

PANORAMA OF THE BIBLE

Panorama of the Bible

Old Testament

Stephen J. Binz



LITURGICAL PRESS

Collegeville, Minnesota

www.litpress.org

Cover design by Ann Blattner. Photo: Panoramic view of the Judean Desert courtesy of Thinkstock by Getty Images. Map from *Little Rock Catholic Study Bible*, created by Robert Cronan of Lucidity Information Design, LLC, © 2011 Little Rock Scripture Study. Used with permission.

Illustrations by Clifford M. Yeary.

The illustration on page 26 is adapted from a file available on Wikimedia Commons and is printed with permission by way of attribution to <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/User:Adik86>.

Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible, revised edition* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Washington, D.C. and are used by permission of the copyright owner. All Rights Reserved. No part of the New American Bible may be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the copyright owner.

© 2016 by Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form, by print, microfilm, microfiche, mechanical recording, photocopying, translation, or by any other means, known or yet unknown, for any purpose except brief quotations in reviews, without the previous written permission of Liturgical Press, Saint John's Abbey, PO Box 7500, Collegeville, Minnesota 56321-7500. Printed in the United States of America.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016933726

ISBN: 978-0-8146-4855-1 978-0-8146-4880-3 (ebook)

Contents

- Preface 1
- Chapter One: Israel's Beginnings (*The Pentateuch*) 5
- Chapter Two: Israel's Foundational Covenant (*The Pentateuch*) 22
- Chapter Three: From Conquest to Kingdom (*The Historical Books*) 36
- Chapter Four: Division, Exile, and Restoration
(*The Historical Books*) 51
- Chapter Five: Israel's Songs and Stories (*The Writings*) 67
- Chapter Six: Israel's Wisdom Tradition (*The Writings*) 83
- Chapter Seven: Challenging the Times (*The Prophetic Books*) 97
- Chapter Eight: Hoping in the Future (*The Prophetic Books*) 113

Preface

People in every culture seem to tell their story around the table. One of my fond memories of childhood is Sunday dinner at my grandparent's house. Our whole family—aunts, uncles, and cousins—would gather at the table for the meal, and my grandparents would tell stories of the past. Looking back on that experience helps me to realize that the narratives they told around the table are an important part of who I am. At the family dinner I realized how our family came to be, where I fit into the story, and I learned the family traditions that I would continue and reshape in my own life.

The family of God tells our story at the table, too. For ancient Israelites, the Passover meal was one way they passed on the narrative of salvation: how they were slaves and how God delivered them, led them through the trials of the wilderness, and brought them into a land where they could live as a free people. For disciples of Jesus, the Eucharist is that sacred meal where the past is narrated and where we join our lives to that story of salvation around the table.

Every time we pick up the Bible and read, we are either preparing ourselves for the family meal or savoring our memories of the table. The Bible is like our family album, like a chest containing old family treasures. It is the literature of the people of God, the book of the church. When we reflect on the words of Scripture, either with others or in quiet solitude, we learn who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. We discover the truths that keep our family of faith together, and we learn what it means to live as a member of that family.

We open the Bible to hear our story. The history of salvation includes what God has done in the past, as well as what God is doing for us now,

2 *Panorama of the Bible*

and what God will do in the future. But sometimes we miss the big picture. We often know individual characters and events in the great narrative of God and humanity, but we fail to comprehend how the whole Bible fits together. Focusing exclusively on parts of the story, we miss the overall plot and how the various narrative threads intertwine to tie together God's wondrous plan.

The Bible is a magnificent library of seventy-three books. But, more important, this wonderful variety of books forms one tradition and is one story of salvation. This one Bible, the essential library of the descendants of Abraham, is the book of the church. Although the Bible consists of many books and a variety of different types of literature, the whole Bible is the narrative of God's redemption of the world. Patriarchs and matriarchs, prophets, judges, kings, priests, apostles, and evangelists belong to this inspired book of life.

This biblical account of redemption encompasses the whole world and offers us God's intentions and desires, which give cohesion, meaning, and purpose to human life. It is the grand narrative that explains for us the way things are, how they came to be so, and what they will ultimately be. It begins with creation and ends with the renewal of all things in the new creation for which we are destined. And in between, it offers us an interpretation of the whole of human history. Learning to take a panoramic view of the Bible enables us to live in the narrative and discover the real story of which each of our lives is a part.

