech has the intended effect on Joseph. Although he dismisses all but the family, his weeping can still be heard by the dismissed Egyptians, as well as “the household of Pharaoh” (45:1-2), “i.e. the royal family” (Ibid., p. 365). Joseph puts his brothers’ fears to rest with the words: “Come near to me, please” (45:4) and an outpouring of brotherly affection on them all. (vv. 14-15)

Much more than a show of the value of repentance, this narrative is an exercise of faith under attack (*Anfechtung*) that spared no one, including the aggrieved parties: Jacob and Joseph. It could not be otherwise. “With Joseph’s story, Luther summed up what this spiritual attack is about. It first reveals the brothers’ sin, and then makes Joseph into their preacher with the same promise he received: ‘Here he absolves them from their sin.’ As Luther says, by doing this ‘heaven is opened and hell is closed.’” (Paulson, p. 264) And with the confession free of any word of reproach, ‘And God sent me before you’ (vv. 7-8; cf. 50:20), “When Joseph finally sees in hindsight... he not only knows God’s good pleasure, or feels what mercy is like even while fearing the loss of God’s law or sign, but is made into a divine practice himself – and instrument of God’s good pleasure.” (Ibid.) Joseph, and no one else (45:12), once called and now ordained, preaches forgiveness.

There remains further work to do: with the blessing of Pharaoh (v. 16) and, not to be missed, God himself (46:3), Joseph arranges for his father and whole family to settle in “the best of all the land of Egypt” and enjoy a splendid material gift besides (45:20-24). Israel, scarcely able to believe the news that his son Joseph still lives (vv. 25-28), returns to the altar at Beersheba erected by his father Isaac after staking a property claim there (26:23-33). At that familiar locale he receives a word of comfort from God: “Do not be afraid to go down to Egypt, for there I will make you into a great nation. I myself will go down with you to Egypt, and I will also bring you up again” (46:1-4). The brief travelogue (vv. 5-7) shortly becomes a table of Israel’s offspring: his sons and grandsons, every person (*nepesh*, “soul”) accounted for that went to Egypt (vv. 8-27). Moses stylistically places the total number “seventy” at the end of the record. So it happens that the Israelites settle the land of Goshen (46:28-29, 33-34), a district of agrarian Egypt to be reserved for the undesirable shepherding caste to which the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had always belonged. (The description “land of Ramses” may be editorial [cf. *Exod. 1:11*].) This segregation would account for how certain plagues turned on Egypt would not affect the Israelites (8:22; 9:26). By that stage involving Hebrew oppression, the gratitude owed Joseph will have been long forgotten. (1:8)

As is only fit, Joseph enjoys a tearful reunion with his father Jacob/Israel, who may now die in peace (*Gen. 46:30*). He then makes good on his resolve to petition Pharaoh to allow the people to settle (47:1-6). Jacob, an old man of 130 years, has the honor of blessing Pharaoh (v. 10) in the presence of his son, no less a minister. “Luther’s interpretation of the Joseph narrative could be described as typological interpretation: Joseph typifies God and thus symbolically reveals the events of history what the words of the prophets might just as well proclaim.” (Maxfield, p. 71)

Genesis Bible Study – Session 23

“The Father’s Blessing” (Genesis 47:13 - 49:27)

Joseph, the son of Jacob (Israel) and his favoured wife Rachel turned grand vizier of Egypt, had explained to his brothers that “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors” (*Gen. 45:7; cf. 50:20*). “Primarily, the ‘preserved life’ and ‘many people’ mentioned by Joseph to his brothers must refer to the descendants of Abraham.” Such is clear from the word “remnant” (*sherith*) often used in prophetic literature (*Is. 1:9; 45:20-23; 65:9; Jer. 23:3-8; Joel 2:32; Zeph. 3:13; Zech. 9:7*) to describe the portion left of Israel that would see the Messianic promise fulfilled (and, then united in fellowship with Gentiles, come to faith [*cf. Rom. 11:5*]). As it stands at the conclusion of Genesis, however, the promise remains exclusive property of the Abrahamic household of faith. “We have observed many instances in Genesis in which God’s people have been threatened with extinction. And if that family that bears the covenant promise is annihilated, does this mean that all the promises of God evaporate into thin air?” (Hamilton, p. 127) Such is not the case, so that “Into the family and nation of promise, who were so dramatically spared by Joseph, is born Jesus Christ, who brings salvation to the world. For the Christian this is the most necessary and theologically rich level.” (Longman, p. 37)

