

GENESIS SYLLABUS

(This is an outline or syllabus that I used many years ago when teaching a Sunday School class at St. Stephen Presbyterian Church.)

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The primary source will be the **Anchor Bible, Vol. 1 Genesis** , translation, introduction and commentary by E. A. Speiser, Doubleday, 1962 (**ABG**). References under the second column (“Reading”) are from the Anchor Bible, Vol. 1.

Secondary sources include

1. *Genesis and Exodus, A New English Rendition With Commentary and Notes*, by Everett Fox, Schocken Books, New York 1990 Edition.
2. *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 1, General & Old Testament Articles, Genesis , Exodus, Leviticus; Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994.
3. *Genesis 1-11, A Continental Commentary*, by Claus Westermann, Fortress Press, Minneapolis, 1994.
4. *Folk-Lore In the Old Testament (One Volume Edition)*, by James Frazer, New York, The MacMillan Company, 1923.
5. *The New Oxford Annotated Study Bible*, Expanded Edition (Revised Standard Version), New York, Oxford University Press, 1977.
6. *The Bible as History*, Second Revised Edition, by Werner Keller, New York, William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1981.

1. THE PRIMEVAL HISTORY

1.1 The Creation Story.

1.1(a) When Was Genesis Written And By Whom?

Genesis Ch. 1-11. Anchor Bible, Vol. 1 *Genesis* (ABG) Introduction (pp. i-lxxvi).

When was Genesis written and by whom? P, J and E, or Moses, or by all of them.? Who are Elohim, Yahweh & El Shaddai? The Hebrew Bible uses all three names for God in Genesis.

In the pantheon of the Canaanites, there was a council of gods (a “heavenly host”), El was the Canaanite high god. Asherah is El’s wife. El is also referred to as El Elyon. We see reference to El in the cognates Israel and Ishmael, just as we see cognates of Yahweh (or Jehovah) in words Joshua, Jeshua, and Jehoshua (and Jesus, for that matter). Was Abraham’s Elohim or Yahweh or El Shaddai, originally the Canaanite El?

Read Psalm 82 for a holdover of this Canaanite notion:

¹God presides in the great assembly; he gives judgment among the "gods": ²How long will you [a] defend the unjust and show partiality to the wicked? Selah ³Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed. ⁴Rescue the weak and needy; deliver them from the hand of the wicked. ⁵They know nothing, they understand nothing. They walk about in darkness; all the foundations of the earth are shaken. ⁶I said, 'You are "gods"; you are all sons of El Elyon [the Most High].' ⁷But you will die like mere men; you will fall like every other ruler." ⁸Rise up, O God, judge the earth, for all the nations are your inheritance.

Elohim is grammatically plural, meaning “Gods,” and sometimes it is interpreted and translated accordingly. This has caused confusion at times. When the Bible, especially Genesis, speaks of God in the plural, at least three explanations can be offered: (a) the use is an affectation, much like the use of the royal “we” (first person plural) when royalty refers to itself (e.g., “we are not amused”); (b) it could refer to the heavenly hosts (or council), angels and so forth; or (c) it could be a hold over from polytheistic times.

Of the three primary authors of Genesis, P (the priestly school) and E (the Elohist or Ephraimite writer of the Northern Kingdom) make frequent use of the term Elohim when referring to God, and almost never uses the appellation Yahweh.

The use of the name of Yahweh is a primary (but not invariable) indication that J is the likely author. J (which stands for Jehovah —an anglicized version of Yahweh—, or for Judah, because the writer was thought to have been from the Southern Kingdom) probably wrote sometime in the 10th Century B.C., which could have made him a contemporary of David.

Note that the King James version translates Yahweh as “Lord God.” Yahweh is sometimes treated as if it were the name of a Hebrew tribal god, and perhaps it was, initially.

Interestingly, the name Yahweh was not supposed to have been used before having been revealed to Moses. This is made explicit according to Exodus 6:3 (P), and is implicit in Exodus 3:14 (E). P & E must, therefore, have been unaware of the use of the name Yahweh in other traditions that described events before the Exodus.

E may have written about a century later than J, but this is not clear. P probably represents a school rather than a person—parts of P are clearly post exilic and parts are clearly not.

Sometimes Biblical scholars speak of “R,” the letter commonly assigned to represent the one or more redactors who were faced with the problem of making a unified whole of the separate (but similar) accounts of J, P & E.

My superficial survey of several of the various exegetical works on the Pentateuch (classic, modern and contemporary) discloses a marked movement away from the preoccupation with the authorship of individual passages, and a renewed emphasis on the document treated as a unified whole. This may be a reaction to a similar preoccupation in the other direction that began in the nineteenth century and, perhaps, culminated in the 1960s, when Speiser was writing. In any event, Speiser does, indeed, emphasize the authorship of the various passages, and as the Anchor Bible is to be our main text, we will too, to some extent.

Although this approach is interesting, causes us to pay closer attention to what we are reading, and enriches the text (in my opinion), there is admittedly a great deal of speculation involved, and we must not lose sight of the fact that whatever the source, the Bible is to be primarily read as a unified whole, as the redactors intended. Given the nature of the task and the times, the job must be considered to have been largely masterfully handled, one might even say—as we do—inspired!

1.1(b) Opening Account of Creation; The P Version.

Genesis 1-2: 1-4a (P). ABG Ch. 1 (pp. 1-13).

“In the beginning.” Our story begins at the beginning with a three word phrase that resonates profoundly in the minds of all who have even the remotest connection with Christianity or Judaism.

As anyone reading the first two chapters of Genesis carefully has undoubtedly already aware, there are two parallel and quite contradictory accounts of creation in Genesis Chapters 1 and 2, apparently representing two different traditions. The most obvious difference is that the order of creation differs. In version 1 (P), humans are created on the sixth day, after the plants. In version 2 (J), humans are created first. The theological significance of this, if any, is beyond the scope of this paper.

God creates heaven and earth out of a formless waste “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.” In the P version, God calls the world and its attributes into existence in a staccato like series of “let there be” . . . “and there was.” First Day, Second Day, Third Day, Fourth Day, Fifth Day, Sixth Day. Until the Seventh Day, when he rests. He views what he has accomplished with satisfaction.¹ The first chapter of Genesis is about as fine and powerful a piece of prose as one is likely to find anywhere. Everett Fox’s translation, which emphasizes the oral presentation is especially majestic in its telling.²

God creates the plants on the third day. (1:10-13)

God creates man **and** woman on the sixth day (1:27) and gives them “every seed-bearing plant and every tree in which is the seed-bearing fruit.” To all of the animals he gives “all green plants as their food.”

1.1(c) Questions and Comments.

Does the Bible suggest that the first humans, as well as animals, were vegetarians?

The orthodox theological view is that God created the world *ex nihilo*, i.e., out of nothing. Is there any support for this doctrine in Genesis? Some have suggested that the opposite is implied. In the Babylonian version of the creation myth, the world was formed out of the allegorical equivalent of chaos (*Tiamat*). Tiamet, though a god, is represented by the primal sea in the Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish*. In Genesis, the world is created out of a formless waste.

Compare Speiser’s interpretation, the King James Version, and the New Revised Standard Version’s interpretation of the original Hebrew.

KJV: “²IN the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. ²And the earth was [prior to that time?] without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

NRSV: “¹In the beginning *when* God created the heavens and the earth, ²the earth was [prior to that time?] a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters.”

Speiser: “¹When God set about to create heaven and earth—²*the world being then a formless waste*, with darkness over the seas and only an awesome wind sweeping over the water . . . “

¹ Recall Blake, “Did He smile, his work to see? Did he who made the Lamb make thee.”

²*Genesis and Exodus*, A New English Rendition With Commentary and Notes, by Everett Fox, Schocken Books, New York 1990 Edition.

Most scholars interpret the word beginning, in the first verse of the Bible as the “beginning of ordered creation,” rather than the absolute beginning of all things.³ Moreover, verse two implies that there was something out there already to be formed—a formless void and the deep already existed as something to be fashioned. Therefore, many scholars argue that the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* is not scripturally sound.

Before proceeding further, a digression into the subject of evolution is called for, because Biblical literalists have traditionally had a tough time with God’s concept of time as interpreted and translated by the scribes in Genesis.

1.1(d) Evolution and the Scientific and Biblical Accounts of Creation.

Coming to grips with evolution, the age of the universe, and the Biblical account of creation—

Scientists uniformly agree that the Universe came into existence 15-20 billion years ago in a “big bang” and has been expanding ever since. The earth coalesced about 4.5 billion years ago. According to both Genesis and science, before this time, the earth was “without form and void.”

Science does not tell us how the universe was created or by whom, or what it was before it sprang full blown into existence, or why it exists. Indeed, from a scientific perspective, any notions regarding these questions are, at least at our present level of knowledge, incomprehensible, but not necessarily meaningless. For the present, science offers no answers to questions such as “why was the universe created” or “why is there something instead of nothing.”

Likewise, most theologians, for the present, concede that an adequate description of God will always be difficult because God in her totality is ultimately ineffable, though we maintain that he is palpable, and if comprehensible, it is only as through a glass darkly. We are only human, after all.

Bacteria and algae formed at least 3.6 billion years ago during the **Precambrian** era. In the **Paleozoic** era, 570-225 million years ago, life began to evolve fairly suddenly and rapidly.

In the **Triassic** period, 225 to 195 million years ago, the ancestor of mammals developed from reptiles—which had previously developed from amphibians, which developed from primitive lungfish, which developed from primitive vertebrates, which developed from worms, which came from the dust or clay of the earth, presumably—which, incidentally, is from where Genesis says we came.

The first anthropoid apes appear 38 to 26 million years ago. The first bipedal humanoids appeared about 4 million years ago. *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* (all humans now on the planet of all races) appeared between 50,000 and 100,000 (or maybe 200,000) years ago, during the ice age, and by 30,000 years ago had spread to most all parts of the earth. Voila, we finally arrived.

³*The New Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 1, General & Old Testament Articles, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus; Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1994, at page 342.

God may be more patient than the Biblical scribes gave him credit, and he certainly operates on a greater time scale than either we or the authors of Genesis are used to or perhaps are even capable of conceiving without tremendous effort.

1.1(e) Sources of 1-2:4a.

Scholars are mostly unanimous in attributing 1-2:4a to P. This is partly because this passage is formal, indeed formalistic, a trait of P's. Further, the name "Yahweh" is not mentioned. We will contrast this passage with the passage that immediately follows, which differs in style, language and content.

Compare the chronology of the Sumerian **Enuma Elish** epic with Genesis (pp. 9-10 ABG):

"Mesopotamia's canonical version of cosmic origins is found in the so-called Babylonian Creation Epic, or *Enuma elish*, 'When on High' (ANET, pp 60-72). The numerous points of contact between it and the opening section of Genesis have long been noted. There is not only a striking correspondence in various details, but —what is even more significant— the order of events is the same, which is enough to preclude any likelihood of coincidence."⁴

There are, nevertheless, noteworthy differences between the Biblical creation story and the Sumerian myths. What primarily distinguishes the two stories —at least in the J version that we are about to encounter— are the moral and theological implications of the Genesis version. No rival deities battling it out, and so forth. In the Bible, the emphasis is on the human's relationship with God; in the Sumerian myths this is not the case.

Here God simply speaks life into being, perhaps shaping and filling what was previously only a formless void.

1.1(f) The J Version; The Story of Eden.

Genesis 2: 4b-24 (J). ABG Ch. 2 (pp. 14-20).

Here we have a different version of creation, **J's version**. This version is not so perfunctory (or majestic, for that matter) as in Chapter 1. Instead we have a rich and complex psychological drama involving human beings in direct contact with their creator, set in a mystical garden, replete with a tree of life, a forbidden tree of knowledge, and a snake that can talk. Everything in the garden is perfect (or so it seems): food is provided by the trees of the garden (meat is not mentioned), clothes are unknown, and the first man and the first woman are free to live presumably forever in the constant enjoyment of each other's company, if only they stay away from the tree of knowledge of good and bad. As we know, the temptation is too much.

⁴Anchor Bible, Genesis, p. 9.

At the time when the God Yahweh made earth and heaven . . . when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up . . . the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul. Then he took his rib from his side and created woman. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh. And they were both naked, the man and his wife, **and were not ashamed.**

Shame, sin and transgression are constant (if not predominant) themes for much of the Bible, but this theme does not reach a crescendo until we get to the prophetic works (Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.).

1.1(g) Questions and Discussion.

