

Genesis



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANONYMOUS

Traditionally, Jewish and Christian readers have attributed the Book of Genesis to Moses. Moses led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt as described in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Deuteronomy begins, “The words that Moses spoke to all Israel,” and by late antiquity, Moses had come to be regarded as the writer of all of the first five books of the Bible, known as the Pentateuch. However, no author is identified within Genesis itself. By the early modern period, biblical scholars speculated that Genesis was composed from multiple source documents. This conjecture is primarily based on the use of different names for God—in some places *Elohim*, in others *YHWH* (*Yahweh*)—in different passages, as well as the duplication of some stories. By the late 19th century, this “Documentary Hypothesis” became the established scholarly view, identifying four authorial strands behind the books of the Pentateuch (the “Priestly” and “Jahwist” sources being especially prominent in Genesis). Though the particulars of this hypothesis have since been critiqued and revised, most mainstream academics still view Genesis as a composite book whose constituent layers were written in different eras. What’s clear about the writer (or writers) of Genesis from its content is that the author has historical concerns (seen through their focus on people’s genealogies, for example), literary concerns (the many elegantly composed stories throughout Genesis), and above all theological concerns (the book as a whole is intended to teach its audience about God and humanity’s relationship with God).

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Though the chronology given within Genesis would place Abraham’s life somewhere around 2100 B.C.E. and Jacob’s arrival in Egypt around 1876 B.C.E., many modern scholars find few details to corroborate the timing or even the historical basis for these and other events in Genesis’s patriarchal (i.e., ancestral) history. For example, the kings described in Chedorlaomer’s war in Genesis 14 are not attested in other ancient sources. One piece of evidence for placing the patriarchs in this area is the term *Hebrew*, which some scholars have connected to the term *Habiru*, which appears in writings throughout the ancient world. However, this, too, is inconclusive, since the term is applied not to a specific ethnic group, but to people who appear on the fringes of society, like fugitives or slaves. Other scholars argue that anachronistic references (e.g., references to people in things that appear in the wrong time period)—like the Philistines, who didn’t invade

Israel’s coastal plain until later, or the use of domesticated camels—go against a very early dating of Genesis. Because of the inconclusive nature of such evidence, modern scholars have often focused more on the history of the oral traditions that they believe came to make up the composite text of Genesis. For instance, the compilation of so-called “Jahwist” and “Elohist” accounts of the patriarchs’ genealogy is thought to have provided exiled Jews in the 6th century B.C.E. with an understanding of their origins, history, and tribal unity. This was likely especially true given the people’s division into a northern kingdom of Israel and southern kingdom of Judah a few centuries before that.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

In the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, Genesis is the first of the five books collectively known as the Pentateuch—Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—which tell the story of Israel from God’s creation of the world until the death of Moses, just before Israel’s entrance into the promised land. These books are also called the *Torah* in Judaism, which loosely means “law,” although Genesis and much of Exodus contain narratives. Genesis’s creation and flood stories contain parallels with other Ancient Near Eastern creation stories, such as the [Enuma Elish](#) and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (both Babylonian, 2nd millennium B.C.E.). Beginning in the 19th century, the study of these ancient epics yielded valuable insights for scholars of Genesis. Many literary works across time and place draw on the stories that appear in Genesis. Classic works that directly reference Genesis include Milton’s [Paradise Lost](#) and Dante’s [Purgatorio](#). Christina Rossetti’s poem [Goblin Market](#), published in the mid-19th century, references Genesis a little more obliquely. It centers around the theme of temptation (its core symbol is forbidden fruit), which echoes the story of the serpent tempting Eve into eating forbidden fruit in the garden. More recent works that draw on Genesis and its various characters include Daniel Keyes’s [Flowers for Algernon](#), Margaret Atwood’s [The Handmaid’s Tale](#), and Elizabeth Acevedo’s [The Poet X](#), among others.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Genesis
- **When Written:** c. 6th and 5th centuries B.C.E.
- **Where Written:** Ancient Israel. Some scholars have speculated that parts of Genesis were written during the Jewish exile in Babylon in 6th century B.C.E.
- **Literary Period:** Ancient Near Eastern
- **Genre:** Religious literature, containing creation stories and

elements of historical epic

- **Setting:** Ancient Mesopotamia, Israel (land of Canaan), and Egypt
- **Climax:** Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, and Jacob and his sons settle in Egypt.
- **Antagonist:** Human disobedience and rebellion against God
- **Point of View:** Third-Person Omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

Famous First Words. The word *genesis*, from the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, means “generation” or “origin.” In Hebrew, the book’s title is *Bereshit*, from the first words, “In the beginning.”

When It All Began. The Hebrew calendar, based on medieval rabbinic calculations, traditionally dates Creation to the year 3761 B.C.E. Today, Jewish communities continue to use this calendar for the purposes of religious observance. The year 2020 C.E. corresponds to 5780/5781 on the Hebrew calendar.



PLOT SUMMARY

The Book of Genesis begins with the creation story, as God creates the heavens and the earth out of nothing. He calls things into existence—light, the sky, seas, **land**, plants, and animals—and declares them “good.” After God makes all the other creatures, he creates human beings in his own image, putting them in charge of the rest of creation. He makes Adam, the first man, out of the **dust** and breathes into his nostrils. After placing Adam in the garden of Eden, he creates the first woman, Eve, out of Adam’s rib to be his companion.

A sly serpent disrupts Adam and Eve’s harmonious existence with God in the garden. One day, the snake questions Eve about God’s prohibition of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, suggesting that she and Adam won’t necessarily die if they eat its **fruit**—they will gain divine knowledge instead. Eve and Adam decide to eat the tree’s fruit, but they immediately feel ashamed and hide from God. Because of their disobedience, God curses the serpent and Adam and Eve—death being the humans’ ultimate punishment. Adam and Eve are expelled from Eden and begin having children, who populate the earth.

Generations later, Adam’s descendants have filled the world with wickedness and violence, so God decides to wipe out almost all of his creation. He commands a righteous man, Noah, to build an ark so that he, his family, and some of each of the earth’s creatures can survive a catastrophic flood. After the flood destroys all other people and creatures, the waters recede, and Noah and his family emerge from the ark. God establishes a covenant, or formal agreement, with Noah and all his descendants: God will never again destroy the earth with a

flood. Noah’s sons begin to repopulate the earth.

God summons Abram, a descendant of Noah’s son Shem, to leave his homeland of Ur and settle in the land God will show him, called Canaan. After Abram settles there, God establishes a covenant with him, promising not only to give him the land forever, but to grant him more offspring than he can count. However, Abram and his wife, Sarai, are old and still childless. Abram has a son, Ishmael, by Sarai’s slave-girl, Hagar. Finally, Sarai (God now calls her Sarah) conceives, and she and Abram (now Abraham) give birth to Isaac. Like the other household males, Isaac is circumcised to signify God’s covenant.

When Isaac is older, God tests Abraham by telling him to take his son to a distant mountain and offer him as a burnt sacrifice. At the last moment, as Abraham draws the knife to kill Isaac, God’s angel stops him and says that because Abraham has not withheld his only son, God will bless him with many offspring. Before Abraham dies, he sends a servant to his homeland to find Isaac a wife from among his relatives. He finds Rebekah, who settles with Isaac in Canaan and eventually bears him twin sons, Jacob and Esau.

As Jacob and Esau grow up, Isaac remains partial to Esau, while Rebekah favors Jacob. One day Isaac sends Esau to hunt and prepare his favorite meal so that he can offer Esau his blessing. However, Rebekah conspires with Jacob to claim the blessing, dressing him in hairy garments so that Isaac (whose eyesight is poor) will believe it’s really the hairier Esau. After Jacob tricks Isaac into giving him the elder twin’s blessing, he flees Esau and lives among Rebekah’s relatives. On the way, he has a dream in which God promises Jacob his blessing.

In the land of Haran, Jacob falls in love with Rachel, who is one of his uncle Laban’s daughters. Laban agrees that if Jacob works for him seven years, he can marry Rachel. When the seven years are up, however, Laban tricks Jacob by bringing his older daughter, Leah, to Jacob’s tent instead. The next day he agrees that Jacob can marry Rachel, too, in exchange for another seven years’ labor. Jacob doesn’t love Leah, so God grants her the consolation of numerous sons and a daughter. Rachel is barren, and she bitterly envies Leah. After many years, God answers her prayers with a son, Joseph.

When Jacob returns to Canaan with his wealthy household, he fears that Esau will still be angry with him. The night before he crosses the Jabbok River to reunite with his brother, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious man, and God renames him Israel. To his surprise, Esau welcomes him with joy. Not long after Jacob resettles in Canaan, Rachel dies while giving birth to a second son, Benjamin.

Out of all his brothers, Joseph is Jacob’s favorite son. Joseph further stokes his brothers’ envy by telling them of his dreams, in which the others bow down to him. Finally the brothers have had enough, and they sell Joseph to some passing traders. They grieve Jacob by telling him Joseph has been killed by an animal.

Meanwhile, Joseph is bought by the Egyptian Pharaoh's official, Potiphar, with whom he quickly gains favor. Before long, Joseph is in charge of Potiphar's household.

After being imprisoned on false charges, Joseph also gains favor with the jailer and develops a reputation as an interpreter of dreams. When he proves to be the only person in Egypt who can interpret Pharaoh's dreams, Joseph is released from prison and made overseer of Egypt's affairs. He wisely begins storing up grain for the famine foretold in Pharaoh's dreams.

When the famine reaches Canaan, Jacob sends his older sons to Egypt in search of grain. The brothers don't recognize Joseph, and he pretends to think that they're spies, holding one brother ransom until the rest return home to get the youngest, Benjamin, and prove their identity. When they eventually return, Joseph accosts the brothers once again with a fake accusation of theft to test their character; then, unable to contain himself any longer, he reveals his identity. The brothers have a tearful reunion, and when Pharaoh hears about it, he insists that Jacob and the whole family move to Egypt, where Joseph can richly provide for them.

After thriving for many years in Egypt, Jacob dies, but first he pronounces a special blessing on each of his sons, whose offspring become known as the 12 tribes of Israel (Joseph and Judah being most prominent among them). After mourning their father, Joseph's brothers try to placate him, fearing he'll get revenge on them for selling him into slavery. However, Joseph assures his brothers that he does not begrudge them, because God turned the brothers' evil into good. Before he dies, Joseph tells his brothers that God will someday lead the people of Israel out of Egypt and back to the promised land of Canaan. When he does, they must carry Joseph's bones with them.

wickedness multiplies, God decides to wipe out the creatures he has made, with the exception of Noah, his family, and a collection of animals. After destroying all other living things with a flood, God makes a covenant with Noah and his descendants that he will never again destroy in this way. Later, God makes a covenant with Noah's descendant Abram (Abraham), commanding him to settle in Canaan, and then promising to give him innumerable offspring and all the **land** from Egypt to the Euphrates River. God accomplishes this by enabling Abram's elderly wife, Sarai (Sarah), to conceive and bear Isaac. God also enables other barren women, like Rachel, to conceive in order to ensure that the promise to Abraham is kept, and he hears the prayers of forgotten women like Hagar. God recurrently announces the promise of offspring and land to Isaac and his son Jacob, often through dreams and visions, and prepares for the people's survival in Egypt by sending Joseph there to prosper. Overall, Genesis depicts God as indescribably holy, fearfully angry at disobedience, and committed to faithful love and care for his people, especially Abraham's chosen line, despite their weakness and failure.

Eve ("the woman") – The first woman, Eve's name comes from the Hebrew word for "living" because she is the mother of all who come after her. God creates her out of one of Adam's ribs because none of God's other creatures prove to be a suitable companion for him. Adam praises Eve as "flesh of my flesh," his perfect counterpart. Later, the serpent tempts Eve to eat **fruit** from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which has been forbidden them by God. Eve believes the serpent when he suggests that God doesn't want her and Adam to gain godlike knowledge. After she eats the fruit, she also gets Adam to eat, and God accordingly curses them both. In particular, Eve and her female descendants are cursed with greater pain in childbirth and with men's rule over them.