So this panorama of the Bible, presented in two volumes—one on the Old Testament and one on the New Testament—offers a bird's-eye view of the Bible. Like looking at a map before setting out on a journey, we will survey the Scriptures so that later in other studies we can explore the riches in each book of the Bible. There is not a book in the Bible that can be interpreted satisfactorily in isolation from the rest. The central themes that run throughout the whole of Scripture offer us the big picture through which we can appreciate the details more clearly.

These two volumes belong together. Together they express one unfolding drama. As St. Augustine wrote, "The New Testament lies hidden in the Old, and the Old Testament is unveiled in the New" (*On the Spirit and the Letter* 15.27). The Scriptures of Israel and the writings of the early church are both necessary for a full understanding of God's saving plan. They are both important for Christian readers because together they are the word of the Lord.

When we understand that the Bible is our literature, we can enter into the story personally and view our lives as participants in the grand narrative of salvation. So, as we review this panorama of the Bible, it will be the responsibility of each reader to continually ask the personal questions: How do I fit into this great story of God and humanity? How do I enter this narrative of salvation today? How is my life being shaped by this inspired literature and molded into the person I was created to be? The more we can understand the whole drama as one grand narrative of salvation and then find ourselves within that story, the better we will embody Scripture and become participants in the mission of God.

Israel's Beginnings

(The Pentateuch)

The Pentateuch, the subject of these first chapters, is the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Numbers, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. “Pentateuch” comes from the Greek meaning “five scrolls.” In Hebrew, these books are known as the Torah, best translated as “teaching” or “instruction.” The Torah forms the founding charter of Israel as a nation and as a religion. It contains many different forms of writing: poetry, legend, genealogy, law, and the epic history of the nation.

These books are attributed to Moses, which means that he is the central figure and the authority behind these books. In fact he appears in almost every chapter of the last four books. But the first book, that of Genesis, doesn't mention him at all. Rather it forms a preparation and preview of the central events to follow.

The Bible begins by setting the story of Israel's past within the framework of the wider context of the whole world. The first eleven chapters of Genesis attempt to answer some of life's most basic questions about the origins of the world, the meaning of good and evil, and God's plan for humanity.

God's Desire for Creation

The whole sweep of the Bible—from its first book, Genesis, to its last book, Revelation—expresses God's desire to offer the fullness of life to the world. The opening two chapters narrate that God, “in the

beginning,” created “the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1–2). And the final two chapters relate that God is establishing “a new heaven and a new earth” (Rev 21–22). These chapters frame the entire biblical narrative of the world’s salvation. The process that God desired from the beginning is fulfilled as all creation is perfected and glorified according to God’s plan.

The opening chapters of Genesis present us with God’s intended design for the earth. In the initial creation account of Genesis 1, God is pictured as creating all that exists. The account is organized like a typical week for the Hebrews—six days of work followed by the Sabbath of rest. The world is shown to be the work of the great artisan, working with creative skill, then relaxing to enjoy the work.

The first three days are depicted as days of separation: the light from the darkness, the sky from the water, and the water from the land. The next three days are shown as days of population: the sun, moon, and stars, the birds of the sky and the fish of the sea, and the animals and people to populate the land. Compared to the creation of a temple, we can say that the divine builder spends three days constructing the holy place and then three days furnishing it. And on the seventh day, God rests and honors this “very good” creation, blessing the seventh day and making it holy.

Six Days of Creation

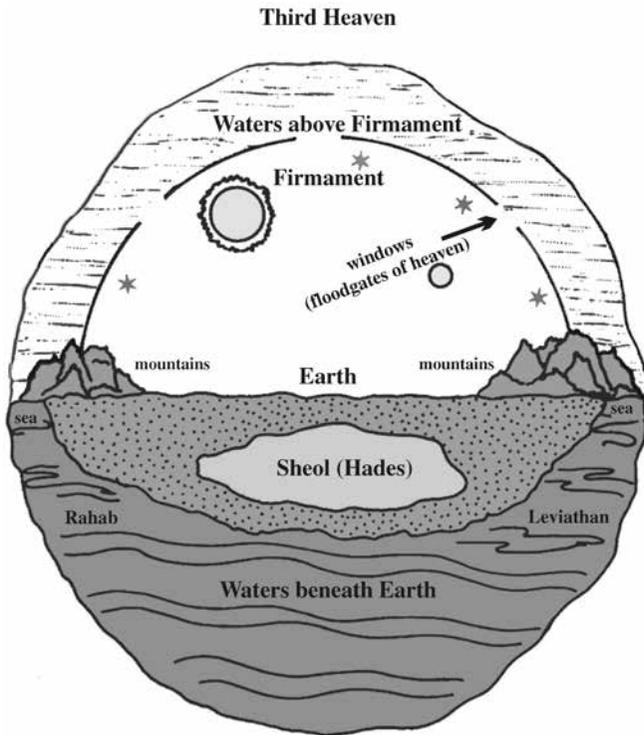
Day	Domain	Creatures	Day
1	Day & Night	Sun, Moon & Stars	4
2	Sky & Water	Birds & Fishes	5
3	Dry Land	Animals & Humans	6

All of the attention in this creation narrative is on God, the one uncreated reality. God alone is divine and eternal, so powerful that only the divine will causes creation to spring into being. God’s word of command, the repeated “Let there be . . .” brings forth a world characterized by order and harmony. Only this God, the cause and source of all things, is worthy of worship.