On what day were the plants created? (Contrast 1:10-13 w/ 2:4-9.)

Was Man created before or after the plants? Is it important? (Contrast 1:26 w/ 2:4-9). Was man created before woman? Again, contrast the P and J versions.

First P (1:26-27): On the sixth day (after everything else was created) God said “ ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion’ . . . So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.” . . .

Contrast J (2:5-25): “when no plant of the field was yet in the earth and no herb of the field had yet sprung up . . . then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground . . .”⁵ Later, after forming everything else, God creates woman. This was, after all, admittedly, a very patriarchal society. It may, therefore, be useful to recall that, in the first version, the first couple are created on an equal basis.

1.2 The Fall.

Genesis 2:25-3:1-24 (J.) ABG Ch. 3 (pp. 21-28).

1.2(a) The Narrative.

The serpent is the sliest of all of the wild creatures that God created. He tells Eve “Even though God told you not to eat of any tree of the Garden . . .” But Eve interrupts him and points out that this is not at all what God commanded. God only forbade the eating of the tree of knowledge. He told Adam and Eve that if they so much as touched it they would die.

The serpent tells Eve that God has lied. If she eats of the tree her eyes will be open and she will be able to discern good from bad (like God!). When Eve hears that by eating the fruit of the tree she will obtain wisdom, and not die, she takes a bite. As we know, she doesn’t die; whereupon she offers Adam a bit and he accepts.

⁵Note the Hebrew play on words, “adama” means earth.

Neither of them die, but their eyes are open, and the first thing they discover is that they are naked, and I guess they took it for granted that this was bad, because they immediately fashioned loin cloths for each other out of fig leaves. Whether Eve covered her top half we are not told.

The God of this portion of Genesis is very different from the distant God we find in the later books of the Bible. Here he walks in the Garden at the time of day when it is most pleasant, much as you or I might be wont.

⁸And they heard the voice of the Lord God walking in the garden in the cool of the day: and Adam and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God amongst the trees of the garden. ⁹ And the Lord God called unto Adam, and said unto him, Where art thou? And he said, I heard thy voice in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself. And he said, Who told thee that thou wast naked? Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee that thou shouldest not eat?

Well, Adam blames Eve and Eve blames the snake, and then God curses them all. Actually, when God gets to Adam, he curses the ground, rather than Adam, for some reason.

Eve will desire her husband, but he will lord it over her, and she will suffer pain in childbirth. Adam will have to earn his bread by the sweat of his brow and his life will be a generally hard lot. He will eventually be returned to the ground. "For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." The text does not explicitly state that the curse is also to apply to their offspring, but perhaps we are to presume it, given as it seems to be a fairly accurate picture of the lot of men and women throughout most of history.

God nevertheless does help the first humans to survive their new condition by providing them clothes fashioned from skins.

In a passage that is not exactly monotheistic, God says:

"Behold, the man **is** become as one of **us**, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever: Therefore the Lord God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from whence he was taken."

Who is God talking to here? Who is in the group consisting of "us."

1.2(b) Comments and Questions.

Sources. Legacy. Implications.

The story of the cast skin and the perverted message.

Who created the serpent? Is the serpent evil? Why a snake? Is there any justification in Genesis for identifying the serpent with Satan? The serpent is a multi-faceted metaphor or image.

What is the only other occurrence of an animal talking in the Bible? (Balaam's ass.)

Note the connection between knowledge of good and bad and shame and nakedness. In Hebrew, the word "arum" means "nude" and it also means "shrewd."

Does sex seem to be mixed up in all of this in some confused way? Note the several common meanings and uses of the Biblical term “to know.”

Did humans with knowledge pose a threat?

What is the tree of life?

Were humans immortal before eating of the tree of good and bad?

Why does God curse the ground?

Original sin. Is the Fall a fall up, a fall down, or a fall out with God?

Does the story we are examining —transgression, inquest, sentence— to be taken literally, such that it is an adequate explanation to say that our great-grandchildren will be cursed because Eve ate the apple, plain and simple. Or, is it more adequate to say that our human nature is imperfect, and that (for whatever reason, be it willful disobedience, innate contumaciousness, or genetic), none of us that we know has ever totally obeyed and trusted God without transgression, and that, as a result, we are forced and presume to exercise decisions over what is good (for us) and what is evil (bad for us), and that as a result, life (physical life at least) will never (again) be completely harmonious? The allegory will possibly always remain somewhat of a mystery, subject to various interpretations, more than one of which may reflect the human condition in some form.

Some would conclude —and with good reason— that given our inherent limitations, we can only rely on grace to be justified. The first three chapters of Genesis would tend to support this, whether the interpretation is literal or abstract.

1.3 Cain & Abel.

Genesis 4: 1-16 (J). ABG Ch. 4 (pp. 29-33).

1.3(a) Ultimogeniture and Other Musings.

We see here — and not for the last time— sympathy for the second born. Is this an allegory of the age old hostility between the farmer and the rancher (why can't they just be friends?). Whom did Cain marry? What is the significance of the mark of Cain?

1.3(b) The Line of Cain.

Genesis 4: 17-26 (J). ABG Ch. 5 (pp. 34-38).

Note the uncanny similarities between the names in the line of Cain and the line of Seth.

At the end of this chapter we learn that “It was then that the name Yahweh began to be invoked.” This and similar passages in Genesis have long cause problems for those intent on reconciling the old testament texts. The emphasis here is clearly on the personal name of God. This is a stumbling block for literalists, since Exodus 3:14 (E) and 6:3 (P) are explicit that the name Yahweh was not revealed until the time of Moses.

1.3(c) The Patriarchs Before the Flood.

Genesis 5:1-28 (P); 5:29 (J); 5:30-32 (P). ABG Ch. 6 (pp. 39-43).

Why is P so concerned with genealogies? Are these physical connections with past important, and if so, why?

There are obvious chronological problems with the timeline of the Patriarchs. The chronology cannot be taken literally. In addition to the fact that we know beyond a reasonable doubt that the world is more than 6000 years old (Bishop Usher notwithstanding), that two (and sometimes seven, counting the clean animals) of everything in it would not fit into a boat, and that —by whatever mechanism— the process of our creation/evolution took millions of years, there is the additional problem that the three primary ancient Biblical texts do not agree with one another: the years from the creation of Adam and Eve to the Flood total 1,656 in the Hebrew text (the one used here); 1,307 according to the Samaritan Bible, and the 2,242 in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Bible used by the early Church fathers).

There was a distinct Mesopotamian tradition that assigned extremely long lives to the antediluvian kings (who were said to have lived for hundreds of thousands —not just a mere thousand or so— years).

The literal timeline is really not very important, but it is nevertheless, something that must be confronted at some point; and, in any event, is of some interest insofar as it reflects both human nature in general and the perspective of the early Hebrews in particular.

2. THE FLOOD NARRATIVE

2.1 Prelude to Disaster.

Genesis 6:1-4 (J). ABG Ch. 7 (pp. 44-46).

To whom is the Bible referring when it speaks of the Sons of God having children by the daughters of men? Who were these “heroes of old,” the giants or Nephilim that were produced by this union. Did they have to be drowned in order to correct an imbalance?

In the Nephilim we may have an interesting parallel to the Titans of Greek mythology.

How can we explain later references in the Pentateuch to postdiluvian descendants of the Nephilim?

This fragment is atypical of the Bible.

2.2 The Flood.

Genesis 6:5 —8:22 (J composite⁶). ABG Ch. 8 (pp. 47-56).

How did Methuselah die?⁷ How many 900 year generations were there between Adam and Noah.

“That the biblical account [of the Flood] as a whole goes back ultimately to Mesopotamian sources is a fact that is freely acknowledged by most modern scholars.”⁸ There are, indeed, striking similarities between the Epic of Gilgamesh⁹ and the Biblical Flood stories. In both the hero (Noah/ Utnapishtim) is singled out to build an ark in accordance with detailed specifications. There follows a flood in which all life not in the ark is killed and, after the flood subsides, the ark comes to rest at the top of a tall mountain. In both, the hero releases a series of birds (in both cases a dove and raven are mentioned) to test whether the waters have subsided.

There are also significant differences in the stories. For our purposes, we should note in particular that although both the Sumerian version and the Biblical version can properly be classified as myth, the Biblical version has been more clearly placed in an allegorical context, or at least the moral and theological aspects of the story are more obviously emphasized (one would hope it is safe to say).

How did God kill all of the fish, or were they spared?

Note the priestly emendation giving a slightly different version of the number of animals of each species put in the boat, in order, possibly, to allow for the post flood sacrifices.

⁶According to the Anchor Bible “The received biblical account of the Flood is beyond reasonable doubt a composite narrative, reflecting more than one separate source.”

⁷If you have been counting, you will conclude that he was drowned in the Flood.

⁸Anchor Bible, Genesis, p. 54.

⁹The Akkadian version of the Gilgamesh Epic was reduced to writing no later than 2000 B.C.; however, the story is of Sumerian origin, dating back perhaps as much as thousand years earlier.

2.3 Blessing and Covenant.

Genesis 9:1-17 (P). ABG Ch. 9 (pp. 57-59).

God demands henceforth an accounting for human life.

Every creature that is alive is now given for food (presumably until the Levites came along). Only the green plants “were given for meat.”¹⁰ .

Although humans are still imperfect, as is clearly indicated by the story of Noah and his sons immediately after the Flood, God promises that he will not destroy everything again, though there will still be natural disasters. At the end of the storm, there will be a rainbow: a charming image with which to conclude a difficult story.

2.4 Myth, Allegory and Parable.

What is the difference between a myth, an allegory and a parable? What is the difference between symbolism and allegory? Without belaboring the distinctions here, suffice it to say that the words do not mean the same thing, though they have much in common. And it should be obvious and beyond cavil that a myth can be an allegory (and perhaps all are), but not all allegories are myths; a parable can be a story, a myth or an allegory, or all three, but not all stories are myths and not all myths are parables. Enough said.

The Gilgamesh Epic is a myth. It is also an allegory. It is hard to think of a myth that is not. Is it a parable as well? Perhaps. Most parables are simply stories used to teach a moral point. Most parables are not myths, because they were not necessarily ever meant to be believed literally, even when first told. This is true of Jesus’ parables. On the other hand, a myth can be a parable if it is used more to instruct than to entertain.

A myth, once it is identified as such, is not to be literally believed. The same is true, at least usually, of a parable. Jesus has taught us that there is much to be learned from parables, and he never intended for or asked us to take them literally, since his message was meant to transcend the literal. The Noah’s arc story, if it is to have any meaning for us beyond being a ripping good yarn (which it certainly is), should likewise be read as transcending the literal story.

In our tradition, we certainly have always sought for something edifying and the spiritual behind the stories in the Bible, and, I, for one, think the endeavor worthwhile, even if sometimes difficult. Otherwise, we could reserve the tale for the camp fire instead of church.

True, it is not an easy matter to read moral and theological significance into a divine act that was just short of genocide, but we do, nevertheless. One could draw all kinds of inferences from the story, depending upon one’s inclinations, beliefs and traditions. One might even conclude, with reason, that this is a story about a cruel and vengeful God who seemingly cannot make up his mind about what to do with the product of his initial failings (i.e., human beings).

¹⁰Genesis 1:30

However, in our tradition, this is not at all the way we have chosen to interpret it. On the contrary, most Christians interpret this story as one that ultimately points to redemption, and that despite our failings and the havoc wreaked by natural disasters, God has always ultimately saved a remnant. In this regard, some of us would choose to emphasize the fact that the story we are studying concludes with a covenant that God will always save the world in the end and will never destroy humankind utterly. It is the emphasis that we chose to place on the story that allows it, perhaps, to be called a parable as well as a myth. This emphasis is closely bound up with our tradition —indeed, it is our tradition and our religion— which makes it a little different (to say the least) from just another fairy tale.

2.5 Noah and His Sons.

Genesis **9:18-27** (J); **9:28-29** (P). ABG Ch. 10 (pp. 60-63).

What is the big deal about viewing nakedness? What does the Bible mean in other contexts when it refers to “uncovering someone’s nakedness”?

Why is Canaan cursed and not the other sons of Ham?

Why is Ham here referred to as Noah’s youngest son in vs. 24, whereas vs. 18 clearly implies that he was the middle son?

Speiser suggests that this passage points to the political conditions in the 12 century B.C.E.