Adam ("the man") – The first man, Adam's name is from the Hebrew for "human being" and is also closely linked to the Hebrew for **dust** or earth. Adam is formed from the dust of the ground and brought to life by God's breath. Adam is given "dominion" over the rest of God's creatures and, because none of these creatures is a fit companion for him, he is given a wife, Eve (formed by God from one of Adam's ribs). After Adam joins Eve in eating **fruit** from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Adam is cursed with death, frustration in earthly toil, and expulsion from the garden of Eden. Adam becomes the father of Cain, Abel, and Seth and lives for 900 years.

Noah – Noah is Lamech's son and is descended from Adam through Seth. Noah's sons are Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Noah walks with God blamelessly and finds favor in God's sight. When God determines to wipe out wicked humanity, he instructs Noah to build an ark in which Noah, his family, and two of each kind of creature will be preserved during the coming flood. Noah and his family live in the ark for more than 150 days, until the floodwaters have fully receded. After the



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

God/the LORD God – God is arguably the main character in the Book of Genesis. God is often referred to as simply "God" (in Hebrew, *elohim*), but in other places, God's name is rendered "LORD God" to represent the traditional Jewish convention of saying "LORD" (in Hebrew, *adonay*) instead of God's personal name (YHWH or "Yahweh"). Genesis portrays God as the all-powerful creator, making the heavens, the earth, and all the earth's creatures, including human beings, out of nothing. The LORD God breathes the breath of life into the nostrils of the first human (Adam), giving him life, and forms Eve out of Adam's rib. God gives Adam and Eve all the trees in the garden of Eden for food but forbids them to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. After Adam and Eve disobey and their eyes are opened to good and evil, God curses them and their offspring and expels them from the garden. Generations later, as human

flood, Noah and his sons are tasked with repopulating the earth, and God makes a covenant with them and their descendants, promising to never again destroy the earth by a flood. After the flood, Noah curses his son Ham for dishonoring him by seeing him naked. Noah dies at age 950.

Abram (Abraham) – Abram is Terah’s son. God commands Abram to leave his home country behind and travel to the **land** (Canaan) God will show him; there, God will make a great nation of him. Abram takes his nephew Lot with him and accordingly travels to Canaan, settling by the oaks of Mamre at Hebron. Here, God promises Abram that he will give him the whole land, as well as innumerable offspring. He later establishes a covenant with Abram, promising him that though he is yet childless, God will grant him all the land from Egypt to the Euphrates, and that though his offspring will be enslaved by foreigners, God will liberate them. After Abram takes Hagar as a wife (on his childless wife Sarai’s urging) and fathers Ishmael, God appears to him again, renaming him Abraham and promising again to make him the father of many nations. Abraham introduces the practice of circumcision among his family in response to God’s covenant promise. After Abraham and Sarai’s (now Sarah’s) son, Isaac, is finally born, fulfilling God’s promise of a direct descendant for the two of them, God tests Abraham’s faith by ordering Abraham to offer Isaac as a burnt sacrifice; when Abraham obeys, proving that he fears God, God stops him at the last moment and provides a ram for the sacrifice instead. After Sarah dies, Abraham sends his servant back to his home country to seek a wife for Isaac. He also takes a second wife named Keturah, who bears him more children. Abraham dies at age 175 and is buried with Sarah.

Isaac – Isaac is the promised son of Abraham and Sarah, born when his father is 100 and Sarah is past 90. His name means “laughter” and speaks to how both Abraham and Sarah laughed in disbelief at the idea that God would grant them a child in their old age. When Isaac is a young boy, God tests Abraham’s faith by commanding him to sacrifice Isaac on a remote mountain. When Abraham prepares to sacrifice his son, an angel intervenes at the last moment. Later, Isaac marries Rebekah and becomes the father of Jacob and Esau. He settles in the valley of Gerar and later in Beer-sheba, becoming wealthy and recognized for God’s blessing in his life. Of his two sons, Isaac favors Esau, and when he is old and blind, he is tricked by Jacob into giving Jacob Esau’s blessing. After Isaac dies, he is buried with Abraham and Sarah.

Jacob (Israel) – Jacob is the younger of Isaac’s and Rebekah’s twin sons. His name means “he supplants.” Known as a trickster, Jacob is quieter and more wily than his brother, Esau. After getting Esau’s birthright in exchange for some stew, Jacob (urged by Rebekah) later tricks his blind father into giving him Esau’s blessing—he covers himself with goatskin so that if Isaac touches him, he’ll think it’s really the hairier Esau. When Esau is enraged by this deception, Jacob flees to his uncle Laban in

Haran. On his way, Jacob dreams of a ladder to heaven and of God’s promise to bless his offspring and to always be with him. As soon as he arrives among his mother’s family, he falls in love with Laban’s daughter Rachel. Laban agrees to grant Rachel to him in marriage in exchange for seven years’ labor. However, on the wedding night, Laban brings his other daughter, Leah, to Jacob instead. After Jacob finds out what’s happened, Laban agrees to give him Rachel as well, but Jacob must work an additional seven years. Jacob has numerous children with Rachel, Leah, and their maids Bilhah and Zilpah. After 20 years in Laban’s household, Jacob, now wealthy, returns to Canaan—sending before him a huge gift of livestock in order to appease Esau. The night before Jacob and Esau are reunited, Jacob wrestles with a mysterious figure, and God renames him Israel. The next day, in spite of Jacob’s misgivings, Esau welcomes him warmly. After Isaac dies, Jacob settles in Isaac’s homeland; his favorite child is Rachel’s son Joseph. After Joseph’s brothers sell him into slavery, Jacob spends many years believing that his beloved son is dead. After Joseph prospers in Egypt and reunites with his brothers, Jacob moves with the rest of the family to Egypt, is joyfully reunited with Joseph, and dies there. He is buried with his ancestors in Canaan.

Joseph – Joseph is Rachel and Jacob’s first son, granted to Rachel by God after many years of barrenness. Joseph becomes Jacob’s favorite son, and his brothers envy him bitterly for this. Joseph makes matters more difficult by telling his brothers about his dreams, in which they are subservient to him. One day, Joseph’s brothers throw him into a pit and then sell him to a caravan of traders, who carry him to Egypt. There, Joseph is sold to Pharaoh’s captain of the guard, Potiphar. In Egypt, God makes Joseph successful—Potiphar places Joseph in charge of his household. After Joseph is falsely accused of attempted rape by Potiphar’s wife, he even finds success in jail, being put in charge of the other prisoners. After Joseph is the only one who can interpret Pharaoh’s dreams, Joseph is placed in charge of Egypt’s affairs, storing up grain for the predicted years of famine. When Joseph’s brothers journey to Egypt in search of grain, they don’t recognize their newly elevated brother. Joseph at first pretends not to recognize them, either, and demands that the youngest brother, Benjamin, be brought to him from Canaan. Once he is, Joseph finally reveals his identity and convinces his brothers to get Jacob and move the entire family to Goshen, where he will provide for them for the duration of the famine. When Joseph dies, he promises his brothers that God will someday lead their people from Egypt back to Canaan, and he arranges for his bones to be carried there.

Sarai (Sarah) – Sarai is Abram’s wife. Sarai remains barren for many years, though God has promised children to her and Abram. Eventually, she takes matters into her own hands by giving her slave, Hagar, to Abram, but after Hagar conceives,

Sarai angrily drives her into the desert. When the angel of the LORD reiterates the promise of children, Sarah, now 90, laughs at the thought. However, God fulfills his promise, enabling Sarai to conceive and bear Isaac (whose name means “laughter”). Sarah dies at age 127 and is buried in the cave of Machpelah.

Rebekah – Rebekah is Nahor’s granddaughter and Bethuel’s daughter; she marries Isaac after Abraham sends his servant to his homeland in search of a wife for his son. At first, Rebekah is barren, but after Isaac prays for her, she conceives Jacob and Esau, who wrestle in her womb. Of her two sons, Rebekah favors Jacob and incites him to trick the dying Isaac into giving him Esau’s blessing.

Rachel – Rachel is one of Laban’s daughters, making her Bethuel’s granddaughter and Jacob’s cousin. She becomes engaged to Jacob soon after he arrives in Haran, having been sent there by his parents to seek a wife among his mother’s relatives. After Jacob has worked for seven years in exchange for Rachel, however, Laban gives Leah to Jacob first. Then Jacob is allowed to marry Rachel, whom he loves far more, in exchange for another seven years’ work. Rachel remains barren for many years, watching jealously as Leah gives birth to son after son. Eventually, she gives Jacob her maid, Bilhah, who bears him Dan and Naphtali. After many years, God enables Rachel to conceive Joseph. She later dies in childbirth with Benjamin and is buried at Bethlehem.

Leah – Leah is one of Laban’s daughters, making her Bethuel’s granddaughter and Jacob’s cousin. She is less beautiful than her sister, Rachel. After Jacob has worked for seven years to marry Rachel, Laban marries Leah to Jacob first. Leah is painfully aware that Jacob does not love her. Seeing that Leah is unloved, God grants her many children: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Issachar, Zebulun, and Dinah.

Cain – Cain is Adam and Eve’s first child. He becomes a farmer. After God rejects Cain’s offering of **fruit**, Cain becomes jealous, lures his brother Abel into the field, and murders him. As a result, God curses Cain to wander as a fugitive, but he also places a mark on Cain so that no one will kill him.

Hagar – Hagar is Sarai’s Egyptian slave-girl and Ishmael’s mother. When Sarai remains barren, she tells Abram to take Hagar as a wife. When Hagar conceives, she looks contemptuously on Sarai, who lashes out at both her and Abram. Then Hagar flees into the wilderness, where God hears her affliction and promises to grant her countless offspring. Then she returns to Sarai and bears a son, Ishmael, to Abram. After Isaac is born, Sarah again banishes Hagar and her son, but God provides for their survival and again promises to make a great nation of Ishmael.

Lot – Lot is Haran’s son and nephew of Abram’s nephew. Lot travels to Canaan with Abram and ultimately settles in the plain of the Jordan near Sodom. After Lot and his household are taken captive by King Chedorlaomer’s forces, Abram rescues

him and brings him back to Canaan. When angels visit Lot’s house and the men of Sodom threaten to rape them, Lot protects them. When Lot and his family flee Sodom during its subsequent destruction, Lot’s unnamed wife glances back and is turned into a pillar of salt. Lot settles in a remote cave with his two daughters, who conceive offspring by sleeping with their father while he is drunkenly unconscious.

Esau – Esau is the elder of Isaac’s and Rebekah’s twin sons. One day, Esau exchanges his birthright (his inheritance from Isaac) in exchange for some of his brother Jacob’s stew. Later, Jacob tricks Esau out of his rightful blessing from Isaac as the firstborn, enraging him. Many years later, Esau reunites with Jacob joyfully, despite Jacob’s fears that his brother would still be angry about Jacob’s past trickery. Esau has two Hittite wives, and he also marries one of Ishmael’s daughters. Esau’s descendants become known as the Edomites.

Laban – Laban is Rebekah’s brother and one of Bethuel’s sons. Jacob flees to Laban after tricking Esau out of Isaac’s blessing. Laban agrees to give Jacob his daughter Rachel as a wife in exchange for seven years of work, but after the seven years are up, he tricks Jacob by giving him Rachel’s sister, Leah, instead. After that, he also gives Rachel in exchange for another seven years’ work. Years later, Laban displays his deceitful nature again by removing animals from his flocks which he’d promised to Jacob. After Jacob, his wives, and his children flee from Laban, Laban pursues them and accuses Jacob of theft, but he ultimately makes a covenant with Jacob and lets them all go with his blessing.

The Serpent – The serpent is the craftiest animal in the garden of Eden. He questions Eve about God’s command not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and he suggests that, contrary to what God has said, she and Adam won’t actually die if they eat its **fruit**—instead they’ll become godlike in their knowledge. Because of this, God curses the serpent to crawl in the **dust** and to forever suffer the hostility of Eve’s offspring.

King Abimelech – King Abimelech is the ruler of Gerar. When Abraham claims that Sarah is his sister, he takes her for himself, but is warned by God in a dream not to touch her. A generation later, a similar thing happens when Isaac and Rebekah settle in Gerar. He later makes a covenant with Isaac.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Abel – Abel is Adam and Eve’s second child. He becomes a shepherd. Abel brings God an offering of sheep, which God accepts. Out of jealousy, Cain lures Abel into the field and kills him.