The seven-day framework for God’s creation, the formation of man and woman in the divine image, God’s walking with them in the gar-

den, and the forbidden tree of knowledge are all figurative expressions of what God most deeply desires for creation. God does not distance himself from creation, but rules over it in a deeply personal way. God makes the garden the place of divine dwelling with man and woman, and as they continue to multiply and fill the earth, God wishes the whole earth to be that divine dwelling place.

To read these stories as if they were simply historical information would diminish the richness of meaning and depth of truth contained within them. The writers are not writing as journalists, scientists, or historians would write. The stories presume the primitive worldview of the ancient Middle East. The earth they understood was a flat surface covered by a dome called the firmament, which let in the rain and the snow. The earth was elevated above the sea and the waters beneath the earth.



The Garden of Eden is described as a divine sanctuary where God is at home and lives in harmony with creation. Like ancient temples, it

is entered through its east side where it is guarded by cherubim. God's command that the human being (Hebrew: *ʾadam*) "serve and care for" the garden are the same verbs used in later passages to describe the duties of Israel's priests in the tabernacle. So, human beings were designed by God to serve as priests in this garden-sanctuary with direct access to God.

Similarly, God's creation of man and woman in the "image of God" confers regal status upon them. In the ancient world of other cultures, the divine image was linked to kings. The royal ruler was believed to be the living image of the divine sovereign. In Israel, this regal status is confirmed as God gives the man and woman dominion over every living thing, appointing them to rule with divine care and justice over God's creation. As man and woman are fruitful and their descendants spread throughout the earth, they are to extend the reign of God throughout creation. So, God's original design for human beings is that they be royal rulers throughout the earth and a kingdom of priests.

Clearly, the creation accounts do not so much address the question of "how" the world came to be, as the more important question of "why" the world was created. They are a profound meditation on the meaning of creation. The ancient authors choose to pass on the truths that they have come to know in the form of stories, and these stories of creation are very successful attempts to express the essential truths about existence and life.

These stories have been honored for thousands of years because people have understood that they address some of the most profound and important questions of human life: What is our purpose? What is God like? What does God want us to be like?

Some of the essential truths taught by the creation account of Genesis 1 are these:

- There is one supreme God, unlike the multiple gods of other nations.
- God is the primary cause of all that exists.
- The sun and moon are not gods, as other religions believed, but part of God's creation.
- All creation is good, and people are the peak of that good creation.
- Men and women are equally made in the image of a loving God.
- Men and women are cocreators with God and stewards of the earth.

God's Design Disrupted by Human Sin

A second creation story, which includes the story of sin, follows the first creation account. The editor of Genesis decided to include both of these creation stories because both had long been treasured within the community as expressing the truth about God and humanity.

In this second account of Genesis 2, God forms *ʾadam* from the ground (*ʾadama*), and breathes the divine breath into his nostrils to make him live. God then plants the Garden of Eden and places the man there. When God forms birds and animals from the ground, God presents them to the man for naming. But when none of them prove to be a suitable companion for the man, God builds a woman from the side of the man. When she is brought to the man, he recognizes that she is not from the ground like the animals but from his very self: "bone of my bones / and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2:23). And like children, they feel no shame in their nakedness.

In both creation accounts, we see that human beings are made for God, for one another, and for the created world. As God's royal stewards and priests, we are responsible for developing the world in such a way that all creation gives God glory. But as the narrative continues, God's design is disrupted by the refusal of man and woman to live according to God's desire for creation. The cunning serpent, one of God's creatures, deceptively distorts God's words and undermines God's plan, and man and woman choose to listen to the serpent's instructions rather than those of God.

By failing to exercise their dominion over the serpent, they destroy the trusting harmony God desires within the garden. By betraying God, man and woman are sent forth from the dwelling God prepared for them. Their God-given dominion over the creatures of the earth turns to domination. God's authority is overturned, and harmony begins to revert to the chaos that existed before God formed the world. As the stories of the early chapters of Genesis reveal, the hallmark of sinful humanity becomes violence toward other creatures, both human and animal, and toward God's good creation.