There is obvious confusion in the way in which Ham and Canaan are treated. There would appear to be a couple of traditions here that got conflated. What is probably going on is that the Israelites, at the time the story was fixed, were in conflict with their near neighbors, the Canaanites, and thus assigned them to a different ancestry, though we know on linguistic and other grounds that the Israelites were much more closely related to them than to the Philistines (the sons of Japheth) whose tent the sons of Shem were said to share. Later, the Canaanites became less a threat than the Philistines, which gives us some idea as to when this genealogy was fixed.

2.6 The Table of Nations.

Genesis **10:1-32** (J & P Composite—R). ABG Ch. 11 (pp. 64-73).

We have here a primitive, but a determined, attempt to account for the generation of all of the peoples of the world that were known to the narrator. The classification is a mixture of geographic, linguistic, ethnic and political considerations. Thus, the Canaanites, who are closely related to the Israelites, are associated with Ham who is said to be the ancestor of the Egyptians, with whom the Israelites were not closely related.

Japheth is related to the Greek Iapetos (the two names sound more similar when pronounced). Iapetos was one of the Titans in Greek mythology. Note that the descendants of Japheth include the Ionian (Javan) Greeks. Speiser points out that although the principal criterion for connecting the peoples of the world in the elaborate genealogies was geographic, the descendants of Japheth listed happen, for the most part to be Indo Europeans; “so that the list becomes ethnogeographic and ethnolinguistic in effect, as is actually indicated in vs. 5.”

2.7 The Tower of Babel.

Genesis 11:1-9 (J). ABG Ch. 12 (pp. 74-76).

Speiser notes that the Tower of Babel had a definite source in cuneiform literature, but that, more importantly, the source was used to explain a difficult question and at the same time to add a moral to the story concerning man's folly and presumption.

What languages were spoken in the Middle East during this period of time? Could the people understand each other? Was there, in fact, a time when they could? How long does it take before people who once spoke the same language can not longer communicate.

3.

THE STORY OF ABRAHAM AND SARAH

Genesis 12-25:1-18. ABG Ch. 14-32.

If the miscegenation between the sons of God and the daughters of men, producing the Nephalim, previously described, offended your sensibilities, you are warned, the following passages contain explicit scenes of sex and violence (some of it gratuitous), sodomy (in one case with angels, yuk!), incest, pandering, rape, bloodshed, deceit, warfare, and more. (*Pulp Fiction* is treacle compared to this.)

3.1 Genealogies From Shem to Abraham.

Genesis 11:10-27 (P); 11:28-30 (J); 11:31-32 (P). ABG Ch. 13 (pp. 77-81).

Genealogies are a preoccupation of P. Why?

Is Noah still living when Abraham is born?

Does Shem outlive Isaac?

Terah has three sons, Abram, Nahor and Haran. Lot is Haran's son. Haran dies before Terah, and after his death, Abram and Nahor move to Haran. Terah dies in Haran.

Note that Nahor (Abraham's brother), marries his niece, Milcah, Haran's daughter. Nahor was the name of a city in the region of Haran. Under Hurrian (Nuzi) law, Nahor would have first adopted Milcah, followed by marriage. There was a mixed population living in this area (Mari and Haran) around 2000 B.C. that demonstrably included West Semites, from whom we believe the Hebrews were descended.

Speiser says "There can be little doubt today that the material before us is based in large part on very old traditions, some of which may date to the period of Abraham himself."

Where was Abraham's birthplace and when did Abraham live?

Where is Haran? Who were the Hurrians? Where is Ur? It may perhaps be only coincidental that Ur and Haran were associated at this time together as the Mesopotamian centers of moon worship.

The Chaldeans were a branch of the Semitic Aramaeans, and they did not make their presence known in Mesopotamia until the end of the second millennium.

The home of the Patriarchs was probably Haran, not Ur. Genesis 12:1&5 indicate that Haran was Abraham's birthplace. There were two powers associated with Haran, the Hurrians and later the Kingdom of the Mari, with whom the Hurrians were closely linked.

3.2 Abraham's Call and Migration.

Genesis 12:1-4a (J); 12:4b-5 (P); 12:6-9 (J).

ABG Ch. 14 (pp. 85-88).

Abraham responds to God's call and embarks on his journey. Note the power of the language in the first three verses of chapter 12.

Is Abraham an historical figure?

This is no ordinary migration, but a call from God that leads Abraham and his ancestors on an epic journey that is still in process.

Note the statement that the Canaanites were then in the land. This is an indication that when the story was written the Canaanites were no longer predominant, but that they were at one time. Speiser points out that this would have been an unlikely way for Moses to have described the situation, at a time prior to then entry of the Israelites, when the land was controlled by the Canaanites.

3.3 Abraham and Sarah in Egypt.

Genesis 12:10-20 (J). ABG Ch. 15 (pp. 89-94).

In an oft repeated theme, there is a famine in the land and this drives Abraham into Egypt. Abraham all but offers his beautiful wife to Pharaoh, on the pretense that she is merely his sister. He tells Sarai that this is "so that all may go well with me on account of you." And it does. Abraham receives his reward in the form of livestock and slaves, until Pharaoh discovers the ruse as the explanation for the plagues that suddenly began to afflict Egypt. Whereupon he sends the newly enriched Abraham and his wife/sister on their way.

What is going on with the wife-sister motif that appears over and over in Genesis? Does it seem as if the story of Sarai and Pharaoh keeps getting repeated? In another version, 20:1-18, Abimelech seems to get substituted for Pharaoh, at Gerar. Still later, in Ch. 26:6-11, Isaac and Rebekah, take Abraham's and Sarah's place, once again, with Abimelech at Gerar. The similarities in these stories can cause confusion if one is not paying close attention.

The special wife-sister relationship was totally foreign to the Akkadian Semites, but was a peculiar custom of the Hurrians and their immediate successors, the Mari, as reflected in the documents archeologists have uncovered at Nuzi and elsewhere.

A wife was often adopted as a sister in Hurrian society, particularly among the upper classes, because this gave them both enhanced social status and increased legal rights under Hurrian law. The same status was given when a brother gave a sister in marriage, as we know was the case with Isaac and Rebekah. The center of Hurrian civilization was in Haran in 2000 B.C.

The West Semites, from whom the Patriarch's emerged, were in a very close cultural relationship with the Hurrians of Haran, even though the Hurrians were not Semites, and may have been proto-Indo Europeans, similar to the Mitanni.

Note that camels were not common until the end of the second millennium, though they are listed as among the animals that Pharaoh gives Abram in return for Abram generously allowing Sarai to pose as his sister so that she could "serve" (service) Pharaoh as a wife.

3.4 Lot's Separation From Abraham.

Genesis 13:1-18 (J, /P/). ABG Ch. 16 (pp. 95-98).

Abraham is by now very prosperous, and so is his nephew Lot. So prosperous are the two of them, that they need more pasture land so as not to compete with one another.

Lot and Abraham agree to separate in peace. Their near relation will later account for the kinship between the trans-Jordanian Ammonites and the Moabites.

3.5 Invasion From the East. Abraham and Melchizedek.

Genesis 14:1-24 (X). ABG Ch. 17 (pp. 99-109).

This is a wonderful story about desert politics and tribal warfare. The kings of Sumer, Ellasar, Elam and Goiim make war on the king of Sodom, Gomorrah, Admah, Zeboiim and Zoar, because the latter group had rebelled against the suzerainty of Chedorlaomer, king of Elam. The battle is joined in the Valley of Siddim, now the Dead Sea, four kings against five. In the first clash of arms, the joint forces of Chedorlaomer carry the day and Lot and his family are taken prisoner.

Meanwhile, Abram, "the Hebrew," is camping with Mamre the Amorite, Abram's confederate, when he hears the news of Lot's capture. Abraham immediately gathers his household and retainers together and swoops down on the previously victorious troops at night, recovering the booty and freeing Lot.

Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of El-Elyon, the local deity, blesses Abraham.

Who is Melchizedek? Read Speiser's footnote to vs. 18.

Note the reference to Abram "the Hebrew." The Hebrews did not refer to themselves in this fashion, anymore than you would refer to yourself as a Texan or an American when telling a story to your family. Therefore, it would appear that the author of this story is not our familiar J or P or E, but someone else, apparently an outsider describing the exploits of a powerful sheik. In other words, Abraham's existence here appears to be attested to by a separate contemporary source.

This narrative lends support to the notion that Abraham was, in fact, a real person (one or more, perhaps), if it comes, as it appears to, from an independent outside source.

Speiser gives the most likely date for this episode as 1700 B.C.

3.6 Promise and Covenant.

Genesis 15:1-21 (J /E?/). ABG Ch. 18 (pp. 110-115).

In this passage God comes to Abraham in a vision, in which he promises prosperity to Abraham's offspring, and the future possession of the land, from the Nile to the Euphrates. The covenant is sealed in a ritualistic ceremony complete with flaming torch and smoking fire pot.

The presence of these elements of sympathetic ritual magic successfully invoke an air of mystery and awe that produce a very powerful literary effect.

E generally prefers that God communicate indirectly, through dreams, visions and angels, for example. This is one reason why Speiser attributes 15:13-16 to E.

3.7 The Birth of Ishmael.

Genesis 16:1-16 (J /P/). ABG Ch. 19 (pp. 116-121).

As is frequently the case in Genesis, the first born turns out to be less important than the second.

Ishmael's descendants were tribal nomads and raiders, similar to the Bedouins, yet the Jews recognized them as close kindred who were blessed by God.

Speiser describes the relationship of Sarai, Hagar and Abram as based in Hurrian law. He also makes comparisons to the Code of Hammurabi and the Nuzi documents to show that the situation where a barren wife gave her maid to her husband as a concubine was common and was regulated by law.

Note that God speaks to Hagar through a messenger, "Yahweh's angel." Speiser remarks that the in association with a divine term, as here, refers to a manifestation of the Deity, not necessarily a separate being. **It is only later that angels and other supernatural beings came to constitute a distinct class in a heavenly supernatural pantheon**, as the religion tended to become notably more polytheistic, instead of less so, as time went by.

3.8 Covenant and Circumcision.

Genesis 17:1-27 (P). ABG Ch. 20 (pp. 122-127).

In this Chapter, said to be transcribed by P, Abram and Sarai get new names. What does this signify?

When Abraham is 99 years old, Yahweh appears before him and announces himself as "El Shaddai" and tells Abraham that if he will follow the ways of Yahweh and be blameless, he will grant a covenant with him and make his offspring exceedingly numerous.

Yahweh promises Abraham that even though Sarah is 90, she will bear a son. Abraham intercedes with God, as is frequently his wont, asking that God let Ishmael thrive. God agrees, and promises that Ishmael will give rise to 12 chieftains and will become a great nation, but his covenant will be with Isaac.

Who is El Shaddai? To the author of Chapter 17, P, this was the only name for God known to the Patriarchs prior to Moses. (See Exodus 6:3.)

The covenant is to be marked by circumcision of all males in Abraham's household, and their offspring. In the future this rite is to be performed on the 8th day after birth.

Circumcision is a primitive tribal practice, generally connected with puberty and premarital rites. Other cultures use various forms of self mutilation, including tattoos or piercing as marks of distinction.

This particular form of mutilation was practiced by the Egyptians and many of the Semite tribes such as the Moabites and Ammonites, but not by the Mesopotamians or the Indo European (or mixed Indo European) settlers in the Levant, such as the Philistines, Hittites or Hurrians.

Note that by the time of Joshua's entrance into the Holy Land, the practice must have died out, assuming that it was at one time universally practiced by the arriving Hebrews, because before going into battle, Joshua has everyone circumcised.

3.9 Abraham and His Mysterious Visitors.

Genesis 18:1-15 (J). ABG Ch. 21 (pp. 123-131).

This is the J version of the story we just saw in chapter 17. Note the differences in style and narration.

Abraham, very realistically portrayed, is sitting at the entrance to his tent as the day was growing hot. Looking up from the heat of the desert, he suddenly finds three men standing beside him. Immediately, in the tradition of Bedouin hospitality to travelers, that still exists today, Abraham jumps up and offers the visitors water and food, calling out to Sarah “Quick, three seahs of the best flour! Knead and make rolls!” He then slaughters a choice calf and with curds and milk presents his guests a sumptuous repast.

As it turns out, the visitors are celestial, one of whom is Yahweh himself, who (again?) promises that Sarah will bear a son when he next visits Abraham. Sarah laughs to herself, and then lies to God about it. The author paints a realistic and all too human picture of Sarah: curious, impulsive, and capable of lying when caught in a deception.