Ishmael – Ishmael is Abraham’s son by Hagar. He is born after Sarai gives up on bearing children and makes her husband take Hagar as a wife. When Sarah banishes Hagar for the second time, God spares Ishmael’s life in the wilderness and promises

to make a great nation of him.

Seth – Seth is Adam and Eve’s son, born after Abel’s death.

Enoch – Enoch is a descendant of Adam, through Seth, who is noted for walking with God and being taken by God at the end of his life, presumably instead of suffering a natural death.

Methuselah – Methuselah is a descendant of Adam, through Seth, who is noted for living 969 years. He is also Noah’s grandfather.

Lamech – Lamech is Noah’s father.

Shem – [Shem is one of Noah’s](#) sons. After Ham is cursed for seeing his father’s nakedness, Shem receives a blessing from Noah. Shem’s descendants are said to become the Semitic peoples. Specifically, he is the ancestor of Abram (Abraham) and the people of Israel.

Ham – Ham is one of Noah’s sons. After Ham discovers Noah sleeping naked in his tent, Noah curses him, saying that Ham and his offspring will be slaves to Ham’s brothers and their offspring. Ham’s offspring settle across Egypt, northeastern parts of Africa, and Assyria.

Japheth – Japheth is one of Noah’s sons. After Ham is cursed for seeing his father’s nakedness, Japheth receives a blessing from Noah. His descendants settle across Asia Minor.

Terah – Shem’s descendant, Terah is the father of Abram (Abraham), Nahor, and Haran. He lives in Ur.

Nahor – Nahor is Terah’s son and Abram’s brother; his wife his Milcah. He is the father of Bethuel, Rebekah’s father.

Haran – Haran is Terah’s son, Abram’s brother, and Lot’s father.

Milcah – Milcah is Nahor’s wife.

King Melchizedek – King Melchizedek is the ruler of Salem (which later becomes Jerusalem), who blesses Abram. His origins are unexplained.

Bethuel – Bethuel is Nahor’s son and Rebekah’s father.

Keturah – Keturah is Abraham’s second wife, who bears him many more children.

Reuben – Reuben is Leah and Jacob’s firstborn son. He talks the rest of Joseph’s brothers out of killing him.

Simeon – Simeon is Leah and Jacob’s second son. He takes part in the murder of Shechem and Hamor.

Levi – Levi is Leah and Jacob’s third son. He takes part in the murder of Shechem and Hamor.

Judah – Judah is Leah and Jacob’s fourth son. Judah begets children with his daughter-in-law Tamar. When Jacob blesses his sons, Judah’s offspring are singled out as future rulers.

Bilhah – [Bilhah is Rachel’s maid, whom she gives to Jacob for childbearing purposes.](#) While Rachel remains barren, Bilhah gives birth to Dan and Naphtali.

Dan – Dan is one of Bilhah and Jacob’s sons.

Naphtali – Naphtali is one of Bilhah and Jacob’s sons.

Zilpah – Zilpah is Leah’s maid, whom she gives to Jacob for childbearing purposes. She bears Gad and Asher.

Gad – Gad is one of Zilpah and Jacob’s sons.

Asher – Asher is one of Zilpah and Jacob’s sons.

Issachar – Issachar is Leah and Jacob’s fifth son.

Zebulun – Zebulun is Leah and Jacob’s sixth son.

Dinah – Seventh and last child (and only daughter) of Leah and Jacob. After her family moves back to Canaan, Dinah is raped by Shechem.

Shechem – Shechem, Hamor’s son, rapes Dinah, then desires to marry her. Jacob deceives Shechem and his father by agreeing to a marriage if the men will be circumcised. While the men are recovering from the circumcisions, two of Jacob’s sons murder them to avenge Dinah.

Hamor – Hamor is Shechem’s father, a prince in Canaan. He and Shechem are killed by two of Jacob’s sons in revenge for the rape of Dinah.

Benjamin – Benjamin is the second son born to Rachel and Jacob. Rachel initially names him Ben-oni and dies just as he is born.

Potiphar – Potiphar is Pharaoh’s captain of the guard, who purchases Joseph as a slave. He is so impressed with Joseph that he places Joseph in charge of his household. However, after Potiphar’s wife falsely accuses Joseph of attempted rape (angry that he’s rejected her advances), Potiphar throws him in jail.

Tamar – Tamar marries Judah’s sons Er and Onan in turn. After they both die, Judah intends to marry Tamar to his son Shelah, but Judah ends up sleeping with her himself, believing her to be a prostitute. Tamar later gives birth to Judah’s sons Perez and Zerah.

Pharaoh – Pharaoh refers to the ruler of Egypt during Joseph’s years there. When Joseph successfully interprets Pharaoh’s dreams, Pharaoh places him in charge of Egypt’s affairs to prepare for the predicted famine. Later, he allows Joseph to settle his entire family in the land of Goshen.

Asenath – Asenath is Joseph’s Egyptian wife. She bears him two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim.

Manasseh – Manasseh is Joseph and Asenath’s older son.

Ephraim – Ephraim is Joseph and Asenath’s younger son. When Jacob is dying, he intentionally gives Ephraim the elder brother’s blessing, prophesying that he will become greater than Manasseh.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-

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GOD, HUMANITY, AND CREATION

The Book of Genesis is the first book of the Bible, the sacred text of Judaism and Christianity. Though traditional Jewish and Christian readers of this biblical book have attributed it to Moses (an early prophet and leader of the Jewish people), modern scholars believe that the book was written over a period of centuries—spanning from the 10th century B.C.E. to as recently as the 5th century B.C.E. Scholars also suggest that Genesis served to give the Jewish people a sense of their origins and identity at various points of their history. However, the theme of God as creator runs throughout Genesis, dealing with cosmic and human origins on a larger scale. Creating the world and the first human beings (Adam and Eve) by his own word and breath, God is portrayed as calling human beings to emulate his creative power within the world. By emphasizing God's creative power, Genesis suggests that human beings, as bearers of God's image, share in Adam and Eve's inheritance of creation, as well as the obligation to extend God's creative and caring work throughout the world.

According to Genesis, God created everything, and everything is an expression of God's creative power—including human beings. Genesis opens with an account of God's creation of all that exists: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, 'Let there be light'; and there was light. [...] And there was evening and there was morning, the first day." In this account, God created the world out of nothing; before God creates, everything is "formless," dark, and empty. God then speaks creation into existence by the power of a mere word. After creating the earth, skies, vegetation, and animals, God makes humanity. God declares, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over [...] all the wild animals of the earth' [...] So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Humanity, both male and female, reflects God in some way ("in our image"—a phrase that's interpreted in different ways, whether it's God talking to himself or, from a Christian perspective, to other persons of the Trinity). In this passage, that "imaging" is linked to humans' care for the other creatures God has made. In other words, humans, in their supervision of the created world, should reflect God's creativity and his care for them.

Human beings' existence reflects God's being in a unique way. God makes human beings out of the substance of the earth and

also grants them life from his own breath: "Then the LORD God formed man from the **dust** of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being." As this verse shows, humans are an extension of God's creation ("from the dust of the ground") and even of God himself ("the breath of life"). After breathing life into the first man, God immediately places him in a lush garden home (the garden of Eden) in which the man can thrive. In Eden, the man is meant to enjoy the beauty and bounty of God's creation; and, much as he is charged to "have dominion" over the animals, the man is also charged with tending the garden—again reflecting God's creativity and care.

God provides for the continuation of humanity. He sees that the man, Adam, needs a partner, so Adam is tasked with surveying the animals, "but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man [...] And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh[.]' The woman is a fitting companion for the man because she is made from his very substance. The man's exultant reaction to the woman ("bone of my bones...") also suggests that the woman is not simply a "helper," but a perfect counterpart and match for the man. As Adam was made from the breath of God and so reflects God's character, so also, it seems, the woman, made from the man, reflects the man in a way that suits them perfectly for one another. Together, their procreation will continue to reflect God's creative work.

Later in Genesis, the theme of creation reappears when God destroys rebellious humanity and preserves a small, faithful remnant (Noah's family) to fulfill his original purpose for creation. God tells Noah, "Go out of the ark, you and your wife, and your sons and your sons' wives with you. Bring out with you every living thing that is with you [...] so that they may abound on the earth, and be fruitful and multiply on the earth." The charge to Noah's family—to "be fruitful and multiply"—recalls the original command to Adam and Eve. After the flood subsides and Noah's family emerges from the ark to repopulate the earth, the story of Genesis increasingly narrows from humanity in general to those specific descendants of Noah who come to be known as the family of Abraham. Genesis's audience is meant to see themselves as descendants of that family and fulfillers of God's charge to them—to reflect God's own character by extending and nurturing creation.



MISTRUST, DISOBEDIENCE, AND DEATH

In the early chapters of Genesis, humanity's proliferation soon leads to trouble: people quickly disobey God, leading to widespread conflict, violence, and death. This disharmony suggests that human beings are meant to obey God in order to live in harmony with him and one another. This is because disobedience is rooted in

mistrust of God—as especially shown by the story of Eve listening to a crafty serpent instead of obeying God. As a result, Adam and Eve are expelled from their peaceful home in the garden of Eden, symbolizing the state of disobedient humanity as a whole—separated from God and therefore subject to suffering and death. By showing how mistrust of God leads to disobedience, or sin, the author of Genesis argues that sin leads to disruption and breakdown of human relationships—with God, with each other, and with creation.

Genesis underscores that humans are required to trust and obey God. When God places Adam in the garden of Eden, he gives the man a condition: “You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.” Until now, death has not existed. God gives Adam a prohibition—he can’t eat from a certain tree. If Adam doesn’t obey God, Adam will die. The serpent (a talking animal who lives in the garden) deviously casts doubt on what God told Adam and Eve. The serpent says to Eve, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden? [...] You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’” By suggesting that God hasn’t told Eve everything, the serpent plants a doubt in Eve’s mind about God’s intentions for her and Adam. Hearing this, Eve eats the **fruit** and shares it with her husband, and “Then the eyes of both were opened[.]” That Eve gives in to the serpent’s hints suggests that she doesn’t trust God. When they disobediently eat the fruit, Adam’s and Eve’s eyes are further opened to the idea of rebellion against God, something unthinkable when they lived in harmony with God.

As Adam and Eve’s story shows, distrust and disobedience (or sin) brings disharmony and death into the world. As a consequence of Adam and Eve’s mistrust and disobedience, God places a curse on all of humanity: “To the woman he said, ‘I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing [...] and [your husband] shall rule over you.’ And to the man he said, ‘Because you have listened to the voice of your wife [...] cursed is the ground because of you [...] By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread [...] you are **dust**, and to dust you shall return.’” Sin brings conflict between the man and the woman; it makes toil more difficult, and worst of all, it leads to death. Whereas creation had begun harmoniously, that harmony has now been broken because of human sin.

At first, humanity enjoyed a dependent relationship with God in the garden, wherein God provided everything for the human beings who trusted in him. Now, because of the curse, humanity must fight for existence, rather than enjoying a life of peaceful reliance on God. God says, “See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil [...] therefore the LORD God sent him forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken.” Now that trust has been broken, with humans presuming to question God’s wisdom and loving

provision for them, they will be forced to fend for themselves.

Genesis ultimately suggests that sin and its curse (death) are hereditary. Adam and Eve’s sons Cain and Abel illustrate the violence and disharmony that come about because of human sin. When the brothers each offer sacrifices to God, God favors Abel’s sacrifice over Cain’s, and Cain kills his brother out of jealousy. When Cain lies to God and says he doesn’t know where Abel is, God sees through the lie and declares that Abel is cursed. “When you till the ground, it will no longer yield to you its strength; you will be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth,” God says. The story of Cain and Abel echoes their parents’ expulsion from Eden in a number of ways. Once-harmonious relationships—both the brothers’ relationship and their respective relationships with God—are disrupted because of human refusal to accept God’s word (in this case, regarding God’s preference for one type of sacrifice over another). The disruption leads to further disharmony between humanity and the earth (“it will no longer yield to you its strength”), as well as a sentence of “wandering.”

The breakdown of harmony between humans and God, humans and one another, and humans and creation is summed up in the story of the flood, just two chapters later. When humanity descends into further corruption, God decides, “I am going to bring a flood of waters on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh in which is the breath of life; everything that is on the earth shall die.” However, by preserving Noah and his family in an ark, God still offers hope for humanity’s survival and for harmony to be restored.