Before following the activities of the family, a brief record of the history of Egypt through the remaining years of famine (*Gen. 47:13-31*) is furnished “to make the extent of the benefit conferred by Joseph upon his family, in providing them with the necessary supplies during the years of famine, all the more apparent” (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 377). Once more the famine is described as “very great” so that there was “no food in all the land” (*v. 13*). The common people find themselves impoverished after buying the grain – of which nevertheless a seemingly inexhaustible store had been laid up (*41:49*). To avoid starvation, they are reduced to bartering first their livestock (*47:17*); then a year later, the land itself (*v. 20*). Joseph “not only had he the good of the people and the interests of the king in view, but the people themselves accepted it as a favour, inasmuch as in a land where the produce was regularly thirty-fold, the cession of a fifth could not be an oppressive burden.” (Ibid., p. 379) The average Egyptian was in the process reduced to serfdom, the warrior and priestly castes assuming control of landed property which was subjected to a yearly tax (*47:23-26*). This feudalizing of Egypt is attested by the ancient historian Herodotus (*Hist. 2.109*). More to the point, Joseph’s policy of reserving a fifth of each year’s harvest (*41:34*) – one which had already preserved the nation from devastation by famine – was guaranteed to continue.

Joseph’s family, properly segmented in Goshen from the rest of Egyptian society (*47:6; 23*), is for their part guaranteed a secure existence. Like their forebears in the lands of Canaan and Paddan-Aram (*24:34; 30:43*) the children of Israel “gained possessions in it, and were fruitful and multiplied greatly” as per God’s promise before entering (*46:3*). Jacob (Israel) is recorded as having lived out the final seventeen years of his life in Egypt, totaling 147 years. (*47:9, 28*) It may be of significance that Joseph had been seventeen when he was initially sold into Egypt (*37:2*). As elsewhere in Genesis, chronology gives way to more nuanced thematic narration (*cf. chs. 1-2*); Jacob’s anticipated death (*47:29*) sets the background for the action of blessing which follows. In first order, however, Israel gives homage to the grand vizier (*47:31*) and renders to Joseph an intimate account of his life (*48:3-7*). This account ends with his sorrow over Rachel’s passing away from home “on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).” (*cf. 33:16-20*) He then proceeds to inquire about Joseph’s two sons Ephraim and Manasseh, born in Egypt (*41:50-52*) and therefore not recognizable to Jacob. Joseph acknowledges them here as before as God’s gift. (*48:8-9*)

Israel is overwhelmed that his progeny continues through Joseph (*v. 11*). Israel's impaired vision as well as his absence during their upbringing requires Joseph to present his sons for a blessing in the order of their birth; however, providence intervenes as Israel crosses his right and left arms so as to extend the honour of the firstborn to Ephraim. (*vv. 10-14; 17-19*) The tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh (*Jos. 16:5*) would come to lead the northern tribes of Israel in their secession (*1 Ki. 12; Is. 9:21; Hos. 6:4; Zech. 9:10*). Though it would eventually lead to apostasy and rebellion (*Hos. 7*), untold prosperity is bestowed upon Ephraim through Israel's blessing (*Gen. 48:16, 20*).

A poetic, not to mention prophetic, flourishing overtakes Israel in blessing the remainder of his sons. He has invoked the name of the God of his fathers, Abraham and Isaac (*48:15; cf. 31:5, 42*). Perhaps the Trinitarian mystery lies beneath the threefold invocation: "the God... the God... the angel who has redeemed me" (Keil-Deilitzsch, pp. 383-384). (*cf. 22:11, 15*) Already in Genesis the rôle of prophet has been established (*cf. 20:7*) as one who brings a word from God that both predicts and prescribes. Livingston observes, "The predictive element is prominent in Jacob's blessing on his sons". (Livingston, p. 168) A theme in the Joseph narrative, divine revelation of future events (as through Hebrew prophets) is sharply contrasted with pagan fortune-telling practices (*Gen. 41:1-36; 44:15*). "Since divination and magic are related, i.e., divination ascertains the future and magic seeks to control it, a comparison of divination with the kind of prediction found in the Pentateuch is important to make." It is, of course, true that every blessing in Scripture is not merely a foretelling but the cause itself of the matters foretold. (*49:1*) The pervasive use of imagery from the animal kingdom is characteristic of Canaanite poetry (Ibid., p. 62).