This account in Genesis 3 focuses on the human condition: our desire for happiness and the reality of pain, sin, and death. The storytellers of Israel's wisdom tradition saw how the world is deeply wounded and wondered how human suffering is compatible with belief in a powerful

and loving God. With colorful language and the symbols of the garden, the author paints a picture of God's desire for our happiness, yet also of God's desire to create us free, capable of personally choosing God's will for our lives. The human will turned against God's plan, and the result is the suffering and death that comes from sin. The storyteller shows us how it has been *from the beginning* by painting a story of life *in the beginning*.

The symbolic tree, whose forbidden fruit the couple eats, represents the temptation to be autonomous and to live apart from God's reign. Human beings are alive and free to enjoy creation as long as they live out their freedom under God's rule and will for human life. The temptation they face through the serpent is to become a law unto themselves, to walk according to their own path rather than the way of their Creator.

The result of this human choice for autonomy apart from God's way is the destruction of the harmony that God placed within creation. The human relationship with God is distorted. From walking comfortably with God in the garden, man and woman now hide from God's presence in fear and shame. The relationship of man and woman to each other is damaged. They become morbidly self-conscious, quickly covering their nakedness and blaming one another.

Yet, God's purposes are not defeated. Although an uncertain and perilous world faces the couple, God does not abandon them. They will still bear the divine image in the world. Although God punishes by cursing the serpent and putting enmity between the offspring of the serpent and that of the woman, God also offers hope by promising that the offspring of the woman will strike and crush the head of the serpent (Gen 3:15). That is, a descendant of Eve will destroy the powers of evil that the man and woman have unleashed through their disobedience.

Some of the essential truths taught by this account of Adam and Eve are these:

- Human beings are created by God with the ability to choose or reject God's will.
- The root cause of human suffering is sin, the human choice to disobey God.
- Sin disrupts human relationships and brings about shame and blame.

- Suffering is not a punishment inflicted by God, but a consequence of sin.
- Human beings suffer on account of our own sin and the sin of others.
- God doesn't abandon the human race but promises them a future in which to hope.

The Effect of Sin in the World

The stories of Genesis 3–11 show how the effects of sin multiply and destroy human relationships with God, with other people, and with the created world. After the sin, Adam hides from God; he blames Eve, and he is expelled from the harmony of the garden and made to work for food with hard labor. When Eve gives birth to Cain and Abel, rivalry grows between them. Out of jealousy, Cain murders his brother Abel and must wander alone upon the earth. The family that God desires to be a place of support and companionship becomes a breeding ground for envy, resentment, rage, and vengeance.

Accounts of family rivalry lead up to the story of Noah and the catastrophic flood. Sin has spread throughout the whole earth, and violence and corruption have so filled the world that God regrets making human beings on the earth. In God's desire to remake the world, he saves Noah and his family as well as a remnant of every species upon the earth. God manifests his commitment to creation despite the destructive effects of human beings in the world. Following the flood, God establishes a covenant with every living creature with the rainbow as its sign (Gen 9:8-17).

The final story of sin's expansion is the account of the tower of Babel. Even though the growth of cities and cultural progress can demonstrate human achievement, it is doomed to failure when it demonstrates human autonomy apart from God. The huge tower becomes the symbol of humans' arrogance because of their attempts to go it alone in defiance of the Creator (Gen 11:4). God condemns the human pride that has inspired it and judges the people by confusing their language and scattering them abroad.

These stories describe tendencies that move deep within every person. Men and women are inclined to act in ways that lead to estrangement and blame each other for it. Siblings tend to fight with one another and grow apart. Human beings think they have the power and wisdom of

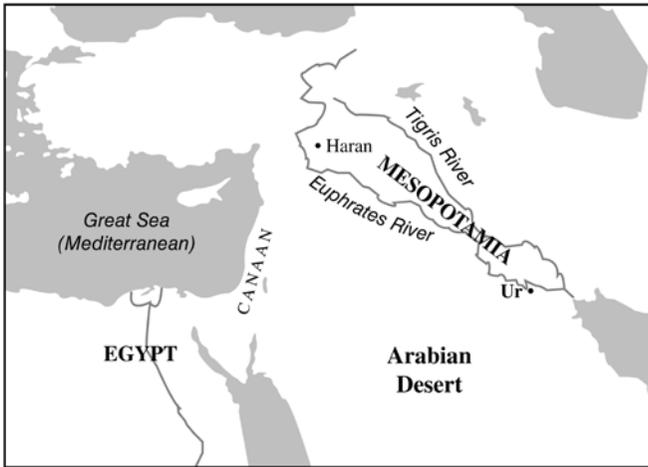
God, and they suffer in their sinful choices. Men and women are good, yet flawed and fallen. Although God passionately wills life and blessing for his creatures, all of these blessings begin to be destroyed because of sin. The power of death gets increasingly stronger and the world begins to return to the chaos from which it came.