COVENANTS AND FAITH IN GOD’S PROMISES

In the Bible, a covenant is an agreement between two parties (usually, God and humanity), which includes promises (usually by God) and conditions (things humanity must do—in general, obey God). Covenants were common in the ancient world, and the original hearers and readers of the biblical stories would have been familiar with them. In fact, they quickly become a central feature of the Book of Genesis, especially the covenants God makes with Noah and Abraham. It also becomes clear, however, that covenants are not made between equal parties—that is, God’s promises outweigh human beings’ inability to fulfill the conditions that God imposes on them. This is because covenants are primarily meant to display God’s faithfulness despite human weakness and failure; more than anything, human beings are called to trust in God’s faithfulness. By establishing a pattern of covenants between God and humans, Genesis shows that God desires to bless humanity, and that unlike faltering humans, God faithfully fulfills the promises he makes to bless his people, especially when circumstances appear most unfavorable.

God makes covenants with humanity in order to bless them, as

shown in the covenants he makes with Noah and later with Abraham. After the flood, God makes a covenant with Noah, promising that even if humans sin, he will never again destroy them: “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you [...] I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth [...] I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.” In addition to a verbal promise, God also gives a covenant sign—the “bow,” or rainbow, in the sky—as a tangible assurance that he will keep the promise he has made, even if people fall short.

Later, God also establishes a covenant with a specific family out of all humanity. Speaking to a man named Abram, God commands, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.” In contrast to God’s expulsion of Adam and Eve from their home as a curse, God now sends Abram out from his home in order to be blessed—and to become a vast nation that will, in turn, bless humanity as a whole. These blessings depend on Abram’s obedience to the covenant, but above all to God’s faithful initiative toward humanity.

When God makes a covenant with humanity, he primarily demands faith from his people—specifically, faith that God will fulfill his promises. One example of this is when God promises offspring to the childless Abram. Even before Abram has fathered any children, God assures him that he will have innumerable descendants: “He brought [Abram] outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your descendants be.’ And he believed the LORD; and the LORD reckoned it to him as righteousness.” Though others are cursed for failing to believe in God’s word, Abram is now blessed for believing God’s promise to provide descendants. This promise requires faith in God because there’s no evidence that Abram will have any children—and his wife, Sarah, is 90 years old.

Abraham must have faith in God himself, not primarily in God’s gifts. After Abraham becomes the father of the promised child, Isaac, God instructs Abraham to take Isaac into the wilderness to sacrifice him to God. Abraham trustingly obeys, and at the last moment, God intervenes: “But the angel of the LORD called to him from heaven [...] ‘Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me.’ And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. [...] So Abraham called that place ‘The LORD will provide[.]’” If Abraham had indeed killed Isaac—his only son—then Abraham would have had no descendants, and God’s promise to him would have appeared to be annulled. Thus Abraham’s willingness to obey God’s command and sacrifice

Isaac shows his deep trust that God will somehow fulfill his promise no matter what, even if it looks like God is failing to come through.

Indeed, after Abraham demonstrates his obedience, God provides a ram for the sacrifice—showing that God has upheld his side of the covenant, just as he promised. In other words, God never intended that Isaac die. God’s provision of a ram echoes God’s promise that he would provide children to make Abram a great nation, and his promise to humanity as a whole (through Noah) that he would not destroy them despite their tendency to sin. Through this repeated covenant emphasis, Genesis instills the lesson that God should be trusted to provide for his people, even when hope for their promised survival appears thin.



THE ROLE OF WOMEN

At the beginning of Genesis, women are portrayed as the pinnacle of God’s creation. After Adam finds no suitable partner among all God’s creatures, God undertakes a special operation (using part of Adam’s body) to create woman: “Then the man said, ‘This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh[.]’” Directly created by God, Eve’s position as “flesh of [Adam’s] flesh” suggests that she is not only made from the man, but designed to be united to him—and thus inseparably part of God’s purposes for humanity. Later in Genesis, women also receive distinct blessings from God. In biblical times, God’s blessing took its most obvious form in the gift of fertility. Contrary to expectation, however, God especially displays his blessing upon women who lack fertility, like Abraham’s aging wife, Sarah. The story of Sarah and other struggling women suggests that God listens to the concerns of women (both those inside of his covenant and outside of it), and that women occupy a special place in demonstrating God’s purposes for the people of the covenant.

Genesis shows that, like men, women occupy a special role in God’s purposes for his people. And, like men, women often struggle to believe that God will do for them what he’s promised. Sarah’s story of barrenness establishes a pattern in Genesis: women desire children, meaning that barrenness leads to doubt and family strife. Sarai (later Sarah), the future matriarch of Israel, knows that God has promised offspring to her and Abraham. But when she continues to be barren, Sarai decides to take matters into her own hands: She “took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife [...] Hagar [...] conceived; and [...] she looked with contempt on her mistress.” The Sarai and Hagar story has certain links to the story of Adam and Eve. Instead of believing what God said when he promised to give Sarai children, Sarai doubted him and sought a different solution to her problem, and Abram went along with the idea (much as Eve questioned God and suggested that she and Adam eat the forbidden **fruit**). Sarai’s exploitation of her slave-girl, Hagar, leads to household

strife. This suggests that failure to trust God's promises—trying to ensure blessings on one's own terms—only leads to suffering.

Even when women's faith falters, as Sarah's does, God listens to women and heeds their prayers, remaining faithful to his promise to create a great nation (the Abrahamic line). By answering women's prayers for children, God uniquely demonstrates his purposes for his people. Genesis repeatedly shows that God doesn't overlook women, even when women don't appear at the center of the story. When Abraham receives angelic visitors from God who repeat the promise of children, Sarah eavesdrops and laughs to herself at the notion that she could bear children at her age. Hearing this, the angel of the LORD asks, "Is anything too wonderful for the LORD?" [...] But Sarah denied, saying, 'I did not laugh'; for she was afraid. He said, 'Oh yes, you did laugh.'" This passage, with its note of humor, reinforces the fact that God hears everything—even the bitter laughter of women who appear, at first, to be on the margins of the action.

God faithfully fulfills his most unlikely promises, most clearly displayed in the unlikely birth of a son to an old woman. After her son's birth, Sarah names her son "Isaac," from the Hebrew for "laughter." Genesis recounts, "Now Sarah said, 'God has brought laughter for me; everyone who hears will laugh with me [...] Who would ever have said to Abraham that Sarah would nurse children? Yet I have borne him a son in his old age.'" God's fulfillment of his promise of offspring to Abraham is narrated through Sarah's words—her earlier bitterness turned to joy. God has heeded her even when a child looked most unlikely, suggesting he will bring life out of barrenness for his people in general.

Genesis also shows that God also pays attention to women who, other people cast out and overlook. For instance, God cares for the exploited slave-girl, Hagar. After Sarah expels Hagar and her son, Ishmael, in anger, Hagar, weeping in the desert, is heard and helped by God: "And as she sat opposite [Ishmael], she lifted up her voice and wept [...] and the angel of God called to Hagar from heaven [...] 'Come, lift up the boy and hold him fast with your hand, for I will make a great nation of him.' Then God opened her eyes and she saw a well of water." Once more, God brings life where there appears to be only death—in this case, saving the life of Abraham's son Ishmael, even though he and Hagar are not part of the direct lineage of Israel. In other words, God's pattern of hearing and caring for women even extends to those who aren't the primary objects of his blessing (as the woman of the Abrahamic line are).

Sarah's story establishes a pattern of barren women throughout Genesis. First, Abraham's niece Rebekah, who marries Isaac, gives birth to the twins Jacob and Esau after a period of barrenness. In the next generation, Jacob's favorite wife, Rachel, endures the shame of barrenness after Jacob's other wife, Leah, has many children. Eventually, "God

remembered Rachel [...] and opened her womb." It's important to note that even here, childbearing isn't a marker of women's value in its own right. The implication in Genesis is that women long to fulfill their part in the story of God's covenant with his people, and this typically takes the form of bearing future generations, who ensure that God's people survive. Because God enables them to do this, women are honored with a special role in God's purposes for his people.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



DUST

Dust symbolizes the idea that humans are part of Creation—that is, they are made by God. Dust thus reflects both the human being's dignity (as having been made by God) and fragility. God forms the first human being, Adam, out of the dust, or earth, of the ground and then breathes life into his nostrils. In fact, "Adam" *means* "earth," reflecting the close relationship between the human being and the substance from which he is made. After Adam eats **fruit** from the forbidden tree, God curses Adam with death, telling him "you are dust, and to dust you shall return"—a reminder that, dependent on God, the human being is susceptible to dissolution and death.



FRUIT

Fruit—specifically the fruit forbidden by God in the third chapter of Genesis—symbolizes the temptation to mistrust and disobey God. The fruit growing in the garden of Eden is good, specifically provided by God for Adam and Eve to eat and delight in. However, God has forbidden Adam and Eve from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil; while it's never described as evil in itself, this fruit yields moral knowledge that isn't meant for Adam and Eve right now. The serpent tempts Eve to sample the fruit anyway, claiming that she won't *really* die as God has warned, and that God simply doesn't want human beings to gain divine knowledge. Persuaded to question God's intentions, Eve eats the appealing fruit anyway, and she gets Adam to eat some, too. After this act of disobedience against God, the human couple, along with their offspring, is cursed with suffering and death.



LAND

Throughout Genesis, land often symbolizes prosperity that comes from God's faithfulness.

When Abram (later called Abraham) settles in Canaan, led there from Ur, God makes a covenant with him, promising him that the whole land will one day belong to him and his offspring. Along with offspring (which God likewise promises to Abraham, his son Isaac, and Isaac's son Jacob), land is the other element needed in order to become a nation. In other words, land is closely tied to the blessing of fruitfulness; Abraham and his offspring will fill the land much as God once commanded Adam and Eve, and then Noah's family, to multiply and fill the earth. It is also tied to God's promised faithfulness, as seen when Joseph dies in Egypt at the end of Genesis, assuring his family that God will someday lead them back to the promised land.




QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Zondervan edition of *The New Revised Standard Version of the Bible* published in 2009.

Chapter 1 Quotes

☞ In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light"; and there was light. And God saw that the light was good; and God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And there was evening and there was morning, the first day.

Related Characters: God/the LORD God

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 1:1–5

Explanation and Analysis

Genesis's famous opening passage introduces God as the creator of all things in existence. It also opens the first 11 chapters of Genesis, which scholars call the "primeval" history (focusing on the creation of the world) in order to differentiate them from the "ancestral" history presented in Genesis 12–50 (focusing on Abraham's family). Before God creates, there is just chaos and nothingness ("void" and "darkness"). God makes, separates, and names things, setting them in their proper order. Some ancient Near Eastern creation stories, like the Babylonian *Enuma Elish*, offer similar accounts, like the storm god Marduk's defeat of chaotic Tiamat (the goddess associated with water) in order to create the world. In contrast, however, the God depicted in Genesis brings things into being through simple

proclamation, like "Let there be light."



Each of the "creation days" in Genesis 1 bears the same pattern. First, there are the words "God said," followed by a command beginning with the formula "Let there be." After that, the commanded things come into being by the power of God's word. God then sees that what he has created is "good," and the day of creation is given a number. The evening followed by morning reflects the Jewish tradition in which a new day begins at sundown.

☞ Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth."

So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it[.]

Related Characters: God/the LORD God (speaker), Eve ("the woman"), Adam ("the man")

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 1:26–28

Explanation and Analysis



After God finishes making the earth, plants, and animals, he turns to creating humanity. God's statement "Let us make [...] in our image" (emphasis added) has been subject to various interpretations by both Jewish and Christian readers and biblical scholars. Some have suggested that God is referring to angels of the heavenly court, while others suggest that God is addressing himself (which, from a Christian perspective, would mean that God addresses other persons of the Trinity). No matter the interpretation, the bigger point in this passage is that human beings, both male and female, reflect something of God's own being, or likeness. Humanity's role in tending all other creatures, and procreating in order to fill the earth, suggests that being "in God's image" has to do with caring for the earth and being creative—exercising divine functions on a small scale, as God has done on a cosmic scale. The Hebrew for "humankind" is *adam*, which becomes the man's name a few chapters later.