Reuben, the firstborn, would exercise "preeminence" only in bestowing curses from Mount Ebal during the Exodus (*Deut. 27:13*). His sin of incest is brought to remembrance (*49:3-4; cf. 35:22*). Also reprimanded are Simeon and Levi, "emphatically brethren in the full sense of the word; not merely as having the same parents, but in their modes of thought and action" (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 390), whose violent resolve had caused their father to abhor their "council" (*49:5-7*). Levi would be vested with the Old Testament (Levitical) priesthood, possessing only scattered cities (*Num. 35*) and dependent on the charitable offerings brought by others. The tribe of Simeon would also be scattered throughout Judah's territory (*Jos. 19:1-9*) and remain numerically inferior (*Num. 26:14; 1 Chron. 4:27*). Zebulun "shall dwell at the shore of the sea" (*Gen. 49:13*), encompassing the Canaanite capital Sidon (*cf. Mark 7:31*). Dan (from *din*, "to judge") would produce the renowned judge Samson (*Jud. 13:2*). Asher's allotment came at the fertile plains at the foot of Mount Carmel "abounding with wheat and oil" (Ibid., p. 405). Gad's blessing is a play on his name (*gud*, "to raid"). Fulfillment of the remaining sons' somewhat obscure fortunes invites speculation.

To Judah and Joseph, unsurprisingly, belong the chief blessings. Judah is worthy of praise (*yadah*) among his brothers. Likened to "a lion's cub" (*Gen. 49:8-10; cf. Rev. 5:5*), the royal "scepter" and "staff shall not depart from Judah" until a different subject is introduced: "until *Shiloh* comes" (*ad ki-yabo shiloh*). This "Shiloh" (Hebrew for "sent one") – "[t]he personal king to come is set forth in a climactic manner in this prophecy ... Still speaking to Judah in the presence of his brothers, Jacob spoke of another one, who, inseparable from Judah and the community over which he was to rule was, nevertheless, distinctly discernible ... The preeminently royal ruler and triumphant mediator was indicated as the means by which the word spoken to Abraham was to be fulfilled" (Van Groningen, pp. 178-179). (*Gen. 12:3; cf. 17:6*) Joseph's past struggles are related as coming under the protection of "the hands of the Mighty One of Jacob" (*49:24*) called here, as elsewhere in the Joseph narrative, *Shaddai*, translated as "the Almighty" (*v. 25*). In a moment of pause Israel prays, and invites the pious reader to pray, "I wait for your salvation, O Lord." (*v. 18*)

Genesis Bible Study – Session 24

“Last Call” (Genesis 49:28 - 50:26)

The closing of the Bible’s opening book is the account of when “Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.” (*Gen. 50:26*) This end is a fitting one in view of the curse brought upon by the sin of Adam and Eve which introduced sin to humanity (*Gen. 3; Rom. 5:12-14*). However, death is not the veritable last thing, or *eschaton* in Greek; Paul teaches that Christ Jesus “must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death.” (*1 Cor. 15:25-26*) St. John’s Revelation also places in view a day when “death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them” (*Rev 20:13-14; cf. John 6:28-29*) giving way to an everlasting state of salvation for those who believe and damnation for those who did not. Salvation is available only through forgiveness of sins (*Ps. 32:1*) and overturning of the sting of death (*1 Cor. 15:56*). So not only the earthly but the eternal fates of Joseph’s brothers is secured by a good word from Joseph, himself having experienced so much of God’s sweeping activity in his life under their persecuting hands. “So much of the Book of Genesis is about this family’s deceptions, but the book’s last chapter is a touching portrayal of forgiveness.” (Friedman, p. 140)

Israel has blessed his sons, destined to become “the twelve tribes of Israel” “blessing each with the blessing suitable to him.” (*Gen. 49:28*) He then steps out of the priestly into a fatherly rôle commanding them to render to him the final service of a proper burial. Joseph applies for passage outside the borders of Egypt into Canaan in order to bury his father in “the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, to the east of Mamre, the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought with the field from Ephron the Hittite to possess a burying place.” (*49:30; cf. ch. 23; 35:29*) Pharaoh grants his request and sends the company of brothers with much pomp and ceremony, guarded by chariots, much to the amazement of the native inhabitants (*vv. 7-11*). The place of their mourning, a flat, elevated plane used for threshing (*cf. 2 Sam. 24*), receives the Hebrew name *Abel-mizraim*, “mourning of Egypt.” First, after a personal display of affection at his father’s immediate passing, Joseph arranges for “the physicians to embalm his father.” (*Gen. 50:1-2*) The rite of mummification (also rendered necessary by the lengthy journey home) marks him among the élite of Egypt; as the process required forty days, his period of mourning reaches seventy (*v. 3*).