This version of the story of the promise of Isaac’s birth is much less formal than that given in Ch. 17. In particular, the characters are more fully developed and the scene is painted with the pen of a true literary artist, as illustrated best, perhaps, in the opening lines of the chapter where in the heat of the day, as Abraham is gazing out on the countryside from the vantage of the door of his tent, three mysterious visitors suddenly materialize. Speiser notes the dreamlike touch that the heat of the Palestinian summer adds to the scene.

3.10 The Story of Sodom and Gomorrah and Lot.

3.10(a) Abraham Intercedes For Sodom

Genesis 18:16-23 (J). ABG Ch. 22 (pp. 132-135).

Yahweh is uncertain whether to conceal from Abraham his plan to make of him a great nation. He does reveal that he is about to visit Sodom and Gomorrah to see whether the cities are as bad as he has heard, implying retribution if the reports turn out to be true. Abraham intercedes on behalf of any in Sodom who happen to be blameless. In an interchange that borders on the comic, Abraham pleads with Yahweh to refrain from destroying the innocent along with the guilty. In reading this dialog one keeps wondering whether Yahweh will lose patience with Abraham and rebuke his presumptuousness.

A prominent moral issue central to the story is whether it is right to punish the innocent individual for the crimes of a guilty society.

3.10(b) The Destruction of Sodom. Lot’s Escape.

Two angels visit Sodom where they find Lot and his family. (The implication is that the third visitor was Yahweh, who stayed behind with Abraham.) Why Lot is now living in the city instead of with his flocks on the plain is not explained, but it is evident that he is not a native of Sodom.

Genesis 19:1-28 (J); 19:29 (P). ABG Ch. 23 (pp. 136-143).

Lot entreats the angels to stay at his house. The townspeople of Sodom assemble outside Lot's door and demand that Lot give up the angels so that they may have sex with them. Lot offers his two virgin daughters to the Sodomites instead. This offer proves insufficient, and the Sodomites are beginning to take steps to break down the door when they are struck by a blinding light.

The angels tell Lot that they have been sent to destroy Sodom, and urges him to take anyone he wishes to save with him and to leave the city. Lot is unable to convince the husbands of his other daughters to leave, but he and his wife and two unmarried daughters flee the city.

The angels enjoin Lot to flee to the hills, and not to look back. For some reason, Lot is convinced that if he goes to the hills he will die and he pleads to be allowed to stop at Zoar. The angels agree to spare Zoar.

While Yahweh is destroying Sodom and Gomorrah with sulfurous fire, Lot's wife glances back and is turned into a pillar of salt.

3.10(c) Lot's Daughters.

Genesis **19:30--38** (J). ABG Ch. 24 (pp. 144-146)

Lot ends up leaving Zoar and going to the hills after all, as the angels had originally urged him to do. There he lived in a cave. Because there were no men by whom Lot's daughters could have offspring, Lot's daughters purposely get their father drunk so that they may conceive by him, which they do. One daughter is the mother of Moab and the other of the Ammonites, tribes that were close relatives of Israel, living in the Transjordanian plain.

This explanation for the ancestry of the Moabites and Ammonites both accounts for the fact that they were near relations to the Israelites and also for their lesser status in Israelite eyes.

3.11 Abraham and Sarah at Gerar.

Genesis **20:1-18** (E). ABG Ch. 25 (pp. 147-152).

Abraham is sojourning in Gerar. He tells Abimelech the king of Gerar that Sarah is his sister, so Abimelech takes her as a wife. (This technique worked well with Pharaoh that Abe tries it again, Gen. 12:10-20.) Elohim comes to Abimelech in a dream, which with E is the primary form of communication between God and man. God tells Abimelech that he is in big trouble on account of committing bigamy with Abraham's wife.

Abimelech pleads ignorance as a defense, blaming Abraham for telling him that Sarah was his sister. Abraham's excuse for shamelessly pandering his wife the way he does is that he needed protection. Further, he tells Abimelech that Sarah really is his sister, though only his half sister, through a different mother. Abimelech, like Pharaoh, then gives Abraham his sister (wife) back, loads him up with livestock and slaves, and sends him on his way.

Presumably, the moral is not that it is OK to prostitute your wife to other men in return of money and other favors if she is your sister as well as your wife.

Note that Speiser attributes the authorship of this passage to E. Why?

As Speiser points out, in addition to using Elohim instead of Yahweh as the name of God, E frequently has God communicate through dreams, and E has a further marked tendency to explain and justify the actions of his characters. Finally, this passage is one of three where the Patriarchs pander their wives (sisters) in return for special favors.

In a parallel passage, Isaac does with Rebekah and in Gehar with Abimelech what his father had done with his mother in the same place to the same person. One would think that Abimelech would have learned his lesson in marrying the sisters of sojourning Hebrews, particularly if related to Abraham. However, this story could be, and probably is, easily explained as a separate tradition (E's) that telescoped the J versions found in Ch 12:10-20 and Ch 26:6-11.

3.12 Birth of Isaac and Expulsion of Hagar.

Genesis 21:1-2a (J); 21:2b-5 |P|; 21:6-21 (E). ABG Ch. 26 (pp. 153-157).

When Abraham is conveniently exactly 100 years old, Sarah gives birth to Isaac. Isaac's name is associated with laughter in several different passages, and the reason is variously ascribed.

Sarah now no longer has need of Hagar or Hagar's son, and so orders them out of the household. Some translations have Hagar leaving with Ishmael on her back, but Speiser does not translate the text that way. Ishmael would have been 15 years old at this time, if you are counting.

An angel of God comforts and assures Hagar that he will care for Ishmael. Ishmael grows up in the desert and becomes a skilled bowman.

Except for the first five verses, Speiser attributes this passage to E. For one thing, this story is remarkably similar to one already told in Ch 26. For another, God does not communicate directly with Hagar, but through an intermediary, as is characteristic of E.

3.13 Abraham and Abimelech at Beer-Sheba.

Genesis 21:22-32 (E); 21:33 (J); 21:34(J). ABG Ch. 27 (pp. 158-160).

In one of the first nonaggression pacts in recorded history, Abraham and Abimelech (with his captain Phicol) conclude a peace treaty that assures Abraham of the ownership of the well at Beer-sheba.

Interestingly, Abraham plants a tamarisk tree as part of his invocation of the name of Yahweh. In later books of the Bible, when the priests had a vested interest in confining worship to the temple in Jerusalem, the association of sacred groves (terebinths) with the worship of God is repeatedly condemned as a pagan practice.

This story is virtually identical to the one we will later encounter in Ch. 26:1-33 involving a treaty between Isaac and Abimelech (with his captain Phicol) over wells and Beer-sheba.

3.14 The Ordeal of Isaac.

Genesis 22:1-19 (E/J). ABG Ch. 28 (pp. 161-166).

In this story, God tells Abraham to burn his son Isaac to death as a human sacrifice. However, as Abraham is about to light the match, God stops him. The whole episode —as we know but Abraham does not— is merely a test of Abraham’s faithfulness.

The drama is heightened by the fact that we, the reader, know of Isaac’s special position. Isaac is Abraham’s only child by his wife Sarah, a child of his old age, given to him by God against all odds after he had all but given up hope. Furthermore, we know from 17:20 & 22 that God’s covenant is to be with Isaac, not Ishmael.

Speiser calls this the profoundest personal experience in all the recorded history of the patriarchs, with a literary style to match the drama. There is little dialog as the story unfolds. Abraham proceeds as if in a trance, with meticulous attention to the details required to carry out God’s command. Isaac carries the wood for his own pyre, not knowing that he is to be the victim. It is not until Isaac is securely tied to the alter and Abraham has knife in hand, that God finally orders him to stop.

Almost all other scholars attribute this story to E, but Speiser believes that J is the author.

Child sacrifice was very prevalent among Israel’s neighbors, as we know from other parts of the Bible, as well as from our history texts. Molech, a Semitic deity, was particularly fond of roasted children, and one is also reminded of the incident in 2 Kings 3:27 where Mesha King of Moab, sacrifices his son to Chemosh in order —successfully, as it turns out— to turn back the combined army of Israel (under Jehoram) and Judah (under Jehosaphat). This battle is an event recorded by the Moabites in an archaic form of Hebrew on the famous Moabite stone. (The Moabites were Hebrews, but not worshipers of Yahweh.)

Human sacrifice in general, and child sacrifice in particular, was an abomination among the Israelites (see, for example, Leviticus 20:2), but we can see in this passage that it was not always thus, and there were later to be occasional lapses. Recall that Ahaz King of Judah sacrificed his son (2 Kings 16:3), and that in Judges Ch 11, Jephthah uses as an excuse for sacrificing his daughter that he had promised God that if he won a victory over the Ammonites he would sacrifice the first living thing that emerged from his house. Jeremiah lists child sacrifice as among the transgressions of which the Jews were deserving of his wrath (Jeremiah 7:31).

3.15 The Line of Nahor.

Genesis 22:20-24 (J). ABG Ch. 29 (pp. 167-168).

Abraham’s brother was Nahor. Nahor’s father was Terah. Terah’s father was also named Nahor, which makes things a little confusing. Nahor is also the name of a city in Northern Mesopotamia, as is Haran, Abraham’s other brother’s name.

Recall that Terah, Abraham’s father, had three sons: Abram, Nahor and Haran. Lot was Haran’s son. Terah died in the city of Haran.

Nahor (Abraham’s brother), had married his niece, Milcah, Haran’s daughter. Milcah had eight children, among whom was a son named **Bethuel**, who we later learn is the father of Laban and Rebekah (the mother of Jacob). Laban is the father of Leah and Rachel, wives of Jacob.

This turns out to be a family tree that does not always properly fork.

3.16 The Machpelah Purchase.

Genesis 23:1-20 (P/J). ABG Ch. 30 (pp. 169-173).

Sarah dies, and Abraham, formally pays for the right to bury her in the cave of Machpelah which he purchases for a tidy sum from the children of Heth. Later the Israelites, like most everyone else at some early stage in their history, will simply steal the land— acquiring it by conquest, if you will—; but at this juncture, Abraham’s acquisition was honestly and honorably purchased by mutual consent. The result of the purchase, we should note, was that, at least in a sense, Sarah was not buried on alien soil.

4. THE STORY OF ISAAC AND REBEKAH

Genesis **24:1-67** (J). ABG Ch. 31 (pp. 174-186).

By the time of this chapter Abraham is old and Sarah had died. God has blessed Abraham exceedingly. He tells his senior servant to “place your hand under my thigh” and swear an oath that he will go to Haran and obtain a wife for Isaac from the land of Abraham’s birth, so that he will not marry a Canaanite. He admonishes him further that on no account is he to take Isaac to Haran.

Speiser says that the symbolism of placing the hand on the inner thigh in connection with the giving of an oath is not clear. As we will see later, this act does have some ritual importance because in Jacob’s wrestling match with the angel, the angel does something similar (dislocating his hip at the joint on the inner thigh), before giving Jacob his blessing. This was said to have caused Jacob to limp afterwards, and is given as the reason why the eating of the sciatic muscle is proscribed by Levitical dietary laws, among millions of other prohibited items.

We see this same ritual yet again, in the blessing that Jacob gives Ephraim and Manasseh at the conclusion of Genesis, in 47:29. “If you really wish to please me [Jacob tells Joseph] put your hand under my thigh as a pledge of your steadfast loyalty to me: do not let me be buried in Egypt!”

I wonder whether the significance of this act (touching the inner thigh in connection with the giving of an oath or a blessing) is related to a similar ancient Indo-European practice, with which the Hurrians of Haran may well have been familiar, used in connection with giving of an oath or testimony. In fact, the Indo-European root word for testify is the same as for testicle. The connection is not easy to make without knowledge of the practice. Observers of the interactions of chimpanzees have observed them making the same gesture, as an act that confirms social status and trust. As in the story of Abraham, it is the personage of lesser authority—the one doing the “testifying” or swearing—that is allowed to place his hand in such a sensitive place, and the fact that it is permitted is a sign that the oath or obeisance is accepted by the superior party.

Abraham’s chief servant dutifully goes to Haran where he asks Yahweh to let whoever gives him water be the one God has chosen for Isaac’s wife. Providentially, it turns out that this person is none other than Bethuel’s daughter Rebekah who greets him at a well, in a manner similar to a story we will encounter later, when Jacob meets Rachel in Chapter 29, in a similar return to Haran to acquire a wife.