Against the background of these early chapters of Genesis, the rest of the Bible narrates the history of salvation. The remainder of Scripture demonstrates how God desires the world to become a dwelling shared by God, humanity, and the creatures of the earth. God's people must be rescued from the control of sin and receive the royal and priestly dignity that God wishes to bestow upon them. The kingdom of God must be established throughout the earth so that God may dwell with his royal and priestly people.

God Initiates a Saving Plan

Although the stories of Genesis 1–11 show humanity moving away from God, Genesis 12 introduces a different kind of narrative. Against the darkness of human sinfulness, the light of God's saving will begins to shine in the person of Abraham. Beginning with his call, we see Israel looking deep into its own ancient history to recover accounts of its ancestors. These accounts of the origins of Israel go back to the ancient traditions passed on through many generations. The type of writing we see in these narratives can be described as folk history, an ancient history that has been handed down through oral tradition. Though rooted in history, the accounts contain imaginative, symbolic, and legendary material. They have a timeless quality and they teach us powerful lessons about God and faith.

Out of all the scattered nations of the earth, God chooses one family. God called Abraham and Sarah to leave their homeland and go to a new, unknown land—to leave their former identity and find their identity in God. They migrate from Ur of the Chaldeans (in present-day Iraq), up the Euphrates river valley, to Haran in Mesopotamia (a city near the present border of Turkey and Syria). Then, they travel with their whole household to the land of Canaan, which would become the land of Israel many centuries later.



The opening verses of Abraham's call (Gen 12:1-3) preview the covenant God will make with him in the form of three promises. First, God will give Abraham a new land, a land to which God is leading him. Second, God will give Abraham numerous descendants—too many to count—who will form a great nation. And third, God assures Abraham that through him “all the families of the earth will find blessing.”

In other words, God doesn't call Abraham just for his own sake, or for his own family, or even for the future people of Israel. Rather, God calls Abraham and enters into covenant with him so that, ultimately, all the people of the world will be blessed. The stories of Abraham demonstrate how God begins to fulfill these promises; the remainder of the Torah shows their partial fulfillment; and the rest of the Bible shows how God fulfills those promises completely.

For all later generations, Abraham becomes the father of faith. Asked to leave his autonomy and security—family, tribe, home, country—he travels a long journey to an uncertain destination, following where God leads him. His faith is marked by his constant relationship with God—a faith that consists of belief in God, trust that God will fulfill the promises, and obedience to God's will.

God is at work, through Abraham, to reverse the curses that sin has brought upon the world. God desires to restore his original blessings and purpose to creation. By giving Abraham's descendants the land, by making them the great nation of Israel, and by ultimately restoring

God's blessing to the people of all nations, God makes Abraham his first instrument in the divine plan to redeem the world.

God confirms the covenant with Abraham through sacrificial rituals and concrete signs. The sign of the covenant with Abraham is circumcision, a visible and permanent mark of God's relationship with this people who come from Abraham's loins. After many long years of trusting, God reaffirms the covenant, telling Abraham and Sarah that they will have a son whom they will name Isaac. Sarah's barren womb gives way to God's promise. Although both Abraham and Sarah laugh aloud at the suggestion that they will have a son in their elderly condition, God has the last laugh. God says to Abraham, "Is anything too marvelous for the LORD to do?" (Gen 18:14). When their son is born, they name him Isaac, which means "laughter."

Finally, Abraham's faith is most challenged when God tells him to take his son Isaac and offer him in sacrifice on Mount Moriah. In this unbearable test, Abraham reluctantly but trustingly journeys to put his only beloved son to death. While Isaac carries the wood of the sacrifice, he asks his father, "Where is the sheep for the burnt offering?" And Abraham answered, "God will provide the sheep for the burnt offering" (Gen 22:7-8). At the last moment, God stays his hand. Abraham has demonstrated his faith in the fullest way.