Chapter 2 Quotes

☞☞ The man gave names to all cattle, and to the birds of the air, and to every animal of the field; but for the man there was not found a helper as his partner. So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept; then he took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. And the rib that the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,

“This at last is bone of my bones
and flesh of my flesh;
this one shall be called Woman,
for out of Man this one was taken.

Related Characters: Adam (“the man”) (speaker), Eve (“the woman”), God/the LORD God

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 2:20–23

Explanation and Analysis


After God creates Adam, he sees that Adam’s solitude isn’t good for him—the man needs a companion. So God tasks Adam with surveying all the animals in the garden of Eden. But after Adam has named all of the creatures (a sign of his “dominion,” or benevolent rule, over them), he finds that none of them can be a satisfactory partner for him. So God makes a companion for Adam out of his own flesh—a woman. When Adam is introduced to the woman, he reacts very differently than he reacted to the animals, breaking out in delighted praise. By calling the woman “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh,” Adam highlights the fact that the woman is equal to him, made from the same substance—his own—and therefore perfectly suited to him. The wordplay in this passage confirms that fittingness: in Hebrew, the words for man and woman are *ish* and *ishshah*. The passage celebrates the fact that both man and woman are created by God and intended for one another’s companionship and fulfillment.

Chapter 3 Quotes

☞☞ But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

Related Characters: The Serpent (speaker), God/the LORD God, Adam (“the man”), Eve (“the woman”)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3:4–7

Explanation and Analysis

Immediately after the introduction of the woman (later named Eve) in Genesis, the story suddenly shifts to a conversation between the woman and a talking serpent who lives in the garden. The abruptness of the shift hints that the coming scene will be of monumental significance. God has told Adam and Eve not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but the serpent subtly undermines this by hinting that God simply didn’t give her complete information. Probably, he suggests, God just didn’t want her and Adam to become godlike in their awareness of good and evil. The serpent’s questioning undermines Eve’s obedience to God’s straightforward command; instead of accepting God’s prohibition, she assumes there’s a *reason* which she and Adam are entitled to take into account. This leads her to eat from the tree, and she and Adam do become aware of the difference between good and evil—an awareness that brings personal shame with it (hence sewing clothes to cover their previously innocent nudity). In later Christian theology, this event becomes known as the fall of humanity into sin.


The serpent’s identity is not exactly clear, except that a diabolical power is at work within it. Since everything God created was deemed “good,” this suggests that evil came into the world at some unnamed point after God finished creating.

●● The LORD God said to the serpent,
 “Because you have done this,
 cursed are you among all animals
 and among all wild creatures;
 upon your belly you shall go,
 and dust you shall eat
 all the days of your life.

I will put enmity between you and the woman,
 and between your offspring and hers;
 he will strike your head,
 and you will strike his heel.”

Related Characters: God/the LORD God (speaker), The Serpent, Eve (“the woman”)

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 3:14–15

Explanation and Analysis



After Eve and Adam eat the forbidden fruit and confess their transgression to God, God pronounces curses on each of the parties involved. God first curses the serpent itself for provoking the human couple into sin. On one level, the curse suggests the natural behavior of snakes (crawling in the dust) and the hostility that often exists between humans and snakes.

In later Christian tradition, there’s a symbolic interpretation, too, as the second verse (“enmity between you and the woman”) has been called the “Protoevangelium,” or first gospel. That’s because the snake is symbolically viewed as Satan and the woman’s offspring as Jesus Christ; many generations later, Christ’s death and resurrection would be seen as vanquishing Satan’s power (though Christ will be wounded, “he will strike your head,” definitively crushing Satan). In the immediate context, however, the curse upon the snake can be interpreted as a mark of disharmony within the harmonious world God had created—a disharmony brought by disobedience and affecting every part of creation, including relationships between humans and their natural environment.

Chapter 5 Quotes

●● The LORD saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of their hearts was only evil continually. And the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the LORD said, “I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created—people together with animals and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.” But Noah found favor in the sight of the LORD.

Related Characters: God/the LORD God (speaker), Noah

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 6:5–8

Explanation and Analysis

When God first created everything, he described it as “very good,” but now—seeing that humanity has become thoroughly corrupt—God grieves over creation. Many generations later, the disobedience which introduced death to the garden of Eden has now been unleashed throughout the earth, to the extent that human intentions are “only evil continually.” So, in keeping with this reversal of human behavior, God decides to undo his own creative work. Because righteous Noah survives the flood, however, he and his family will provide a new start for humankind—a chance for God’s original intentions for creation (for people to reflect God’s image in their leadership over the earth) to be fulfilled. The biblical flood story finds parallels in other ancient stories outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition, like the *Enuma Elish* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. One key difference, though, is that in Genesis, God decides to destroy humanity because of their “wickedness” and not because humanity grew disturbingly noisy, as in *Gilgamesh*.

Chapter 9 Quotes

●● God blessed Noah and his sons, and said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth [...] As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth [...] I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

Related Characters: God/the LORD God (speaker),

Japheth, Ham, Shem, Noah

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 9:1–13

Explanation and Analysis

After Noah's family survives the flood, God makes promises to them that echo his initial charge to Adam and Eve, to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth." In this way, the flood constitutes a kind of rebirth for humanity. God marks this new beginning by establishing a covenant (agreement) with them, their descendants, and all creatures. This is the first such covenant in the Bible—a formal agreement, typical in biblical times, which established a bond between a greater party and a lesser. In this covenant, God promises never again to destroy his creation (though he does not say that humanity won't merit destruction—he simply implies that he won't give humanity what their wickedness might deserve). As biblical covenants often are, this covenant will be accompanied by a special sign—in this case, the rainbow. Whenever the rainbow appears in the sky, it will stand as a reminder of God's promise, as well as his faithfulness in preserving a remnant of humanity through the flood.

Chapter 15 Quotes

☛☛ After these things the word of the Lord came to Abram in a vision, "Do not be afraid, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great." But Abram said, "O Lord God, what will you give me, for I continue childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus?" [...] But the word of the Lord came to him, "This man shall not be your heir; no one but your very own issue shall be your heir." He brought him outside and said, "Look toward heaven and count the stars, if you are able to count them." Then he said to him, "So shall your descendants be." And he believed the Lord; and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Related Characters: Abram (Abraham), God/the LORD God (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 15:1–6

Explanation and Analysis

After Abram returns from a military engagement, God promises Abram, who has had no children so far, both personal protection and family survival. Abram fears that if he has no offspring (his wife, Sarai, has always been barren,


and they are both very old by this point), a household slave will end up inheriting his possessions. In other words, Abram worries that his own family will die with him. But God promises that in spite of apparently unfavorable circumstances, he will give Abram more descendants than can be counted. Abram's trust in God's promise is "reckoned [...] to him as righteousness," meaning that faith in God is regarded as an important aspect of living a life that is righteous, or pleasing to God. This verse is cited several times in the New Testament, where Abram is upheld as an exemplar of faith.

After making this promise, God then establishes a covenant with Abram which focuses more specifically on the guarantee that the land of Canaan will belong to Abram's descendants—both offspring and land being part of the nationhood God has promised.

Chapter 17 Quotes

☛☛ God said to Abraham, "As for you, you shall keep my covenant, you and your offspring after you throughout their generations. This is my covenant, which you shall keep, between me and you and your offspring after you: Every male among you shall be circumcised. You shall circumcise the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and you. Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring. [...] So shall my covenant be in your flesh an everlasting covenant."

Related Characters: God/the LORD God (speaker), Abram (Abraham)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 17:9–13

Explanation and Analysis



When God establishes covenants with his followers, he often institutes a visible sign of the agreement between himself and humanity. For example, the sign of the rainbow is associated with God's covenant with Noah's offspring. Here, God introduces the sign of his covenant with Abraham's line—circumcision, the removal of a male's foreskin. While this sign would obviously not be as visible as the sign of the rainbow, its focus is on the perpetuation of Abraham's promised line of offspring. (However, even those who are not descended from Abraham but are part of his household, like slaves and foreigners, are also included in the covenant obligations and blessings.) Undergoing

circumcision, or subjecting the males of one's household to this practice, demonstrated faith in God's promise to give Abraham countless offspring. Failing to undergo circumcision marked a male as "cut off" from God's covenant—excluded from the line of Abraham's offspring and therefore effectively dead, denied the promised blessings. The sign of this "everlasting covenant" is still practiced by observant Jews today.

Chapter 18 Quotes

☞ Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh, and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son." But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh"; for she was afraid. He said, "Oh yes, you did laugh."

Related Characters: Sarai (Sarah), God/the LORD God (speaker), Abram (Abraham)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 18:11–15


Explanation and Analysis

While God reiterates his covenant with Abraham several times (God's promise that he will give Abraham vast numbers of descendants), this passage is a unique instance. Abraham receives a divine visitation in the form of three men, who announce to Abraham that when they return to him at the same time next year, Abraham's elderly wife, Sarah, will have a son. This is what prompts Sarah, who is well past her childbearing years, to laugh disbelievingly—perhaps with bitterness, perhaps just finding the visitors' overheard claim ludicrous. In response, the guest (now referred to directly as "the Lord" and not as a man or men) asks Sarah why she laughs—this unlikely development will be God's doing, and God can do whatever he pleases. Sarah quickly denies having laughed, but God knows perfectly well that she did. Yet he doesn't respond to her accusingly—the guest just acknowledges that God hears her, even the words she thinks she keeps to herself. So this quote not only restates God's covenant promise to Abraham, but it also shows God's care for individuals within that covenant, including women who are standing on the edges of the main action, out of everyone else's hearing.

Chapter 22 Quotes

☞ When they came to the place that God had shown him, Abraham built an altar there and laid the wood in order. He bound his son Isaac, and laid him on the altar, on top of the wood. Then Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son. But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven, and said, "Abraham, Abraham!" And he said, "Here I am." He said, "Do not lay your hand on the boy or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me." And Abraham looked up and saw a ram, caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham went and took the ram and offered it up as a burnt offering instead of his son.

Related Characters: God/the LORD God, Abram (Abraham) (speaker), Isaac

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 22:9–13

Explanation and Analysis

Just a chapter earlier, God finally fulfilled his promise to give Abraham and Sarah a son, Isaac. Now, after several years have passed (Isaac's age is not made clear), God seems to throw his entire covenant with Abraham and his descendants into question by asking Abraham to sacrifice his son. In dramatic detail, this passage shows just how close Abraham came to killing Isaac in obedience to God's command—Isaac bound on the altar and the knife drawn—before God intervened.

Though interpretation of God's intentions behind this command have varied, the passage shows both Abraham's profound faith in God (he believed that God would still fulfill his promise somehow, against all appearances) and God's own faithfulness (the survival of Israel's offspring is entirely dependent upon him). Indeed, God provides the animal for sacrifice after all, again emphasizing his trustworthiness. Much later, some Christian interpreters would read this passage as a foretelling of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross, which they believed to be God's gift of *his* only son.

Chapter 27 Quotes

☛☛ Then Isaac trembled violently, and said, “Who was it then that hunted game and brought it to me, and I ate it all before you came, and I have blessed him?—yes, and blessed he shall be!” When Esau heard his father's words, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, “Bless me, me also, father!” But he said, “Your brother came deceitfully, and he has taken away your blessing.” Esau said, “Is he not rightly named Jacob For he has supplanted me these two times. He took away my birthright; and look, now he has taken away my blessing.” Then he said, “Have you not reserved a blessing for me?”

Related Characters: Esau, Isaac (speaker), Jacob (Israel), Rebekah

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 27:33–36

Explanation and Analysis

Isaac and Rebekah's twin sons, Jacob and Esau, have struggled with one another ever since they wrestled in Rebekah's womb. Earlier, Jacob took Esau's inheritance in exchange for a bowl of stew. Here, at Rebekah's urging, he tricks his elderly father out of Esau's blessing as the firstborn. In biblical times, such blessings were understood to grant divine favor that couldn't be transferred or revoked—hence the strong emotions surrounding its conferral.



This story is a clear example of dramatic irony. As Esau eagerly rushes into the fields to hunt game in anticipation of Isaac's blessing, the audience knows that he's already been thwarted by Jacob and Rebekah—Rebekah dressed Jacob in Esau's clothes, and Jacob impersonated his brother in order to grab the coveted blessing first. When Esau returns, he pours out his frustration with his trickster twin (“he who supplants”), and perhaps by extension, with the seeming unfairness of God's preference for the younger twin. Jacob's blessings reflect the fact that God doesn't always favor the obvious candidate—he sometimes chooses the younger, the overlooked, and the seemingly inferior.