Rebekah was the granddaughter of Milcah and Nahor. You may recall that Terah had three sons, Nahor, Abram and Haran. Haran had at least two children that are important to our story: Lot and Milcah. Haran died young, predeceasing his father.

When Haran died, Nahor —not too unlike a good Levitical uncle— married his niece, who then bore him a number of children, including Bethuel, Rebekah’s father. Thus, Milcah was both Isaac’s first cousin as well as his aunt. Bethuel would have been Isaac’s first cousin too, as well as his first cousin once removed (the child of his first cousin). This would make Rebekah (Bethuel’s child) Isaac’s first cousin once removed, and his first cousin twice removed. (Please indulge me. As a probate lawyer, I am professionally interested in these various degrees of relationship.)

Although the text is not entirely clear, and appears inconsistent in places, it is evident that Bethuel is deceased at the time of Isaac’s arrival, and that, in keeping with Hurrian law, Laban, Rebekah’s brother, speaks on her behalf, in the place of their deceased father.

We will meet Laban again later, when Jacob returns to Haran. Even in this scene we see that Laban is not a particularly endearing character, though Rebekah is portrayed as generous, likable and sincere.

The story ends with these words: “Then Isaac took her into his tent. He married Rebekah and she became his wife. And in his love for her, Isaac found solace after the death of his mother.” A beautiful ending to a well told story, don’t you think.

4.1 The Sons of Keturah. Death of Abraham. The Line of Ishmael.

Genesis 25:1-6 (J); 25:7-11a (/P/); 25:11b(J); 25:12-17 (/P/); 25:18 (J); ABG Ch. 32 (pp. 186-189).

Abraham remarries a woman named Keturah, who is the mother of the Midianites, among other peoples named in this chapter. Abraham gives his Isaac the primary inheritance, but he gives the children of his concubines presents before sending them eastward.

Ishmael’s 12 sons are identified here. As is typical, their names are mostly eponymous, representing places and tribes known to the Hebrews at the time of the writing.

Abraham dies at 175 years old and is buried in the cave at Machpelah, along with Sarah.

Although in the sequence in which the story is told, Jacob and Esau are not yet born—in fact it is even implied that Abraham died while his servant was away securing a wife for Isaac— if the ages listed are given strict credence (which is probably not appropriate) Isaac would have been 60 at the time of the birth of Jacob and Esau, which would make Abraham 160, with 15 years yet to live.

5. THE STORY OF JACOB

ABG Ch. 33-48. Genesis Ch 25:19- Ch 37:2a

5.1 Esau and Jacob: Their Birth and Youth.

Genesis 25:19-20 /P/; 25:21-26a (J); 25:26b /P/; 25:27-34 (J). ABG Ch. 33 (pp. 193-197).

This passage begins by telling us that Isaac, the son of Abraham and Sarah, “was 40 years old when he married Rebekah, the daughter of Bethuel the Aramaen of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramaen.” For 20 years Rebekah was barren, but in response to Isaac’s plea to Yahweh, she conceived twins.

This is apparently a difficult pregnancy. Yahweh intimates to Rebekah that she has twins who will give rise to two nations who are at odds with one another even while still inside the womb, but one people shall surpass the other, and the “older shall serve the younger.” (We have heard something similar to this before, have we not, with Ishmael and Isaac.)

Rebekah’s twins are Esau (the first to emerge), and Jacob (who comes out second holding on to Esau’s heel). These children are different. Esau emerged at birth reddish in color, “like a hairy mantle all over” and he remains hairy. (In Gilgamesh Enkido too was a hairy man: “shaggy with hair was his whole body.”) Jacob, on the other hand is smooth skinned. Esau’s hairiness and reddishness appear to be allusions to his supposed association with Edom, a relationship that is not altogether clear, but hints that there was a time in which the Edomites and the Israelites were in a close association, that also involved rivalry —a rivalry that would have predated the monarchy established by Saul and David, because the story is much older.

Although Jacob’s name is here explained by the fact that he emerged holding Esau’s “heel,” Speiser says that at an earlier point in the Hebrew language the name meant “may God protect” but by the time that the story was recorded, this meaning was lost, and a new one had to be supplied.

Esau is a man of the out of doors and a hunter. Jacob, by contrast, is more sedentary, and likes to keep to the tents. One day Esau returns from the country on the brink of starving, to find Jacob home cooking a stew. Jacob trades Esau some stew for Esau’s birthright. Although this portrays Esau as somewhat of a dolt, he was starving after all.

5.2 Various Notices About Isaac.

Genesis 26:1-33 (J); 26:34-35 /P/. ABG Ch. 34 (pp. 198-204).

There is another famine in the land, and this forces Isaac to journey to Abimelech, king of the Philistines in Gerar. (Yahweh tells Isaac not to go down to Egypt, where the Patriarchs generally went during a famine.)

Apparently Abimelech (if this is the same Abimelech that tried to marry Sarah) had not learned his lesson, and he once again falls for the sister story, finds out that Rebekah is really Isaac's wife, is shocked by the very idea of the near transgression, rewards Isaac and sends him on his way. We have seen this motif several times already. It is probably the same story, told by different authors (or at least the same tradition recounted in a new scenario), which would explain why it appears to be played out in different settings and times.

Several times in this passage, Yahweh appears to remind Isaac that he is the God of Abraham, and that because Abraham followed Yahweh, Yahweh is going to reward his offspring.

Isaac and Abimelech (and Abimelech's captain Phicol) enter into a nonaggression treaty over a dispute involving wells and Bee-sheba. It is impossible not to note that this is the same story we just got through reading in Ch 21:22-33, except that Isaac is substituted for Abraham. One reason for believing that this is not a different Abimelech is that Phicol is still the captain, and it is doubtful that it would be a different king Abimelech with a different captain who just happened to be named Phicol.

This section concludes with an insertion, probably by P, that Esau married a couple of Hittite women when he turned 40, and that this displeased Isaac and Rebekah.

5.3 Isaac Deceived.

Genesis 27:1-45 (J). ABG Ch. 35 (pp. 205-213).

This chapter opens by telling us that Isaac is old and blind. He knows the end is near and that it is time to bestow his blessing. He therefore summons Esau and asks him to go hunting and to bring him back some game to eat as a festive dish before giving the blessing. Esau, like the good son that he is, leaves to go do his father's bidding.

Rebekah, a schemer and meddler from the word go, favors the stay-at-home younger son. Upon overhearing the conversation between Isaac and Esau, she conspires with Jacob to trick Isaac into thinking Jacob is Esau, so that Jacob will get the blessing. The ruse is successful in the story, but as when reading Shakespeare and Dickens, we are occasionally required to suspend disbelief while we are asked to accept, for example, that Isaac cannot tell the difference between a goat skin and Esau.

Esau returns, and both he and his father realize what has happened. Both of them are shaken and distressed in the extreme. Our sympathies here are clearly with Esau, when he abjectly pleads with his father to give him a blessing too. "Have you just that one blessing, my father? Bless me too, Father." Finally Isaac does so, and he hints that although Esau will be subject to Jacob for a while, Esau will eventually throw free the yoke. An interesting blessing portending of what, we might ask.

Will Isaac get away Scot free? No. One way or another his life will be changed by this trickery. We find this out immediately, when we read that Esau promises to kill Jacob someday, at a suitable time after Isaac has died. Rebekah learns of this intention and sends Jacob packing for Haran, where he is to stay with Rebekah's brother Laban until Rebekah sends for him.

As we later learn, Rebekah never does send for him, and he stays there 20 years. Also it is never clear just what Jacob acquired by all of his duplicity with Isaac. When Esau and Jacob meet again 20 years later, it is Esau that is the great chieftain, and all that Jacob has acquired he has gotten from his various machinations with Laban.

5.4 Jacob Is Sent to Laban.

Genesis 27:46- 28: 1-9 (P). ABG Ch. 36 (pp. 214-216).

This passage represents an obvious break in the narrative, or at least a different version of the story of the reason for Jacob's departure. It is generally attributed to P.

In this version, the reason for Jacob's leaving is so he won't marry any of the local girls, as Esau had done. Isaac, who according to P is going to live 180 years, has apparently regained his health. (P must not have been familiar with the J version of the departure.) Rather than sneaking off as in the previous version, Isaac here summons Jacob and tells him to go at once to Paddan-arm to Laban, the son of Bethuel the Aramaean, Rebekah's brother. Isaac then invokes the blessing of El Shaddai (J would have invoked the name of Yahweh), that Jacob will prosper, and then sends him off to Laban, Rebekah's sister.

When Esau sees how much displeased his parents are for his having married outside the family, he takes another wife, his first cousin, Mahalath, daughter of Esau. If Esau married those Canaanite woman at age 40 (when Isaac was 100) as we were told, and if Isaac really was near death and close to 180 years old as we were also told, then it took poor about 80 years to figure out that his wives had such a serious mother-in-law problem.

On the whole, it would appear that this passage represents a different tradition by a different author. It would be like P to stress ethnic purity as the reason for Jacob's trip to Haran. And as is also typical, it makes a much drier story than J's version.

5.5 Jacob's Dream.

Genesis 28:10-22 (J) /E/. ABG Ch. 37 (pp. 217-220).

This is the famous story of Jacob's ladder, more properly interpreted as a stairway. Yahweh or Elohim alternately appear as the name used for God, in consecutive verses. In this theophanous encounter with God, Elohim speaks to Jacob in a dream, always a tell tale sign that E is at work. Yahweh reminds Jacob that there is a purpose to his life and that his offspring will be many.

Jacob vows that if he survives his journey Yahweh will be his God and he will always give him (undoubtedly through the priests) one-tenth of everything.

5.6 Jacob's Arrival In Haran.

Genesis 29:1-14a (J). ABG Ch. 38 (pp. 221-223).

In a story remarkably similar to the one played out in Chapter 24, when Abraham's servant goes to Haran to find a wife for Isaac and encounters Rebekah at the well, here, Jacob finds none other than his cousin Rachel, Laban's daughter, watering her flocks.

The shepherd's are waiting until there are enough of them to roll away the heavy rock covering the well, but Jacob goes up to the well removes the rock himself, and in an uncharacteristic effusion of emotion kisses Rachel and bursts into tears. Calvin thought that this incident was so shocking that it should be attributed to a scribal error. (This too is somewhat surprising in that in Calvin's time, most theologians still considered the Bible to be inerrant.)

Speiser points out that the documents discovered at the site of Nuzi in the neighborhood of Haran, reflect the conditions at Haran, and indicate that at that time women were subject to fewer restrictions than those that later became the norm in the Near East.

Speiser cites this passage as representative of J's masterful artistic abilities. Jacob the traveler is voluble after his long journey, while the shepherds at the well are understandably taciturn and composed. The sense of drama is heightened as Jacob demonstrates his prowess by removing the rock at the well single handily, and then excitedly kissing Rachel.

5.7 Jacob's Marriages With Leah and Rachel.

Genesis **29:14b-30** (J). ABG Ch. 39 (pp. 224-227).

Jacob is in love with Rachel, and Laban agrees that he can marry her if he will work for him for 7 years. Jacob does so, only to be tricked into finding Rachel's elder sister in his bed after the wedding. Laban explains that custom did not permit marrying off a younger daughter before the elder, but agrees that he may marry Rachel too, if he will work another 7 years. Jacob agrees. Two wives are not enough to satisfy Jacob's needs, so each sister gives him a handmaid for a concubine. Rachel gives him Bilhah and Leah gives him Ziplah. We are told that Jacob loved Bilhah more than Leah.

Leviticus 18:18 expressly forbids marriage to sisters. Perhaps this was excusable since Jacob was tricked.

5.8 The Birth of Jacob's Children.

Genesis **29:31-30:24** (J) w/ /E/. ABG Ch. 40 (pp. 228-233).

Twelve of the 13 tribes are identified as originating directly from Jacob's son's, eleven of whom appear in this section. Leah is the most prolific son-bearer, producing six altogether, plus at least one daughter. She is the mother of **Reuben** (the first born), **Simeon**, **Levi**, **Judah**, **Issachar**, and **Zebulun**. She also has a daughter named Dinah, whose adventures and misfortunes we will hear about later.

Rachel, with great effort and perhaps with the assistance of the mandrake root (thought to be an aphrodisiac and which indirectly benefits Leah as well), gives birth to **Joseph**. Later Rachel will give birth to **Benjamin**, child of Jacob's old age.

Bilhah (Rachel's maid) has **Dan** and **Naphtali**.

Ziplah (Leah's maid) has **Gad** and **Asher**.