Following this scene, God reaffirms the promises of the covenant: "In your descendants all the nations of the earth will find blessing" (Gen 22:18). This final promise to Abraham frames the narrative of his obedient life, from its early beginning at Abraham's call to its final, climactic end. Later revelation states that Mount Moriah is the temple mount in Jerusalem. Here, in later history, the priests of the temple will make morning and evening sacrificial offerings, a divine sign that God will provide universal blessing for all people. Here, at the place God desires to establish as a house of prayer for all the nations, God desires a final sacrifice, an offering for the sin of all humanity.

Patriarchs and Matriarchs of God's People

Many centuries after the life of Abraham and Sarah, God spoke through Isaiah the prophet and called God's people to trust in a troubled time: "Look to Abraham, your father, / and to Sarah, who gave you birth; / though he was but one when I called him, / I blessed him and made him many" (Isa 51:2). God calls future generations to imitate the

example of Israel's first patriarch and matriarch because the promises God made to them are being fulfilled in every age.

The accounts of Genesis 25–35 narrate the stories of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. We see that God's promises are reaffirmed to their son and grandson, so that God comes to be referred to as "the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob."

But these stories are filled not only with promises confirmed, but also with bitter family relationships. The one who inherits the promises is not Abraham's first son, Ishmael, born of Sarah's slave girl Hagar, but Isaac, conceived in Sarah's old age by the saving will of God. When Isaac marries Rebekah, they have twin sons. Esau is the first born, then Jacob follows from the womb, gripping Esau's heel and prefiguring a life of conflict between the two sons.

As the boys mature, Jacob uses his cleverness to claim the inheritance that is due to Esau. With the help of his mother, he outwits his father Isaac and his brother Esau to obtain the birthright and become the heir of the covenant promises. Over and over Israel's stories demonstrate that God's promises cannot be merited or taken for granted. They do not belong by right to the natural or most obvious successor; rather, they are the free gift of God.

The feuding between Jacob and Esau plays itself out in a variety of ways as Jacob flees for his life because of Esau's desire to kill him. On his journey, God meets with Jacob through a dream at Bethel. While sleeping, Jacob dreams of a stairway stretching between earth and heaven, with angels traveling up and down on it. God stands beside Jacob, identifies himself, and reaffirms to Jacob the promises made to the family of Abraham.

I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you are lying I will give to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be like the dust of the earth, and through them you will spread to the west and the east, to the north and the south. In you and your descendants all the families of the earth will find blessing. I am with you and will protect you wherever you go, and bring you back to this land. I will never leave you until I have done what I promised you. (Gen 28:13-15)

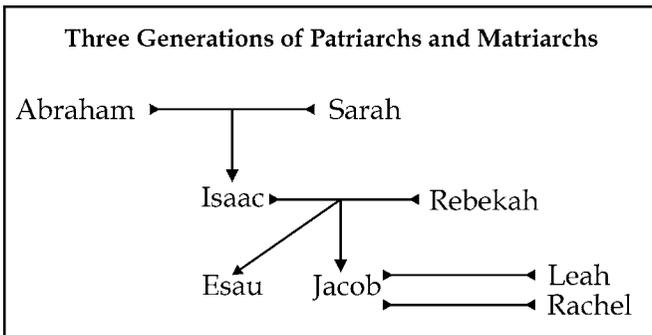
Polygamy was common among the people of the ancient Middle East and the people of Israel were no exception. When Jacob desires to take Rachel as his wife, her father offers to give his daughter in marriage after

Jacob has worked for him seven years. Then on the night of the wedding, her father deceives Jacob and switches his older daughter, Leah, in the darkness of the marriage chamber. The next morning, when Jacob discovers that he has been deceived and has consummated the marriage with Leah rather than his beloved Rachel, the girls' father promises he will give Jacob his younger daughter after another seven years of Jacob's service to him. The one who used his clever cunning to obtain his own father's blessing now is deceived by the clever father of his wives.

While Leah gives birth to sons, Rachel bears none. Competing to see which side of the family will have the most children, both women offer their maidservants to their husband to bear more children. This rivalry between wives and sons will bring immeasurable jealous division within the family of Jacob.

When Jacob prepares to return to his own land with his two wives, two maidservants, and eleven children, he learns that his brother Esau is coming to meet him after many years of estrangement. Jacob fears that his brother will take revenge for his deception. But on the night before their meeting, Jacob encounters a divine visitor who wrestles with him throughout the night. When Jacob asks the stranger for a blessing, God changes Jacob's name to Israel, which means "he who wrestles with God." So Jacob becomes the father of the nation that will be formed from the tribes of his sons, a nation what will certainly wrestle with God throughout its history.