The ten sons who conspired to sell Joseph into slavery in Egypt (*37:12-36*) are reasonably afraid that he will mete out vengeance now that their father is not alive to see it (*50:15; cf. 27:41*). They arrange for a final act of deception, claiming that their father had a prior word on the matter, only to have Joseph weep at the suggestion (*50:17*). He reassures them with a memorable turn of phrase that “you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good” (*v. 20*) – words over which Paul seems to reminisce as he assures hard-pressed believers that “for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.” (*Rom 8:28*) These sons of Israel – who did not merit grace with their acts or dispositions – find themselves forgiven and among those God “foreknew” and “predestined” (*v. 29*). “God will indeed ‘visit’ Joseph’s brothers (*50:24-25*) as God ‘visited’ Sarah (*21:1*, and then he will bring them to the land of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.” (Hamilton, p. 127) The reader is then informed how Joseph attains to the age of 110, surviving his father by some 54 years by the reckoning that he was born in Jacob’s ninetieth year (*cf. 37:3*). During this span of time he is blessed to see his great-great-grandchildren (*50:23*). Ephraim, having received the better portion of their grandfather’s blessing (*48:18*), is singled out in this affair. Manasseh’s grandchildren are also mentioned “born upon his knees, i.e. so that he could take them also upon his knees and show his paternal love.” (Keil-Deilitsch, p. 413)

At the close of the Exodus, Joseph's remains would be interred "at Shechem, in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money." (*Jos. 24:32; cf. Gen. 33:19*) "Thus the account of the pilgrim-life of the patriarchs terminates with an act of faith on the part of the dying Joseph; and after his death, in consequence of his instructions, the coffin with his bones became a standing exhortation to Israel, to turn its eyes away from Egypt to Canaan, the land promised to its fathers, and to wait in the patience of faith for the fulfillment of the promise." (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 413) (*cf. 47:9*) The body has a purpose after death. The importance of bones is illustrated elsewhere in the Old Testament (*1 Ki. 13:20-32; 2 Ki. 13:21; 23:16-20*). Christians are strongly urged against disposal (not to mention dispersal) of their earthly remains by way of cremation; so-called "traditional" burial customs with the body intact serve as a visual attestation to the hope that the departed "have fallen asleep" (*Deut. 31:16; Dan. 12:2; Luke 8:52; John 11:11-14; Acts 7:60; 1 Thess. 4:13-16*) to be awakened at the General Resurrection (*1 Cor. 15*). The Promised Land of Canaan thus typifies the "new heaven and new earth" (*Rev. 21-22*) in contrast with Egypt as a picture of believers' earthly pilgrimage (*Heb. 13:14*).

Joseph's penultimate recorded word to his brothers is not an apologia for the divine code of ethics (such would seem to lead into the Machiavellian principle that "the ends must justify the means" for anyone claiming to enact the will of God in a given scenario). Joseph has never been interested in justifying the ways of God to man, but saving men by means of the Word which justifies by creating faith in those who believe the Gospel (*AC V*). Thus he reassures them, "Am I in the place of God?" (*Gen. 50:19*) which is to say: "am I in a position to interfere of my own accord with the purposes of God, and not rather bound to submit to them myself?" (Keil-Deilitzsch, p. 412) During the earlier façade in which he hid his true intentions from his brothers (*chs. 42-45*) Joseph never acted vindictively, and so here after their father's passing he spares his brothers their just penalty. Instead they receive the thing they need: a word of absolution. Jacob knew a similar experience when he fell into the hands of his own brother Esau and was first given the name "Israel." (*ch. 32*) So it is the case with believers that, in Christ alone, "we have the right to demand of God that he keep his promise (which very thing he is already pleased to do." (Paulson, Vol. 3, p. 397)

Again, it is not Joseph's last act as a minister of God, nor his agency in the saving of many lives both Israelite and non-Israelite, which gains the spotlight in the final passage of Genesis. Joseph "remained in Egypt" fulfilling his allotted years (*50:22*). He humbly petitions his brothers as they had of him, and as his father had done (*v. 24*). Even a blessed death becomes the great leveler for all believers; in this state utter dependence on the Creator is most apparent (*cf. Luke 16:22*).

Luther famously noted in his theology of the cross the ways God conceals his plans under opposing signs: life under the appearance of death and rot, glorification under humiliation and defeat, etc. The life of a believer must for this reason always be viewed from the Last Day (*cf. Jas. 5:1-12; Jude 24*). "The eschaton is neither the resolution of evil and suffering in the moral law, nor is it the explanation of predestination according to the law (that is, how God elects universally, or how God cannot help but choose those who cooperate with his will, or how the merit system works out in the end with the best selections). What, then, is the end? God allows Joseph to be crucified and mummified (ignominious end!) Almighty Father does everything in order to fulfill his 'theology of promises' in a future where Joseph is very much alive and living beyond the law with a God who is... so active in speech that even the future holds no surprise for God or for ourselves." (Paulson, p. 372) Genesis clearly teaches that nothing and no one is autogenerated, neither is anyone self-determined. "In him we live and move and have our being" (*Acts 17:28*); and, as the Psalmist put it best, "Not to us, O Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory" (*Ps 115:1*).

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