There was never a tribe called Joseph, you may wish to note. Instead, we will find out later that Joseph got two portions of the inheritance (even though this right was usually reserved to the older son, and therefore, should have gone to Simeon). The two sons that received the benefit of Joseph's double portion were **Ephraim** and **Manasseh**, who are often collectively referred to as the "Joseph tribes."

5.9 Jacob's Bargain With Laban

Genesis **30:25-43** (J). ABG Ch. 41 (pp. 234-239).

In this passage, Jacob and Laban try to out-trick one another, but Jacob proves to be the superior. The bargain is that Jacob will continue to work for Laban for wages. It is agreed that the wages will be that Jacob gets to keep the dark-colored sheep and the spotted goats (those with unusual coloring) that are born in the future. Laban then promptly removes all of the dark-colored sheep and the spotted goats and takes them three days' journey away, presumably so that the sheep and goats remaining will produce fewer with the unusual coloring.

Not to be undone, Jacob conveniently places striped plant shoots and rods by the goats' watering trough, where the goats like to mate, and places Laban's dark-colored goats in view of the sheep, so that while the animals are mating, the goats will see the rods and the sheep will see the dark goats. You may understandably wonder what this has to do with anything, but in point of fact, the local folk lore had it that the offspring would resemble what the parents were looking at during intercourse. And in the story, the procedure had the desired effect. As an additional technique, Jacob took particular pains to use this method when the sturdier animals were disporting themselves. After six years, Jacob has acquired quite a flock of sturdy black sheep and spotted goats, in spite of Laban's efforts to thwart him. (In the version of the story by E, which follows, the birth of the inordinate number of spotted goats and black sheep is attributed solely to Elohim, rather than Jacob's eugenics.)

5.10 Jacob's Flight From Haran

Genesis **31:1-18a** (J) & (E); **31:18b** /P/; **31:1-18a** (J) & (E). ABG Ch. 42 (pp. 240-251).

This story of the flight from Haran begins with a parallel account of Jacob's dealings with Laban. E tells us that Elohim spoke to Jacob in a dream and told him that he was watching over him as he told him he would do in Bethel, that the goats are producing mottled offspring, implying that that was done for his benefit, and instructing him to pick up and return to Canaan. Rachel and Leah agree with this command, and encourage Jacob to comply. Apparently, Rachel and Leah believe that under local law they were entitled to a share of Laban's property and that he had cheated them out of it.

Jacob, who has served Laban for 20 years now, gathers together all of his possessions, and prepares to depart. Meanwhile, while Laban is away, Rachel sneaks in and steals the household idols. Now, under Hurrian law, possession of the household gods carried with it the right to title to property. This may, in part, explain Rachel's actions, since we will recall that Rachel felt she and Leah were entitled to property from Laban's property which he had refused to render.

Before Laban knows what has happened, Jacob and his household are three days' journey away, but upon discovering the flight, Laban gathers up his retainers and pursues Jacob, finally overcoming him in the hill country of Gilead.

Laban accuses Jacob of stealing his gods from him. Jacob, who knows nothing of Rachel's theft, denies the accusation and entreats Laban to search the place, telling him that he can kill whoever took the gods, if he finds the culprit. Rachel has the idols hidden in a camel's hair cushion that she is sitting on, but when Laban enters the tent she explains that she cannot rise to meet him because she is in her woman's period. This is a double irony or joke, because these people associated a taboo with the menstrual cycle, since it was thought to represent uncleanness. Not only does the ruse successfully fool Laban, but sitting on the idols in her condition is not a reverent thing for a good Hurrian or Semite to do. (e a patriarchal society, and woman —along with most everyone else other than the undisputed head of the family, I might add— suffered more discrimination then than now.)

Laban and Jacob exchange insults and grievances, and generally blow off steam at the expense of each other. However, in the end, they agree to part in peace, build a mound, conduct a sacrifice, and share a meal, all to commemorate the new relationship between them, which is now one of equality, well earned after 20 years of service.

5.11 Encounters

Genesis **32:1-3** (E); **32:4-33** /J/. ABG Ch. 43 (pp. 252-257).

Laban kisses his daughters and grandchildren good-bye and begins his return journey home. Jacob and his camp then continue on their way.

Jacob and his retinue eventually approach Seir, in the country of Edom, Esau's abode. At this point, a reckoning with Esau cannot be avoided. Indeed, in leaving Haran and returning to Canaan it was inevitable that their paths would cross eventually.

Jacob prepares for the encounter by dividing his people into two camps, so that if he should lose one to Esau, the other might survive. As an additional precaution, Jacob sends out several hundred head of livestock as a present for Esau, in an attempt at propitiation.

It is interesting to consider that in the 20 years that Jacob has served Laban, there is no mention of Jacob receiving any inheritance from Isaac, nor has he returned, so far as we know, during all of this time. In fact, it is Esau that is the great chieftain, and when Jacob sends out his servants to reconnoiter, they find Esau on the move with 400 men in his service. So, what did Jacob achieve by cheating his brother out of both his birthright and his father's blessing?

Jacob sends his family and possessions across the river, but he himself stays behind. That night, he encounters what he thinks is a man, and they wrestle all night. During the course of the match, Jacob has his hip socket wrenched by a well placed blow at that delicate site.

The man, it turns out, is an angel. Jacob begins to get the better of his opponent, and refuses to let him go without a blessing, whereupon the angel renames Jacob as Israel because he has striven with divine beings and prevailed, but the angel would not tell him his name. This encounter is said to explain why Levitical law does not allow the eating of the sciatic muscle.

5.12 Meeting Between Jacob and Esau

Genesis **33:1-17** (J); **33:18a** |P|; **33:18b-20** (E). ABG Ch. 44 (pp. 258-261).

Jacob looks up the next morning to see his brother Esau on the horizon, coming his way, accompanied by 400 men. Quite an impressive retinue, wouldn't you agree. But, is he coming to fulfill his threat to kill Jacob, or does he come in peace? Jacob is unsure.

Esau lives in Seir, the future land of the Edomites. Although Esau is anxious for Jacob to accompany him home, Jacob demurs on the ground that his flocks are nursing and his children are frail, and he is therefore required to proceed more slowly.

Using a tactic he adopted earlier, Jacob again divides his household, putting the maids and their children in front. So, presumably, Bilhah (Rachel's maid) and her two children, Dan and Naphtali, together with Ziplah (Leah's maid) and her two children, Gad and Asher, will bear the initial brunt of any attack. Leah and her children (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun and Dinah) are next in line. Rachel and Joseph are last.

However, the impression given is that Esau had long ago forgiven Jacob for the latter's duplicity.

Jacob, who is capable of obsequy when the occasion calls for it, goes ahead of his retinue bowing to the ground to Esau seven times as he approaches, in an obvious attempt to placate his brother. However, in the event, Jacob's precautions and prostrations were not needed, the impression given being that Esau had long ago forgiven Jacob for the latter's duplicity.

Esau is glad to be reunited with his brother, and graciously offers to accompany him. Jacob again demurs on the grounds that his children are frail and his flocks are nursing. Esau then offers to lend Jacob some men, but Jacob again declines, suggesting that Esau proceed him, and that he will meet up with him later in Seir. They separately depart in peace.

Esau goes to Seir, presumably. However, Jacob, it appears, does not join him there after all, but instead, goes to Succoth first, and later camps in sight of Shechem, where he purchases a plot of ground from the sons of Hamor, the father of Shechem. (Recall the Machpelah purchase from children of Heth in Ch. 23.) He erects an altar at Shechem and called it El-elohe-Israel, or "El, the God of Israel."

5.13 The Rape of Dinah

Genesis 34:1-31 (J). ABG Ch. 45 (pp. 262-268).

The relationship with the sons of Hamor soon sour. Shechem, son of Hamor the Hivite (the designation of Hivite is always an ambiguous in its etymology), rapes Dinah. However, this is not the usual case of violent rape; apparently it is more like "date rape," but in any event Shechem is apparently very much in love with Dinah, and does his best to make amends. He offers to marry her, and agrees to whatever terms are required. Shechem's father Hamor goes to Jacob to make the arrangements.

Meanwhile, two of Dinah's full brothers, Simeon and Levi, shamelessly trick Hamor, Shechem and their townspeople into entering into a peace accord, under the terms of which they will intermarry and live in peace, if only the people of the town will agree to be circumcised, which they all promptly do. While they are thus incapacitated, Simeon and Levi and their retainers then kill every male in the city. When Jacob's other sons learn what has happened, they come in mop up, by stealing every thing in the city and taking all of the widows and orphans (that is everybody not already dead) into captivity.

Jacob is not pleased, but Simeon and Levi are unrepentant. Interestingly, at some point in the history of Israel, Simeon has been reduced to a small tribe in the South, that eventually disappears altogether or is amalgamated with Judah, and the Levites are landless altogether. Whether there is a relationship between these facts and this incident is difficult to tell, but the hint is there.

Despite, Shechem's transgression, we are in sympathy with Shechem and Hamor by the end of the story, and, of course, the townspeople did nothing to deserve being massacred and enslaved.

5.14 Bethel Revisited

Genesis **35:1-8** (E); **35:9-13** /P/; **35:914** (E); **35:15** /P/. ABG Ch. 46 (pp. 269-271).

God tells Jacob to proceed to Bethel, perhaps on account of the massacre of Hamor and his family has made things too hot to stay, as Jacob suggested might happen in the last chapter. Thereupon, Jacob apparently instructs his retainers to discard their earrings and household gods, which are buried near Shechem. They then depart for Bethel. Although not much is said about this incident, it could be taken as an early indication that Yahweh proscribed the worship of graven images and other gods.

Upon arriving in Bethel, Jacob builds an alter. God blesses Jacob, and once again he is renamed, indicating a different tradition from that given in Ch. 32. God announces "I am El Shaddai" and thereupon blesses Jacob and promises him that his descendants will be many and prosperous, and that they will inherit the land they are in.

Jacob then names the site Bethel (again), because God spoke to him there.

5.15 Brief Notices About Jacob's Family

Genesis 35:16-20 (E); 35:21-22a /J/; 35:22b-29 /P/. ABG Ch. 47 (pp. 272-275).

After Jacob sets out from Bethel on the way to Ephrath (now Bethlehem), Rachel gives birth to Benjamin, whom she named Ben-oni, but who was renamed by Jacob. The labor was a hard one, and Rachel died as a result.

There is an intrusive sentence that follows the story of Benjamin's birth about the fact that Reuben —Jacob's first born, the son of Leah— slept with his step-mother Bilhah. The author's, while noting this unpleasantness, declined to comment further, but we will see later in Jacob's testament, that the transgression was not forgotten.

Jacob's sons are here listed again, presumably by the priestly author, who may not have known that the genealogy had been recounted already by J.

The six sons of Leah, include **Reuben**, the first born, followed by **Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun**.

The sons of Rachel are **Joseph** and **Benjamin**.

The sons of Rachel's maid, **Bilhah**, are **Dan** and **Naphtali**. (Whether she had any sons by her step-son Reuben, we are not told.)

The sons of Leah's maid, **Ziplah**, are **Gad** and **Asher**.

We are told here that these sons were all born in Paddan-aram, notwithstanding the fact that not ten verses earlier we were told that Benjamin was born on the road Ephrath (Bethlehem) in Canaan. This difference could be accounted for if verses 16-20 were recounted by E, and 22b-29 by P, who was unaware of the E version.

Chapter 35 concludes with a summary, probably by P, that Jacob came home to his father Isaac at Mamre (now Hebron), where Isaac died at 180 and was buried by Esau and Jacob. This episode may strike one as somewhat surprising inasmuch as 80 years ago Isaac, who was then old, feeble, blind, and about to die, called Esau to him to give him his death bed blessing, only to be tricked into blessing Jacob, who then had to flee, serve Laban for 20 years, marry four wives, and have at least 11 sons (Benjamin is not born yet) before returning to Canaan to sojourn for another 40 years.

Again, the chronology can easily be explained if we recognize that we are dealing with more than one tradition. Further, as we know by now, the Bible is no respecter of the details of linear time.

5.16 Edomite Lists

Genesis **36:1- 37:2a** (P). ABG Ch. 48 (pp. 276-283).

Here Esau is, not for the first or last time, identified with Seir and Edom, and a rather elaborate genealogical survey of his lineage ensues. Why such attention to the genealogy of Esau?