At dawn Esau arrives and runs to his brother, weeping and embracing him. Jacob's happy surprise teaches him to trust in God's designs. He does not need to scheme and deceive to obtain God's blessings. Jacob experiences the divine presence in both the love of God and the love of his brother. Here there is hope that forgiveness and reconciliation can prevail over the homicidal jealousy exemplified in Cain and Abel.



The Twelve Sons of Jacob

The children of Rachel and Leah, together with their midwives, number twelve sons: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, Dan, Naphtali, Gad, Asher, Joseph, and Benjamin. These twelve become the patriarchs from whom the twelve tribes of Israel take their descent.

The last section of Genesis, chapters 37–50, contains the stories of Joseph and his relationship to his brothers. Joseph, the first son of Rachel, is Jacob's spoiled and favorite son. His father loves him best and has made him a long ornamented tunic. Joseph's dreams and his ability to interpret them intensify his brothers' jealousy, so they plot to kill him. Instead they sell him to a band of traders who bring him down to Egypt, but they deceive Jacob into thinking his son has been murdered. They dip Joseph's coat in the blood of a goat, and they tell their father that Joseph has been slain by a wild beast. Again, Jacob reaps what he has sown. Just as Jacob deceived his own father Isaac to obtain his blessing, so now Jacob experiences the betrayal of his own sons' deception.

In Egypt, Joseph becomes a servant to Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh. Then his fortune changes when he successfully interprets the dreams of Pharaoh and thereby saves Egypt from famine. When Joseph is made a favorite minister of Pharaoh, famine in Canaan brings his brothers to seek help in Egypt. Joseph is now in a position to invite his father and brothers to come down to Egypt to live and escape the famine. Joseph's reunion with his brothers is an emotional event and their father Jacob dies a happy man because he is reunited with his son Joseph.

The account of Joseph reads like a novel that is hard to put down. It is a story of injury and forgiveness, of estrangement and reconciliation. We see the development of Joseph from a selfish and alienated youth to a mature and selfless leader fully reconciled with his family. Through his generosity and willingness to forgive, Joseph upholds the unity of Israel's family and prevents their extinction. Throughout these accounts, the providential hand of God guides the fate of the family of Jacob-Israel as God brings good out of evil and turns disaster into triumph over and over again.

Moses Called to Be God's Instrument of Liberation

The whole book of Genesis is a preview for the experiences told in the book of Exodus. Most nations can point to a decisive event that constitutes

the beginning of their histories. For Israel that event is the exodus. This event gave birth to Israel as a people, as a nation, and as a religion.

The book can be described as epic history. It does not use detailed historical records, but it recounts the oral history remembered by the people of Israel through the ages. It exalts the power of God in the founding events of their life as a people. At its core it is historical, but its focus is on God—the One who cares for his chosen people and passionately desires their freedom.

As Exodus begins, we realize that the seventy members of Jacob's family who went to Egypt have increased abundantly over many generations.

Now Joseph and all his brothers and that whole generation died.
But the Israelites were fruitful and prolific. They multiplied and became so very numerous that the land was filled with them.

Then a new king, who knew nothing of Joseph, rose to power in Egypt. (Exod 1:6-8)

The first chapters of Exodus are an account of misery and oppression. The new pharaoh fears the numbers of the Israelites, so he subjects them to brutal slave labor and initiates a cruel policy of killing all newborn male Israelites. After a wondrous infancy narrative, showing how the initiative and courage of women rescue Moses and lead him to be raised in the court of Pharaoh, the book recounts how Moses is called to rescue his people.

The call of Moses, like the call of Abraham, marks the beginning of a new stage of God's saving plan. While shepherding sheep in the wilderness, Moses comes to the mountain of God. There he has an astonishing encounter with God, who speaks to him from a burning bush. Telling Moses to take off his sandals because the place and the encounter is holy, God identifies himself to Moses as the God of his ancestors.

I am the God of your father, he continued, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look at God.

But the LORD said: I have witnessed the affliction of my people in Egypt and have heard their cry against their taskmasters, so I know well what they are suffering. Therefore I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and lead them up from that land into a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey, the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the

Perizzites, the Gergashites, the Hivites and the Jebusites. Now indeed the outcry of the Israelites has reached me, and I have seen how the Egyptians are oppressing them. Now, go! I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt. (Exod 3:6-10)

God initiates the events of the exodus as God sees the wretched state of the people and hears them as they cry out for help. God is determined to rescue them from their oppression. But the exodus event is not just liberation from slavery; it includes the gift of freedom to live in a land of blessings and abundance. The fertile and spacious land of God's promises is the ultimate goal of Israel's redemption. Now God is sending Moses to Pharaoh to be the instrument of Israel's deliverance.