Chapter 30 Quotes

☛☛ When Rachel saw that she bore Jacob no children, she envied her sister; and she said to Jacob, “Give me children, or I shall die!” Jacob became very angry with Rachel and said, “Am I in the place of God, who has withheld from you the fruit of the womb?” [...]

Then God remembered Rachel, and God heeded her and opened her womb. She conceived and bore a son, and said, “God has taken away my reproach”; and she named him Joseph, saying, “May the Lord add to me another son!”

Related Characters: Jacob (Israel), Rachel (speaker), God/the LORD God, Joseph, Leah

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 30:1–2, 22–24

Explanation and Analysis

Like Jacob's grandmother Sarah, his wife, Rachel, faces years of infertility. Because childbearing was strongly associated with God's blessing, barrenness was likely a source of particular shame for women in biblical times. For Rachel, the shame is especially personal—Jacob's other wife and Rachel's sister, Leah, has already had several children, provoking Rachel's jealousy.


Yet Genesis assumes that God is responsible for giving children or withholding them, and finally, God “remembers” Rachel. As elsewhere in Genesis, “remembrance” doesn't imply forgetting; it means that God is now taking action on a person's behalf. He does this by enabling Rachel to conceive Joseph—though it's notable that having one child doesn't satisfy Rachel, and she announces her desire for another son even as she names the first.

Overall, the contrast between Rachel and Leah emphasizes both God's faithfulness to his covenant and his attention to those who are downtrodden, cast out, and overlooked. He gives Leah children specifically because she feels unloved in her marriage and needs comfort (a moment that bears resemblance to how he sees and comforts Hagar). At the same time, he gives Rachel—who, with Jacob, is in the direct covenant line God has chosen to bless—a son just when she's given up hope of ever receiving that blessing.

Chapter 32 Quotes

☞☞ And Jacob said, “O God of my father Abraham and God of my father Isaac, O Lord who said to me, ‘Return to your country and to your kindred, and I will do you good,’ I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness that you have shown to your servant [...] Deliver me, please, from the hand of my brother, from the hand of Esau, for I am afraid of him; he may come and kill us all, the mothers with the children. Yet you have said, ‘I will surely do you good, and make your offspring as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted because of their number.’”

Related Characters: Jacob (Israel) (speaker), God/the LORD God, Abram (Abraham), Esau, Isaac

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 32:9–12

Explanation and Analysis

As Jacob journeys home from Haran to Canaan, he prays one of the most personal prayers that appears in Genesis. After cheating Esau out of his birthright and blessing in his youth, Jacob assumes that Esau will greet him with resentment and hostility when they’re finally reunited 20 years later. Now, the night before meeting Esau, Jacob begs for God’s deliverance. In doing so, he appeals to God’s faithful character. In other words, Jacob frames his prayer by stating the promises God has made to him in the past (to do good to Jacob in his homeland and to grant him countless offspring) and trustfully asking God to do what he’s promised. The wording of the prayer suggests that Jacob has always been aware of God’s promises—he names God as the God of his father and grandfather before him, and he quotes God’s promises to make his offspring like “the sand of the sea,” possibly something he’d grown up hearing quoted (Genesis doesn’t record this promise being spoken to Jacob directly). The pattern of God’s promises, and human faith and obedience in response, will be a refrain throughout the Hebrew Bible.

☞☞ Jacob was left alone; and a man wrestled with him until daybreak. When the man saw that he did not prevail against Jacob, he struck him on the hip socket; and Jacob’s hip was put out of joint as he wrestled with him. Then he said, “Let me go, for the day is breaking.” But Jacob said, “I will not let you go, unless you bless me.” So he said to him, “What is your name?” And he said, “Jacob.” Then the man said, “You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, for you have striven with God and with humans, and have prevailed.”

Related Characters: Jacob (Israel) (speaker), God/the LORD God

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 32:24–28

Explanation and Analysis

This incident, a well-known story in Jacob’s life, also takes place the night before Jacob reunites with his brother Esau. It’s a puzzling event—the unidentified man simply appears out of nowhere and begins grappling with Jacob beside the Jabbok River. By the end of the encounter, Jacob believes that his opponent is God (who does appear elsewhere in human form, as when he visited Abraham before Isaac’s conception). Jacob’s sheer determination is shown in that, even after he’s injured, he refuses to let go, wanting God’s blessing. After striving with people all his life (especially Esau and his father-in-law Laban), Jacob discovers that God is the one he must ultimately face, and the only one he can depend on to bless him. In this way, the wrestling scene is a climax in Jacob’s life and his relationship with God, an answer to his heartfelt prayer for help earlier that night. Accordingly, he receives a new name, Israel, which becomes the collective name of his offspring, too. There’s also wordplay here: the Hebrew word for “God wrestles” sounds similar to both *Jacob* and *Jabbok*.

Chapter 37 Quotes

☞☞ [Joseph’s brothers] said to one another, “Here comes this dreamer. Come now, let us kill him and throw him into one of the pits; then we shall say that a wild animal has devoured him, and we shall see what will become of his dreams.” [...] So when Joseph came to his brothers, they stripped him of his robe, the long robe with sleeves that he wore; and they took him and threw him into a pit. [...] When some Midianite traders passed by, they drew Joseph up, lifting him out of the pit, and sold him to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver. And they took Joseph to Egypt.

Related Characters: Joseph

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 37:19–28

Explanation and Analysis

Jacob’s favoritism toward Joseph would be enough to alienate the rest of his sons, but Joseph enrages his brothers further by talking about his dreams—in which his



brothers invariably end up bowing down to him. One day in the fields, the other brothers conspire to get rid of Joseph for good. Alone among Joseph's brothers, Reuben (the eldest) takes pity on him, convincing his brothers not to murder him outright. Instead, they just steal the robe which Jacob had given him and then sell him to a passing trade caravan.

This dramatic story has even wider implications than it seems at first. Because Joseph is the son of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the representative of Israel—his journey to Egypt prefigures Israel's 400-year enslavement in Egypt, which will be the subject of the Book of Exodus. In the short term, Joseph's sojourn in Egypt and subsequent rise in power there brings about unexpected provision for his family during a famine—and his brothers *do* end up bowing down to him, like his prophetic dream showed. Thus Joseph's enslavement is an example of God working to uphold the covenant he has made, through means that appear unlikely at the time.

Chapter 44 Quotes

☞ Now therefore, when I come to your servant my father and the boy is not with us, then, as his life is bound up in the boy's life, when he sees that the boy is not with us, he will die; and your servants will bring down the gray hairs of your servant our father with sorrow to Sheol. For your servant became surety for the boy to my father, saying, 'If I do not bring him back to you, then I will bear the blame in the sight of my father all my life.' Now therefore, please let your servant remain as a slave to my lord in place of the boy; and let the boy go back with his brothers. For how can I go back to my father if the boy is not with me? I fear to see the suffering that would come upon my father."

Related Characters: Judah (speaker), Jacob (Israel), Benjamin, Joseph

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 44:30–34

Explanation and Analysis


After Joseph's brothers sold him into slavery, the boys' father, Jacob, fell into prolonged grief, underscoring that Joseph was his favorite among his children. (Rachel was his favorite wife, and her two sons were Joseph and Benjamin.) Though Reuben (the eldest) convinces the other brothers to sell Jacob rather than kill him, it's clear that the boys have no moral qualms over betraying their brother or deeply distressing their father.

Years later, when Joseph's brothers come to Egypt in search of grain during the famine, Joseph recognizes them and, pretending he thinks they're spies from Canaan, orders them not to return without his younger brother, Benjamin, as proof of their identity. After Jacob finally relents and lets Benjamin go to Egypt, Joseph plays another trick on his brothers—hiding a silver cup among their possessions and threatening to imprison Benjamin for the alleged theft. In this long speech, Judah begs Joseph to let him remain behind instead, unwilling to subject Jacob to such grief once more. This speech shows how much Judah's character has developed; when he and his brothers initially sold Joseph into slavery, he had no apparent qualms about grieving Jacob. Now he prefers to sacrifice himself to spare Jacob. After hearing this change of heart, Joseph is finally moved to reveal his identity, throwing aside the elaborate ruse.

Chapter 48 Quotes

☞ When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him; so he took his father's hand, to remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head. Joseph said to his father, "Not so, my father! Since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head." But his father refused, and said, "I know, my son, I know; he also shall become a people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations."

Related Characters: Jacob (Israel), Joseph (speaker), Manasseh, Ephraim

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 48:17–19

Explanation and Analysis

After many years in Egypt, Jacob is about to die, and he blesses Joseph's young sons first. In this passage, Joseph tries to arrange his sons in front of his Jacob so that the elder will receive the greater blessing. Ironically, this recalls elements of Jacob's own tricking of his father, Isaac—how he claimed the firstborn's blessing that Isaac intended for Esau. However, unlike Isaac, Jacob sees through Joseph's attempt to orchestrate a blessing, and he patiently corrects Joseph when he protests the seeming injustice. Though Jacob stole Esau's blessing through selfish deceit, God used that trickery for his own purposes. The elevation of the younger brother, Ephraim, continues here, as he receives the blessings that, in biblical culture, normally go to the firstborn. However, both Ephraim and Manasseh are



honored by being elevated to the same status as Joseph's brothers, themselves becoming ancestors of two of Israel's twelve tribes (though Ephraim's tribe becomes mightier).

term, concludes Genesis on a hopeful note. Joseph's kindness, perhaps better than any of the other patriarchs, reflects God's kindness.

Chapter 50 Quotes

☝☝ Realizing that their father was dead, Joseph's brothers said, "What if Joseph still bears a grudge against us and pays us back in full for all the wrong that we did to him?" [...] Then his brothers also wept, fell down before him, and said, "We are here as your slaves." But Joseph said to them, "Do not be afraid! Am I in the place of God? Even though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good, in order to preserve a numerous people, as he is doing today. So have no fear; I myself will provide for you and your little ones." In this way he reassured them, speaking kindly to them.

Related Characters: Joseph (speaker), God/the LORD God

Related Themes:  



Page Number: 50:15–21


Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Joseph's brothers are stricken with anxiety after their father, Jacob, dies. After selling Joseph into Egyptian slavery many years ago, the brothers now fear that, with Jacob's buffering presence no longer standing between them, Joseph will finally exact revenge for their treachery. In a moving reversal, the brothers come before Jacob and willingly submit themselves as slaves to the one *they'd* maliciously sold into slavery. However, Joseph speaks to them reassuringly. In doing so, he concisely sums up Genesis' view of how God faithfully upholds the covenant he's made with his people: "though you intended to do harm to me, God intended it for good." Through deception and suffering, God nevertheless brought about a greater good for Joseph, and through him, God provided for Joseph's family in the future. This story of Joseph's mercy toward his brothers, and God's provision for his people over the long

☝☝ Then Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die; but God will surely come to you, and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob." So Joseph made the Israelites swear, saying, "When God comes to you, you shall carry up my bones from here." And Joseph died, being one hundred ten years old; he was embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Related Characters: Joseph (speaker), Jacob (Israel), God/the LORD God, Abram (Abraham), Isaac

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 50:24–26

Explanation and Analysis

Genesis ends with Joseph's death in Egypt. Though most of Genesis narrates the story of Abraham's settlement in the promised land and his descendants' blessing there, the end of the book finds Abraham's family living in a foreign land. Yet it also ends, fittingly, with the refrain of God's promise to bring his people back to the promised land someday. Joseph demonstrates his faith in this promise by charging his brothers to keep his bones and one day carry them back to Canaan for burial. This shows Joseph's deep faith in God's covenant—his promise to lead the people back to Canaan. Moreover, it reminds the audience (who likely know that in the next book of the Bible, the Book of Exodus, the Israelites will be oppressed and enslaved in Egypt) that God remains in control of the situation and will still faithfully fulfill his promise to them, as he's done through unfavorable circumstances all along. "God will surely come" to the Israelites, even after hundreds of years.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

CHAPTER 1

Before there was anything else, God made the heavens and the earth. The earth had no form, and everything was dark. Then God's spirit moved across the waters. God said, "Let there be light," and light appeared. God declared the light "good," and he separated it from the darkness. The light was called "day," and the darkness was called "night." The first evening and morning passed.