We know that the Israelites will be found after the Exodus to be living side by side with the other Hebrew tribes that are said here to be descended from Esau. We also know that Israel would be at war with them for hundreds of years. The Amalakites, who were descended from Esau, were destroyed when God commanded Saul to “smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have; do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass,” in short commit utter genocide against them (not only against the adults and babies, but against their animals as well, which seems a little extreme). You will recall from 1 Samuel 15 that Saul spared the king (Agag) and the Amalakite sheep, and accordingly he was berated by Samuel (who promptly hacked Agag to pieces with his sword) and punished by God, for failing to properly carry out the final solution to the Amalakite problem.

The reason for noting all this is that it is in this portion of Genesis that we learn that the Amalakites, Edomites, and other Hebrew tribes with whom the Israelites were constantly warring were considered by them to be, and in fact probably were, their near relations.

Recall also that after Sarah’s death, Abraham remarries a woman named Keturah, who is the mother of the Midianites. Moses married a Midianite (Miriam) and his father-in-law was a Yahweh worshiper, who revealed to Moses Yahweh’s name. So the Midianites were also closely related to the Israelites, and yet at various times the Israelites were locked in bloody combat with them as well, even during Moses’ lifetime.

The Edomites must have been more powerful than the Israelites at an early stage in their mutual histories, since we are told in this chapter that they had kings “long before their were kings in Israel.” Early scholars noted long ago that this statement was inconsistent with the Mosaic authorship theory, since there were no kings of Israel during Moses’ time.

It is worth remarking that in the Edomite lists of kings or dukes or chieftains, the leaders are never succeeded by their sons. This tradition might explain a similar practice during the days of the Judges, before Saul and David.

6. JOSEPH AND HIS BROTHERS

Genesis Ch. 37:2b- Ch. 50. ABG Chs. 49-62.

6.1 Joseph Sold Into Egypt

Genesis 37:2b-36. ABG Ch. 49 (pp. 287-294).

The epic now shifts to the story of Joseph. Joseph, the first, and at this time the only son of Rachel (since Benjamin has not been born one gathers) is 17 years old and is found tending the flocks with the sons of Jacob's concubines, the maids Ziplah and Bilhah.

Recall that the sons of Rachel's maid, Bilhah, are Dan and Naphtali, and the sons of Leah's maid, Ziplah, are Gad and Asher. Jacob's other six sons are by Rachel's sister Leah.

Joseph, we are told, gives his father Jacob bad reports about these half brothers.

Now Israel (Jacob) loves Joseph more than his other children, because Joseph is the child of his old age. The implication, which becomes clearer later, is that Rachel is still alive, because Benjamin is as yet unborn.

Of course, we were previously told both that Benjamin, Joseph's younger (and full) brother, was born after Jacob sets out from Bethel on the way to Ephrath (now Bethlehem). But then again, we were also told that all 12 sons were born in Paddan-aram.

Jacob gives Joseph a beautiful coat or tunic, and this causes his brothers to hate him even more. Joseph fans the flames by telling them of his dreams, in which they are all binding sheaves in the field, and his sheath stands upright, and their sheaves form a circle around his and bow down to it.

In another dream, the sun, moon and 11 stars all bow down to him. This outrages even Jacob, who interprets it as implying that Jacob, Rachel and the other sons (plus Dinah, perhaps, unless Benjamin is counted, but Benjamin's mother, Rachel, died in childbirth) are to bow down to him, which is clearly disrespectful of the father and mother if not the brothers.

Later, Jacob, who is in the Hebron valley at this point, tells Joseph that his brothers are tending the herds at Shechem, and that he is to go find them and bring backward as to how they are faring. When Joseph gets to Shechem, he finds that his brothers and their flocks have moved to Dothan, somewhat farther off. (As a side note, Dothan is about a days' journey north of Shechem, so Joseph is at this point particularly far removed from his father's protection.)

Joseph's brothers see him coming, and they conspire to kill him.

Reuben, the first born, and a son of Leah, Joseph's aunt as well as his step-mother, tries to save Joseph by suggesting that they throw him into a pit, so that he can save him later. His brothers oblige, strip Joseph of his fancy raiment, and throw him into a pit, without water.

As the brothers sat down to each lunch, they noticed a caravan of Ishmaelites approaching on their way from Gilead to Egypt. Judah, Leah's third son, now intervenes on behalf of Joseph, and suggests selling him to the Ishmaelites. His brothers agree.

Meanwhile Midianites appear on the scene, pull Joseph from the pit and sell him to the Ishmaelites for 20 pieces of silver, but apparently the brothers mysteriously do not see this take place.

Reuben then visits the pit, only to find Joseph gone. Whereupon he rents his close and wonders aloud what to do.

The brothers kill a kid and drench Joseph's blood in it and take the coat to Jacob, who thereupon rents his clothes and laments his loss.

The chapter closes with the Midianites (what happened to the Ishmaelites?) taking Joseph to Egypt and selling him to Potiphar, a courier of the Pharaoh and his chief steward.

Since we were just told that the Midianites sold Joseph to the Ishmaelites for 20 pieces of silver, we are surprised to find them selling him again, this time to an Egyptian.

It is apparent that there is more than one tradition being recorded here.

6.2 Judah and Tamar

Genesis **38:1-30**. ABG Ch. 50 (pp. 295-300).

The story of Joseph, which has begun as one of would be fratricide and violence, is interrupted, and we now shift back again to sex, for the story of how Judah has sons by his daughter-in-law.

Judah has three sons by a Canaanite woman. The eldest son married Tamar, but then God killed him because he was displeased with him. So, as was the custom, Judah gave Tamar to his second son Onan, so that Tamar could produce an heir to succeed to the inheritance that would have belonged to the eldest son whom God killed.

Onan dutifully lies with Tamar, but knowing that if Tamar produces an heir for his deceased brother, Onan, "spills his seed" on the ground. This may be the oldest recorded use of the birth control technique described more scientifically as *coitus interruptus*. This displeased Yahweh, who then killed Onan too.

This incident in the Bible has been cited as the basis for the Vatican's injunction against birth control.

Judah still had one son left, but perhaps noting that liaisons with Tamar had not augured well, he did not give Tamar his last child, leaving Tamar to languish in the house of her father.

Judah's wife later dies, and Judah journeys to Timnah for the sheep shearing. Tamar knows he is coming, and perhaps taking cognizance of the fact that the death of Judah's wife would have left him without the normal sexual outlet, Tamar puts a veil on, shed's her widow's weeds, and lies in wait for Judah, in the guise of a temple prostitute. Judah falls for the ruse and pays to have sex with her. The fee is to be a kid out of the flock, which Judah promises to provide later, but Tamar insists on a pledge in the form of Judah's signet ring and staff.

Tamar has succeeded in her object of getting herself pregnant. When Judah hears that his widowed daughter-in-law is pregnant he is outraged and is going to burn her, because, of course, he has no idea that he is the father. When Tamar produces the ring and staff, Judah realizes what has happened and is shamed. He acknowledges that Tamar was more right than he, because he had refused to give her his third son, as was her right and as was his duty. Deprived of the traditional recourse, Tamar had no choice but to do what she did. However, Judah did not lie with her again.

Tamar, in a repetition of an oft repeated Genesis theme, gives birth to twin boys, and again there is some confusion as to which one is to be recognized as the first born.

One son stuck out his hand first and the nurse tied a red thread around it, to tell them apart. However, no sooner was this done than the twin retracted his arm and was proceeded out of the birth canal by his brother. So the first born was Perez and the son with the red thread tied to his finger came out second. He was named Zerah.

These two names are eponyms for the two chief clans of Judah, the Perezites and the Zerhaites. Originally the Zerhaites were dominant, but in the end it was the Perezites that became the more important. It was from Perez that David was descended, from David that Jesus claimed descent through Joseph (setting aside the issue of whether or not Joseph was Jesus' biological father).

6.3 The Temptation of Joseph

Genesis **39:1-33**. ABG Ch. 51 (pp. 301-304).

When we last left Joseph, the Midianites had taken him to Egypt where they sold him to Potiphar. Chapter 39 opens by telling us that Potiphar bought Joseph from the Ishmaelites, but because Yahweh was watching over him, Joseph had risen to a position of great importance in Potiphar's household.

This chapter is notable for the number of references to Yahweh as the direct cause of Joseph's good fortune. However, Joseph's good luck runs out when he refuses to let Potiphar's libidinous wife to have her way with him.

Finally, after being scorned by Joseph, Potiphar's wife becomes furious. She grabs Joseph's coat (coats turn out to be the source of several of Joseph's problems) and tears it from him. As when Joseph's brothers showed Jacob Joseph's coat as evidence of his death, here Potiphar's wife uses the coat as evidence that Joseph tried to rape her.

Joseph was convicted and sentenced to prison, but again, Yahweh sees to it that he prospers, and even in prison he rises in authority. Joseph is extremely capable and seems to succeed at everything he undertakes, but the text makes clear that Yahweh is behind much of his success.

There is an Egyptian story about a faithless wife who is married to one brother, but who makes sexual overtures to the other, only to be rejected, whereupon she accuses her brother-in-law of having attempted to seduce her. The story is called the "Tale of the Two Brothers" and it has many similarities with the Joseph story.

6.4 Joseph Interprets the Dreams of Pharaoh's Servants

Genesis **40:1-33**. ABG Ch. 52 (pp. 305-308).

While in jail, Joseph is introduced to two recent arrivals, Pharaoh's cup bearer and baker. The cup bearer and baker have had strange dreams that they take for granted are portentous and wish to have interpreted. Joseph tells them that the interpretation of dreams comes from God, and he then commences to interpret them himself. He predicts death for the baker and restoration for the cup bearer, and this is what in fact happens.

Before the cup bearer leaves prison to be restored to his former office, Joseph asks the cup bearer to remember him. The cup bearer promises to do so, and then promptly forgets all about Joseph, who languishes in prison for another couple of years.

6.5 What Dreams Did For Joseph

Genesis 41:1-57. ABG Ch. 53 (pp. 309-317).

Two years after the cup bearer is released, Pharaoh has a dream that needs proper interpretation. At this point the cup bearer remembers Joseph, who is thereupon sent for by Pharaoh.

Joseph tells Pharaoh that it is not he (Joseph) that interprets dreams, but rather God. Joseph then tells Pharaoh that his dreams foretell seven good years and seven lean years, and that he should prepare for the lean years by laying up stores. Pharaoh is pleased, and immediately puts Joseph in charge of the project. **Joseph is now 30 years old, and has been in Egypt 13 years.**

As an additional reward, Pharaoh gives Joseph a daughter of one of the chief priests as a wife. Joseph's Egyptian wife bears him two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. These sons will later each take an inheritance from Jacob the size of the one due Joseph, and they will each represent one of the thirteen tribes of the Israelite federation. There is no tribe of Joseph, but Ephraim and Manasseh are instead known as the Joseph tribes.

Things transpire for the next fourteen years much as Joseph had predicted, and Joseph is quite the hero for having averted the disaster that would have overtaken the country but for Joseph's provisioning.

A prominent theme throughout this part of the story is that God is working through Joseph, and that there is a divine destiny unfolding.

Why would the Egyptians, who were historically contemptuous of shepherds in general, and of Semites in particular, be so willing to promote Joseph to the highest of offices?

A historical footnote might be in order here.

During the 200 years or so of the Patriarchal period, Egypt was ruled by the 11th & 12th Dynasties that make up the Middle Kingdom (2134-1784 BC). The Middle Kingdom was largely stable, but at the end of this period, anarchy erupted. This period of relative anarchy is known as Egypt's Second Intermediate Period, and comprises the 13th-17th Dynasties. At the beginning of this period, we know that there were large numbers of Hyksos in northern Egypt.

About 1730 B.C. the Hyksos, Asiatic invaders, primarily Semitic, but perhaps not entirely so, made significant intrusions into historically Egyptian territory. We do not know much about these people, because they were barbarians when compared to the Egyptians, and because after they were expelled, following some two centuries of dominance, memory of them was largely and effectively obliterated from most of the written monuments, the native Egyptians being less than enthusiastic about this dark period of their history.

The Hyksos eventually dominated most of Egypt and perhaps parts of the fertile crescent. The Hyksos were (presumably) Semites, presumably closely related to the Hebrews and other Semitic Canaanites. The Hyksos established the 15th dynasty.

The Hyksos introduced the horse into Egypt, and is probably the main reason they were able to conquer the country so easily.

At least 50 pharaohs, ruled during the 120 year period of the 13th Dynasty. The rulers of the 13th Dynasty, most all weak, were challenged first by the rival 14th Dynasty, and finally by the Hyksos.