The response of Moses expresses humility and reluctance. When he asks for the divine name so that he can identify God to his people, God responds with the distinctive name by which God will be known throughout the Scriptures. God says, "I am who I am. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you'" (Exod 3:14). The divine name, YHWH, is generally written in English versions of the Bible as "LORD." The root verb conveys the idea of dynamic presence. The name conveys this idea of God's active presence in the life of Israel. God will be known through what God does, through the effect God has in the life of the chosen people. The whole of salvation history is God's expression of the divine name.

Moses uses every excuse he can muster to escape his call, yet God reassures him: "I will be with you." Then the presence of God, bringing good from evil, bringing freedom from oppression, is demonstrated in two basic stories of deliverance: first, the plagues in Egypt and Passover (Exod 7–11), and second, the crossing of the sea (Exod 13–15).

God Frees the Israelites from Slavery

The obstacle to the Israelites' liberation is Pharaoh, who is regarded by the Egyptians as divine and holding absolute power. The exodus is described as a conflict between the LORD, the God of freedom and life, and Pharaoh, the god of oppression and death. Both assert a claim over the faithfulness and service of the Hebrews. The exodus events express the defeat of the powers of slavery that Pharaoh represents, and they express the liberation of God's people from all that prevents them from becoming the people they were chosen to be.

Through a series of ten plagues, Pharaoh is confronted with the fact that the LORD is God. The LORD's enslaved people are rescued from their oppression on the night of Passover. As the tenth and final plague comes upon the Egyptians, the families of the Israelites are instructed to sacrifice a lamb and to apply its blood to the lintel and the doorposts of their homes. This sacrificial blood prevents death from entering their houses and becomes the doorway through which the families of God will enter into their freedom.

Defeated and desperate, Pharaoh at last lets the Israelites go. But he makes one last attempt to restrain the Israelites and orders his armies to pursue them as they flee Egypt. The Israelites then arrive at the sea, with the Egyptians in hot pursuit. At God's command, Moses stretches out his hand over the sea and the waters are divided, allowing the Israelites to pass through the sea for their final escape to freedom. With the waters divided like a wall to their right and left, the Israelites pass through on dry land just before the break of dawn.

This passage of Israel through the sea is remembered as the primary event of salvation for Israel, expressing in a single event the whole narrative of transition from bondage to freedom. For the ancient Israelites, the sea represents the forces of destruction, chaos, and death. The passage through the waters, from the darkness into the dawn, is an image of birthing, the transition through the birth canal. Israel is God's firstborn, and the exodus is described by later writers as the moment of Israel's birth.

The song of Moses in Exodus 15 celebrates God's magnificent rescue at the sea and describes this liberation as the way God will be continually manifested. God is the one who is repeatedly conquering all those forces opposed to freedom and abundant life: crushing injustice, overcoming domination, and vanquishing oppression. The newborn Israelites praise their God of freedom and life and celebrate God's divine victory over all the forces of oppression and death. The song links Israel's "coming out" of bondage to the people's "coming into" the land.

One of the most important descriptions of God in the Old Testament is "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (Exod 20:2; Deut 5:6). The liberation of God's people from bondage and their establishment as a people was the decisive event of God's self-revelation to Israel. This passage from bondage and death to freedom and life became the paradigm for describing all of God's future actions of deliverance.

The people of Israel learned to reflect on all the events of their national history in light of the primary event of the exodus. The Israelites expressed their faith in God by reciting the saving deeds they experienced throughout their history, beginning with the exodus and narrating their history with ever-new hope. Because God had heard the people's cries in the past, they could be certain that God would continue to rescue and save them. In every age, Israel knew that its future would take shape according to the same patterns with which its past had been formed.

Over and over again throughout the story of Scripture, people find themselves imprisoned, locked in captivity. And God, with power and compassion, brings them to deliverance and abundant life. This bondage takes many forms and many names in Scripture: slavery, imprisonment, oppression, grief, doubt, sin, death, alienation, and despair. Likewise, the passage to freedom takes many forms and names: rescue, deliverance, ransom, release, passover, redemption, and salvation. This deliverance that God offers is both physical and spiritual, both temporal and eternal.

Now that the people of God have passed through the waters, the history of Israel as a nation has begun. Israel was born out of the waters, brought by God out of the waters and into life. Now that Israel is born, God leads her through a period of childhood and adolescence, before she reaches adulthood in the Promised Land. These are the topics of our next chapter as we complete our survey of the Pentateuch.