Next God made a dome, separating the waters above the dome from the waters beneath it. The dome was called the sky. The second day passed.

On the third day, God gathered the waters under the sky into one place, calling them seas. This allowed dry **land**—the Earth—to appear. God saw that these things were good. Then he created all kinds of vegetation, all seed-yielding plants and **fruit**-bearing trees.

On the fourth day, God put lights in the sky to signify seasons, days, and years, and to provide light on the earth. He made great lights for both the day and the night, and stars as well.

On the fifth day, God made creatures to swim in the waters and birds to fly in the skies. After seeing that the sea creatures and birds were good, God blessed them and told them to "be fruitful and multiply," filling the waters and the earth.

Genesis 1 tells the story of how the universe came to exist. It's the beginning of the first 11 chapters of Genesis, which are known by biblical scholars as the "primeval history." In contrast to ancient creation stories from other religions, the earth is made by a single creator God instead of coming about through conflict among multiple gods. God simply proclaims each act of creation, and things come into being.



Water (or deities of water) is often a prominent feature of ancient creation myths. Here, God simply uses water to create a dome, or expanse, to become the sky, or heavens.



Next, having made the sky, God makes the seas, land, and vegetation. Having made specific kinds of places, God will spend the remaining creation days filling those places.



While the stars, sun, and moon are worshiped as deities in other ancient religions, they aren't treated as such in the Judeo-Christian tradition; God creates them with a specific natural function (to mark time and provide light).



Having filled the sky, God now turns to filling the seas and skies with creatures suitable to these habitats. God creates these creatures with the means to perpetuate their species, suggesting that he wants creation to thrive and teem with a variety of life. The phrase "be fruitful and multiply" will reappear again when God makes the first humans, Adam and Eve.



On the sixth day, God made every kind of earthly creatures: cattle, “creeping things” (like mice, reptiles, and insects), and wild animals. After that, God decided to create humankind “in our image” and “likeness.” Humankind would then have “dominion” over all other creatures in the seas, in the air, and on the earth.

After he finishes making animals, God turns to the pinnacle of creation: human beings. Humanity has a special resemblance to God. This probably refers to a spiritual likeness; that is, human beings exercise a sort of divine rule over other creatures, as God rules over the universe. Scholars have a few ideas as to why God is referred to with the plural pronoun “our” here: to some, the gestures to the Christian idea of the Trinity (that God is three beings—God the Father, Jesus the Son, and the Holy Spirit—in one), others believe God is addressing his angels, and lastly, some scholars think God is talking just about himself. It’s also significant that God gives humans “dominion” over the earth—this is often confused with the word “domination.” While domination has negative connotations of abuse and force, dominion means that humans are to be stewards of the earth.



So God made humankind in his image—male and female. God blessed the human beings and told them to “be fruitful and multiply.” They must fill and subdue the earth. They may eat any kind of plant or fruit; the rest of the creatures, too, may eat green plants. Seeing everything he has made, God declares it all “very good.”

The Hebrew word for “humankind” is adam, which will become the first man’s name. Both male and female humans are equally created in God’s “image.” Together, like the creatures named earlier, they are intended to procreate (“be fruitful”) and fill the earth with their kind (“multiply”). The phrase “very good” suggests the wholeness and completion of God’s creation.



CHAPTER 2

Now that God has finished making the heavens, the earth, and everything in them, God spends the seventh day resting. Accordingly, he blesses the seventh day as a holy day.

God’s rest does not so much imply that God can be tired, but that God’s work is perfectly complete—there’s no further work to be done. The sacred seventh day became the basis of the Sabbath, a day dedicated to worship and rest from labor. In Judaism, the Sabbath is Saturday (more precisely from sundown on Friday to sundown on Saturday); in Christianity, it’s on Sunday.



After the LORD God makes the earth and heavens, before it has yet rained to bring forth plants from the ground, the LORD God forms a man from the **dust** of the ground. He breathes the breath of life into the man’s nostrils, causing him to become a living being.

In this chapter, God begins to be referred to as the capitalized word “LORD.” In Hebrew, this appears as “YHWH,” which stands for God’s personal name, Yahweh, which ancient Jewish tradition did not spell out or pronounce. Modern scholarship has also suggested that the shift to the name “LORD God” (after the first chapter’s more generic “God”) indicates a separate strand of oral tradition underneath the biblical text. This second, less sweeping (and more intimate) creation account is also regarded as evidence for another layer of tradition.



The LORD God plants a garden in Eden and places the man there. The LORD God makes every kind of pleasant, fruitful tree to grow in Eden. The tree of life sits in the middle of the garden, as well as the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The garden is watered by a river. Beyond Eden, the river becomes four branches, and two of these are the Tigris and Euphrates.

The LORD God puts the man in the garden of Eden to tend it. He tells the man that he is allowed to eat from every tree, except for the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If the man eats from that tree, he will die.

The LORD God decides that it's not good for the man to be alone; he needs a companion. So the LORD God forms animals and birds and brings each of these to the man, who gives them names. However, none of these creatures is found to be a suitable partner for the man. So the LORD God puts the man into a deep sleep and removes one of the man's ribs. From the rib he forms a woman.

When the LORD God brings the woman to the man, the man calls her "Woman," because she was taken out of the man. The man says that she is "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." (Because the woman was taken from the man, a man leaves his parents and "clings" to his wife, becoming one flesh with her.) The man and his wife are naked, and they are unashamed about this.

God puts the first man into an environment that's created just for him. Besides the trees from which the man can eat, two other special trees grow in the garden of Eden, though their role isn't yet specified. The mention of the Tigris and Euphrates places Eden somewhere in Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), though its purported location is vague.



Scholars see the garden as a kind of holy sanctuary in which the man, guarding and tending it, acts as a priest. The forbidden tree gives moral knowledge in a way that God doesn't intend for the man to experience.



So far, God has deemed everything in creation "very good," but the man's solitude is the first thing that is not good. The Hebrew word that's used for partner is ezer, a word which implies that the man lacks some necessary companionship. Most scholars take issue with the common translation of the word ezer to the word "helper," which has connotations of inferiority. But in Hebrew, the word ezer actually means perfect companionship and help that comes from a place of strength, more like a savior or a rescuer than an assistant. This suggests that the woman isn't intended to serve the man, but to serve alongside him. Throughout the Old Testament, the word ezer appears 21 times, 16 of which refer to God himself, which scholars see as further proof that God intended the woman to be the man's perfect match, like a puzzle piece, rather than his administrative assistant.



The Hebrew words used here for man and woman—ish and ishshah—are a play on words that the original audience would have recognized. The man's joyful description of the newly made woman as "flesh of my flesh" shows that he recognizes her as his equal, belonging in the closest possible relationship with him. This closeness establishes the pattern for marriage.



CHAPTER 3

The serpent, the craftiest animal, speaks to the woman, asking her about God's command—did God say they couldn't eat from any tree in the garden? The woman clarifies that they're not supposed to eat from, or even touch, the tree in the middle of the garden, or else they will die. But the serpent claims that they won't *actually* die. God, the serpent claims, knows that if humans eat from that tree, then their eyes will be opened, and they'll become like God—knowing good and evil.

Looking at the tree, the woman sees that it is beautiful, and its **fruit** looks appetizing, especially since eating it will supposedly make her wise. So she takes fruit from the tree and eats it. She also offers some fruit to the man, and he eats it as well. Then, their eyes are opened, and they realize they're naked. They sew loincloths out of fig leaves to cover themselves.

In the evening, the man and the woman hear the LORD God walking in the garden, and they hide from him. The LORD God calls to the man. The man explains that when he heard God, he was afraid, because he knew he was naked. The LORD God asks the man how he knew he was naked—did he eat from the forbidden tree? The man says that the woman gave him **fruit** from the tree. In turn, the woman says that the serpent tricked her.

The LORD God pronounces a curse on the serpent because it has done this. The serpent will crawl on its belly in the **dust**, and there will be “enmity” between the serpent and the woman's offspring—her offspring “will strike your head, / and you will strike his heel.”

The story shifts abruptly from the introduction of the woman to the appearance of a talking serpent. It's not clear where the serpent comes from, why it talks, or what its intentions are. It just questions the woman about what God has told her, and offers hints about what God might really have meant by his prohibition. In particular, the serpent suggests that maybe God just wanted to stop humans from becoming more like him. (Of course, the previous chapter underscored that humans are already made in God's image—unlike the snake—and they are supposed to exercise dominion over creatures, not obey them.)



Looking away from the many trees that God has provided for the humans' delight, the woman focuses on the one she can't have—a step into mistrust and disobedience. The man, too, goes along with this rebellion against God's command. Eating the fruit does open their eyes to good and evil, but this turns out to be far less enticing than the serpent made it sound. For the man and the woman, eating from the tree results in an awareness of wrongdoing (sin), which is further manifested in their newfound feeling of shame over their nakedness.



In Genesis, God is sometimes presented as being anthropomorphic, or having human characteristics. In this passage, for example, God doesn't appear as a booming voice or larger-than-life presence—he's seen walking through the garden much like a human would. When the man and the woman hide from God, it shows their newfound knowledge of good and evil: they're aware that they've done something wrong and wanted to avoid the consequences of it. When God questions the couple about their guilt, they both try to cast the blame elsewhere. The harmony between God and humans (and between humans and other creatures) has been broken.



God curses each of them for disobeying his command, beginning with the serpent. Though this curse refers to humanity's dread of snakes, Christian interpreters view the “striking” to refer to Christ's defeat of the serpent (Christ being the woman's offspring many centuries later).



Then the LORD God curses the woman, saying that her pain in childbirth will be greatly increased, and that her husband will rule over her. And because the man has listened to his wife and eaten from the forbidden tree, the ground he works will be cursed, and he will bring forth food with much toil, eventually returning to the **dust** himself—"you are dust, / and to dust you shall return."

The man names his wife Eve, because she is the mother of all living people. Then the LORD God makes clothing for both the man and his wife. He drives the man and his wife out of Eden because they have become like God, knowing good and evil—and now they might also eat from the tree of life and live forever. God places the cherubim at the entrance to Eden, with a flaming sword.

God's curses on the two humans further illustrate the breakdown in harmony among creation—between the man and woman, between humans and nature, and between humans and God. Natural phenomena like childbirth and work will become laborious. Most of all, death enters the world, returning human beings to the elements from which they were created.



The Hebrew word for "Eve" is close to the word for "living," hence the idea that she's the matriarch of all living people. After cursing the couple, God immediately shows care for them in the provision of clothing—showing that his curse is not meant for their destruction but as a means to uphold justice. However, they are driven from the garden in which they previously enjoyed a peaceful life of dependence upon God.



CHAPTER 4

Adam and Eve conceive a son, and Eve gives birth to Cain, saying that she has "produced a man" with God's help. Later, Eve has another son, Abel. Abel becomes a shepherd, and Cain tills the ground. One day, Cain brings the LORD an offering of fruit, while Abel brings an offering from his flock—the choicest sheep. The LORD is fond of Abel's offering, but he disregards Cain's.

Cain invites Abel to go out into the field. There, Cain kills Abel. When the LORD asks Cain of Abel's whereabouts, Cain says he doesn't know: "am I my brother's keeper?" The LORD says that Abel's blood cries out from the ground; therefore Cain will be cursed from the ground from now on. He will till the earth with difficulty and wander as a fugitive. Cain is dismayed, afraid he will be killed also, so the LORD places a mark on Cain. Then Cain settles in the land of Nod.

Cain and his wife have a son, Enoch. Cain builds a city and names it after Enoch. Several generations later, Cain's descendant Lamech takes two wives named Adah and Zillah. Adah's son Jabal is the ancestor of nomadic herders; her son Jubal is the ancestor of musicians. Zillah's son Tubal-cain becomes a bronze- and ironworker.

Humanity begins to multiply through Adam and Eve. (Fittingly, the Hebrew verb for "produced" resembles the name Cain.) However, the effects of Adam and Eve's sin are soon revealed in conflict between their offspring. It's not explained why God prefers Abel's offering, except that a sheep would obviously be costlier than fruit.