The Hyksos controlled middle and northern Egypt from their capital at Avaris in the eastern delta. Simultaneously, the native Egyptian rulers of the 16th Dynasty ruled the delta and Middle Egypt, but probably as tributaries to the Hyksos.

It is very likely that the period in which Joseph entered Egypt, was put in power, and allowed to invite his family to immigrate, was a period in which the Hyksos were in power. This would explain why Joseph, who was not an Egyptian, was able to advance so easily, an accomplishment that would have been well nigh impossible under traditional native Egyptian rulers.

Two hundred years and fifty years after they arrived, the Hyksos were expelled for good by Ahmose I, who established the 18th Dynasty in 1570 B.C., which lasted for 300 years.

From 1353 to 1336 B.C. (or 1379 to 1362 B.C. depending on who is reckoning), King Amenhotep IV (who later changed his name to Akhenaton or Ikhnaton) ruled Egypt. Akhenaton attempted to impose a radical monotheism on Egypt, based upon the worship of Aton, or Aten, the sun god.

As you can imagine, Akhenaton (meaning “it is well with Aten”) was not popular with the priesthood, especially the priests of the many other now non existent deities. This religious experiment ended with Akhenaton’s death.

Akhenaton’s first wife appears to have been his mother (Tiy). He had one daughter by her. His second wife, the famous queen Nefertiti, was his maternal cousin. His third and fourth wives were not relatives. Akhenaton’s son by his fourth wife was the now famous King Tut (Tutankhamon, named after the sun god Aten that his father had declared was the only god). Akhenaton’s fifth and last marriage was to one of his daughters by Nefertiti. Tutankhamon brought the experiment with monotheism to an end, and returned to the worship of the old Egyptian gods. Tutankhamon married his half sister, but then Abraham may have done the same, so we cannot say that the practice was peculiarly Egyptian.

Some think that Joseph arrived during the period of Hyksos domination, and that the exodus took place after the Hyksos had been expelled. The exodus might have taken place shortly after the failure of Akhenaton’s attempt to establish the monotheism on the Egyptians.

6.6 The Brother’s First Trip to Egypt

Genesis 42:1-38. ABG Ch. 54 (pp. 318-324).

Meanwhile, back in Canaan, the famine causes Jacob to send all of his sons, save Benjamin, to Egypt to purchase grain. When the brothers arrive, who do they find is the dispenser of rations but Joseph, who recognizes his brothers though they do not recognize him.

Joseph interrogates them, and accuses them of being spies. Finally he consents to let them leave, with the grain they came to purchase, on the condition that they will return bringing Benjamin with them. But Joseph retains Simeon as a hostage.

The nine brothers return, and relate their story to Jacob who is understandably dismayed. In opening their bags, they and Jacob also find that Joseph has given them their money back, and are dismayed by the mystery.

Interestingly, the brothers made this same discovery on the way home, just a few verses earlier, and it worried them at that time too.

Jacob refuses to allow the brothers to return to Egypt with Benjamin, even though Reuben offers his sons as surety.

6.7 Second Trip to Egypt

Genesis **43:1-34**.

ABG Ch. 55 (pp. 325-330).

The famine gets worse, and Judah implores Jacob to allow them to return to Egypt with Benjamin. Jacob finally relents. This time it is Judah who offers himself as surety, and he obliquely criticizes his father for his indecision and delay: "We could have been to Egypt and back twice by now, if you had allowed us to return when we first asked."

Jacob tells his sons to take presents to Joseph (who he knows only to be a powerful Egyptian Vizier), and to take a double portion of money in order to pay for the grain they got the first time.

When they get to Egypt they are apprehensive about the fact that they returned with all their money the first time, so they approach the Steward with the story of the mysterious return of the money and of their innocence. The steward is equally mystified and assures them that he had received full payment for the grain.

Joseph plans to toy with his brothers a while longer. He begins with the good cop routine, by feasting all of his brothers, giving Benjamin, however, a multiple portion.

6.8 The Ultimate Test

Genesis **44:1-34**. ABG Ch. 56 (pp. 331-335).

The brothers pack animals are loaded with the rations they have purchased, and they begin their return trip back to Canaan. Once again, Joseph has given them their money back, and in addition he has planted a cup used for divination in Benjamin's pack.

After the brothers have left, Joseph sends his men out to overtake them, and to accuse them of the theft of the goblet. The brothers are naturally unsuspecting, having just been wined and dined, and they deny any involvement in the purported theft. They offer the life of the thief, and themselves as slaves for Pharaoh, if in fact it turns out that one of them has taken the goblet.

The goblet is duly discovered in Benjamin's bag, and they all return to Egypt, and we can easily imagine their state of mind: shame, confusion and fear.

What is going on is that Joseph, in addition to extracting a full measure of revenge, is testing his brothers to see if they have changed: to see if they will sell out Joseph's brother Benjamin the way that they sold him to the Ishmaelites/Midianites 22 years ago. He therefore offers to accept Benjamin as punishment for the theft and to let the rest go home. But Judah proves worthy, and steps forward and asks Joseph to take his (Judah's) life instead of Benjamin's, for Jacob's sake and because, in any event, Judah had already pledged his life as surety for the safe return of Benjamin.

6.9 The Disclosure

Genesis **45:1-28**. ABG Ch. 57 (pp. 336-341).

Joseph is obviously moved by Judah's willingness to sacrifice himself for Benjamin. Now Joseph knows that his brothers (or at least Judah) have changed (although Judah never wanted Joseph killed in the first place).

Joseph sends his Egyptian retainers out of the room, and in the privacy of his family discloses his true identity. He tells his brothers not to worry about having sold him into slavery because it was really God who sent Joseph into Egypt in advance of his brothers, in order that Joseph would be in a position to save his family from the famine.

Joseph tells his brothers to hurry back home and get Jacob and the rest of the family, and all of their belongings and animals, and to return to Egypt, where Joseph will arrange for them to live in Goshen, for there was still five years of famine ahead, which means that 9 years have transpired since Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream. Joseph would therefore be 39 years old.

Jacob is delighted to receive the news that Joseph is alive and immediately agrees to leave for Egypt as Joseph has suggested.

6.10 Jacob's Migration to Egypt

Genesis **46:1-34**. ABG Ch. 58 (pp. 342-347).

Jacob/Israel sets out for Egypt. At Beer-sheba he offers sacrifices to the God of Isaac. God speaks to Jacob in a dream, announcing, "I am El, the God of your father. Be not afraid to go down to Egypt, for I will make you there into a great nation."

Jacob's descendants are then listed by name, and are said to number 66, not counting the wives of Jacob's sons. We are then told that adding to these 66, Joseph's two sons, brings the total to 70. This is a puzzling form of arithmetic. Perhaps if Dinah and Jacob are added, the numbers can be reconciled, but that approach is outside the text. The chronology too is in doubt, since two children of Perez are numbered in the list, and Perez, the son of Tamar and Judah, could not have been born until at least 20 years after Joseph's abduction, and at this point Joseph has only been in Egypt 22 years.

The most troubling portion of the text is with respect to the enumeration of Benjamin's sons, which has been badly mangled, and is blatantly inconsistent with Numbers.

Joseph tells his family to tell Pharaoh that they are shepherds, so that Pharaoh will want them to settle in Goshen, "For every shepherd is an abomination to the Egyptians."

6.11 Jacob Before Pharaoh. His Land Policy

Genesis 47:1-26. ABG Ch. 59 (pp. 348-353).

Pharaoh interviews Jacob and Joseph's brothers. They tell Pharaoh that they are shepherds, and Pharaoh invites them to settle on the best land, and Joseph settles them in the region of "Rameses," which is the pick of the land. Rameses is a synonym for Goshen, but of course, the name is here an anachronism, because it was not to be called Ramses until Ramses became Pharaoh, 400 years later.

Jacob explains that he is 130 years old, which would mean that Joseph, who is thirty nine, was born when Jacob was 91.

Joseph is able to purchase all of the farm land in Egypt from the starving peasants who are not in a position to argue, since there is a famine going on and Joseph has set aside all of the available stores. In return for the perpetual serfdom to which they were reduced, the former land owners were given the right to share crop the land and to retain 80% of the product of their labor, for which they replied, "You have saved our lives! We are thankful to my lord that we can be serfs to Pharaoh."

6.12 The Blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh

Genesis 47:27- 48:1-22. ABG Ch. 60 (pp. 354-360).

Here we are told that Jacob lived in Egypt 17 years, living 147 years in all. As he approached the time of his death, he calls Joseph (who would have been 56) to him and asks Joseph to place his hand under Jacob's thigh, to pledge loyalty to him, and to promise that he will not allow Jacob to be buried in Egypt.

Shortly thereafter, Joseph brings his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh to an old and enfeebled Jacob, for a death bed blessing. Jacob adopts the two boys as his own. Like his father Isaac, Jacob is failing in vision, and like Isaac, gives his blessing to the younger son by accident.

6.13 The Testament of Jacob

Genesis 49:1-27. ABG Ch. 61 (pp. 361-372).

Most commentators recognize that this poem is of great antiquity, no portion of the written version of which can be attributed to any period after 1000 B.C. Old as this poem is, it was clearly written many years after the time in which it is set, probably. Most scholars recognize this poem as a composite insertion, representing a number of separate traditions, brought together in final form during the period of the judges or early monarchy.

The "blessing" is part curse and part oracle, and the sayings associated with each tribe vary widely in length and perspective: some passages are dictated in the second person (Reubin and Judah), some in the third, and in only four does Jacob speak of himself in the first person (Reubin, Simon/Levi, and Judah).

Just exactly what the significance is of the blessings (and curses) is often obscure. One thing is clear, the blessing does not refer to individuals, but to tribes.

The order followed is unusual. Leah's six sons are listed first, Rachel's two sons are listed last, but Bilhh's sons enclose those of Zilpah.

The five sons of Leah:

Reuben the first born will to exceed at first, but “unstable as water” he will be diminished in the end, for having slept with his step mother, defiling the couch of his father. The tribe of Reuben pretty nearly had disappeared by the time of David, having been conquered and absorbed by Moab.

Judah is praised extensively: “the sons of your father shall bow to you,” “a lion’s whelp is Judah,” etc.

Simeon and **Levi** are reproached for their lawlessness, probably an allusion to the attack on the Shechemites after the rape of their sister Dinah. They are to be dispersed, which is what eventually happens, during the settlement of Canaan. Levi historically was allotted no land of its own, and Simeon died out as a tribe early on, becoming amalgamated with Judah. In fact, Simeon is omitted altogether from the list of tribes found later in Deuteronomy 33.

Zebulun is to abide by the coast, next to Sidon. (But see Joshua 19:10-16, where Zebulun is not on the coast.) **Issachar** is a rawboned ass, a willing serf because his homestead is so good and his country so pleasant.

The sons of Bilhah (Rachel’s maid): **Dan** shall govern his kindred, like other tribes in Israel. “May he be like a serpent by the path that bites the horse’s heel so that the rider is tossed backward.” **Naphtali** is a hind let loose that brings forth lovely fawns.

The sons of Ziplah (Leah’s maid): **Gad** shall both raid and be raided by others. **Asher** shall be rich.

Rachel’s sons: **Joseph** is praised at length. He is a wild colt, the Shepherd, the Rock of Israel, and he will be greatly blessed.

Benjamin is a wolf on the prowl. Mornings he devours the prey and in the evening divides the spoils.

6.14 The Death of Jacob and Joseph

Genesis 49:28-1 26 ABG Ch. 62 (pp. 373-379).

Jacob finally dies at 147 years of age. He has been in Egypt 17 years. On his death bed his final request is that he be buried along side Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah and Leah, in the cave of Machpelah facing Mamre in Canaan, that Abraham purchased from Ephron the Hittite and the children of Heth..

Jacob is embalmed, in accordance with the custom of Egypt, and then Joseph and his brothers and a great retinue return his body to Canaan for burial with great solemnity and circumstance.

Joseph’s brothers worry that with the death of their father Joseph will finally pay them back for having tried to kill him. Joseph however has long ago forgiven them, but more important, he realizes, and points out to his brothers, that this seemingly unfortunate event was all part of God’s plan for (ironically) saving the family.

The Book of Genesis closes with Joseph’s death at 110 years. He is embalmed and buried in a coffin in Egypt. Literalists may stumble here, since in Joshua 24:32 Joseph is said to have been buried in Shechem.

When the curtain rises again in Exodus, 430 years have passed.