Jealous that God preferred Abel's gift, Cain deceives his brother, murders him, and then heartlessly lies to God about what he's done, denying any responsibility for his brother ("am I [his] keeper?"). But being omniscient, God knows what happened, and Cain will forever bear the consequences. Still, God shows mercy to Cain so that he will not be killed, too.



Cain's descendants are described as the founders of civilization—building cities, doing work like herding and toolmaking, and creating cultural artifacts like music. (It's also assumed that other human beings exist with whom Adam's sons can intermarry, though this isn't explained.)



Meanwhile, Adam and Eve have another son, named Seth, because God has “appointed” for Eve another child. Seth has a son named Enosh. Around this time, people begin to “call upon the LORD.”

It’s not explained what “call[ing] upon the LORD” means, exactly, but it’s implied that some of Adam’s descendants begin to acknowledge and worship God publicly, calling him by his personal name, “Yahweh.”



CHAPTER 5

Adam’s descendants are listed, beginning with God’s creation of humankind, male and female, in his image. When Adam fathered Seth, he was 130 years old; after Seth was born, Adam lived 800 years more, for a total of 900 years before he died.

Humanity’s creation at the beginning of Genesis is echoed here. Genesis contains many genealogies, or records of family descent, to show how humanity got from Adam to the audience’s present. These genealogies often follow the formula found here.



Adam’s descendants—Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, Enoch, Methuselah, and Lamech—are named, along with the ages at which they became fathers and the age at which each man died. Notably, Enoch is distinguished for having “walked with God” and been taken away by God at the end of his life. His son, Methuselah, is notable for living a total of 969 years.

It’s possible that the genealogies in Genesis are understood to skip generations (even with the superlatively long lives attributed to people in the primeval history), offering highlights such as notably faithful or long-lived figures.



When Lamech was 182 years old, he had a son named Noah, who in turn became the father of Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Genesis traces Adam’s descendants through Seth to Noah, who will be the next major figure in the history of God’s people.



People continue to multiply. Daughters are born, and men see that they are attractive and take wives for themselves. The LORD says that his spirit will not remain in fleshly mortals forever, and that from now on, their years will be limited to 120. The Nephilim also live on the earth and marry human women, who bear their children. These become famous heroes and warriors.

The interpretation of this passage is unclear, but it implies some kind of sexual impropriety or indiscriminate choice of wives that displeases God—a result of humanity’s original rebellion, when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit. The term Nephilim (Hebrew for “fallen ones”) is infamously unclear, too. They seem to be formidable figures whose offspring contribute to the violence described in the next passage.



The LORD sees that humanity’s wickedness is great, and he regrets having created them. He decides that he will blot out what he has made, both people and all other creatures. Noah, however, finds favor in God’s sight. Noah follows God blamelessly.

Many generations after Adam and Eve’s disobedience, humanity as a whole is described as having devolved into rebellion against God, though Noah is named as a lone exception.



God tells Noah that, because of the violence that fills the earth, he is going to destroy everything that breathes. He instructs Noah to build an ark made out of cypress wood, giving him exact directions regarding the rooms and dimensions the ark must have and the materials Noah should use. After Noah builds the ark, God will flood the earth, destroying all life. However, he will establish a covenant with Noah. Noah, his wife, his sons, and their wives will enter the ark, along with two of every kind of creature—male and female. Noah does as God commands him.

Disobedience is so pervasive that God has basically determined to undo his creation. However, he provides a means for humanity's continuance—he will ensure that righteous Noah and his family will survive the coming deluge in a huge boat, along with each kind of animal. His agreement with Noah is called a "covenant," or a formal agreement between two parties, usually initiated by the superior party with the inferior.



CHAPTER 7

The LORD orders Noah and his household to go into the ark, because Noah alone is righteous in his generation. He also tells Noah to take seven pairs of "clean" animals into the ark, one pair each of unclean animals, and seven pairs of each kind of bird. In 7 days' time, God will send rain on the earth for 40 days and nights. Noah does as God commands.

The distinction between "clean" and "unclean" animals refers to the sacrificial system, which is explained later in the Bible in the Book of Leviticus. Thus God is not only providing for the survival of the species he has made, but for humanity's ongoing worship of him.



Noah is 600 years old when the flood begins. He and his family escape in the ark, along with the clean animals, unclean animals, and birds. The flood comes as God had said, and God seals Noah, his wife, Noah's sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth, and their wives inside the ark. As the rain continues to fall, the ark rises on the swelling waters; even the mountains are covered by the flood. Every kind of creature that lives on the earth dies, and all human beings die. Only Noah and his family remain, sailing in the ark for 150 days.

Other creation stories from the biblical period included flood stories—like the Epic of Gilgamesh and the [Enuma Elish](#)—although the details of the flood vary. For example, the story in Genesis is the only one where the flood is a divine response to humankind's disobedience. It's also marked by specific chronological details and a vivid description of the drama of the event. However, the details aren't precisely clear whether the flood covers the entire world, or primarily engulfs the characters' known world.



CHAPTER 8

God remembers Noah, his family, and the animals in the ark. He causes a wind to blow over the earth, which makes the floodwaters subside. At the end of the 150 days, the ark rests on the mountains of Ararat. As the waters recede, the mountains gradually reappear.

When the Bible describes God as "remembering" someone, it doesn't mean that God had forgotten about them. Instead, it means that God is about to act on that person's behalf—in this case, bringing Noah and his family safely through the waters, as he'd promised to do. The mountains of Ararat are located in modern Turkey.



After 40 days, Noah opens a window and sends a raven out. The raven flies back and forth until the waters dry up. Then Noah sends out a dove, but it returns to the ark because there is not yet dry ground for it to rest on. He sends the dove out again 7 days later, and the dove returns with an olive leaf in its mouth, showing that the waters have subsided. After another 7 days, Noah sends the dove out for a final time, and it does not return.

While the flood was sudden and dramatic, the waters' recession and the earth's drying is a slow, gradual process. Noah's method of sending out the various birds to gauge the earth's conditions shows that even after Noah and his family had survived the flood, they were still required to wait and trust that God would fully deliver them from the situation.



Noah removes the covering from the ark and sees that the ground is drying. When it is fully dry, God tells Noah, his wife, and his sons' families to leave the ark with the animals. After they emerge from the ark, Noah builds an altar to the LORD and offers burnt sacrifices on it. When the LORD smells the offerings' aroma, he promises himself never again to destroy his creation.

When Noah emerges from the ark, the first thing he does is offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving and atonement (a practice that's explained in greater detail in the Book of Leviticus). The offering also suggests that even if human beings disobey God again, God will not destroy them like he did with the flood, and that sacrificial practices will be part of upholding that harmony between humanity and God.



CHAPTER 9

God blesses Noah and Noah's sons and charges them to "be fruitful and multiply," filling the earth. All living things will be food for them; the only exception is that a creature's flesh must not be eaten along with its blood. Also, the shedding of human blood is costly: whoever sheds someone else's blood must shed his own in payment, because human beings are made in God's image.

God's charge to Noah and his sons echoes his original command to the first animals and then to Adam and Eve to procreate and fill the earth. This supports the idea that the flood is a kind of re-creation, a fresh start for humanity. The ethic expressed here—a life for a life—also assumes that people will continue to sin against God, but that infractions will now be dealt with by legal measures.



Then God tells Noah and his sons that he is establishing a covenant with them and their descendants, and with all living creatures. According to this covenant, God will never again destroy the earth by a flood. The sign of the covenant will be a rainbow in the clouds. Whenever there is a rainbow in the sky, God will remember his everlasting covenant.

This is the first time a covenant—a formal agreement between parties—is explicitly mentioned in Genesis, though it was alluded to when God instructed Noah to build the ark. The covenant even includes animals, which supports the idea that God is starting creation over anew. Covenants come with special signs, in this case a natural phenomenon, to remind the parties of their agreement.



From Noah's three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, the whole earth is repopulated. Noah becomes the first to plant a vineyard. One day, Noah gets drunk on wine and lies naked in his tent. After Ham discovers him, Ham and his brothers cover Noah with a garment, the others walking backward so that they won't see their father's nakedness. When Noah wakes up, he curses Ham, including Ham's son Canaan and his offspring, saying they will be slaves to Ham's brothers and their offspring. He then gives Shem and Japheth blessings. At age 950, Noah dies.

Human beings begin to procreate and disperse once again, as they did after Adam. However, like Adam's sons, Noah's sons quickly get into trouble, a kind of second fall of humanity. Ham is cursed for dishonoring his father while his brothers show greater discretion. Although the precise nature of Ham's offense isn't clear, he obviously disrespected Noah, reintroducing disharmony into their relationship. This moment also reminds readers of Adam and Eve's shame in Eden when they realized they were naked.



CHAPTER 10

The post-flood descendants of Noah's sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth, are listed. The descendants of Japheth settled in Asia Minor and Europe. Ham's descendants largely settle in Egypt, with some settling in Assyria; the descendants of Ham's son, Canaan, inhabit the land of what is later called Palestine. Shem's descendants are the Semitic peoples of Arabia and Mesopotamia. From all Noah's descendants, nations grow and spread across the earth.

Noah's offspring disperse across the world, with Shem, Ham, and Japheth representing various people-groups that grew and spread out over a long period of time. Genesis 10 has been referred to as the Table of Nations for this reason.



CHAPTER 11

At first, the whole earth uses the same language to communicate. Eventually, as people settle on the plain of Shinar, they decide to build a city and a brick-and-mortar tower that reaches to heaven. By doing so, they hope to “make a name” for themselves. The LORD observes the people’s city and tower and sees that, having one language, the people will be able to do whatever they want. He determines to confuse the people’s language so that they cannot understand one another. He does so, and the people are scattered over the face of the earth. The place is called “Babel” because God confused their language.

The descendants of Shem are traced across several generations to a man named Terah. Terah is the father of Abram, Nahor, and Haran. Haran was the father of Lot; he died, before his father Terah, in the land of Ur. Meanwhile, his brother Abram took a wife named Sarai, and his brother Nahor took a wife named Milcah. Sarai was barren, or childless. Terah, with his son Abram, Abram’s wife Sarai, and Terah’s grandson Lot, set out from Ur for the land of Canaan, but they stop and settle in the land of Haran.

CHAPTER 12

The LORD tells Abram to leave his country and family and enter a **land** that God will show him. The LORD says that he will make of Abram “a great nation,” and that through him, all of the earth’s families will be blessed. Taking Lot with him, Abram does as God says. He is 75 years old when he leaves Haran for the land of Canaan. When they enter Canaan, the LORD appears to Abram and tells him that he will give this land to Abram’s offspring. In response, Abram builds an altar to the LORD. He gradually journeys toward the Negeb.

When a famine hits the land, Abram and Sarai go to Egypt. Before they enter Egypt, Abram tells Sarai that because she is beautiful, the Egyptians may kill him and take her for themselves. Therefore she must claim to be Abram’s sister instead of his wife. As Abram had said, the officials of Pharaoh’s household take Sarai for Pharaoh and give Abram lots of livestock and slaves. But the LORD sends plagues into Pharaoh’s house, which leads Pharaoh to discover that Sarai is actually Abram’s wife. He sends Abram and his household on their way.

As humans spread across the earth, so does sin. Rebellion against God happens collectively as well as individually. Here, people conspire against God’s intentions—instead of depending on him for what they need, humans try to be self-sufficient and assert themselves, even reaching for heaven itself. The Hebrew word balal means “to confuse,” which is what God does in order to thwart people’s rebellious intentions.



From the broader sweep of humanity, the genealogy narrows to focus on a specific family—Abram’s. Abram and both of his brothers will be significant in the narrative to come. Abram’s father initially sets out for what will become known as the promised land of Canaan but stops short. Being childless, Abram does not appear to be the ancestor of a great nation.



Scholars mark Genesis 12 as the beginning of Genesis’s “patriarchal history,” which tells the story of Israel’s earliest ancestors: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jacob’s sons. God tells Abram to resume the journey his father began, to Canaan. In calling Abram to do this, God also states his intentions for all of humanity to come—he will bless them through Abram’s obedience. The promise that accompanies God’s call—that God will make “a great nation” through Abram—is surprising, given that Abram’s wife, Sarai, has already been described as barren.



The narrative in Genesis doesn’t always make it clear how characters’ actions should be judged. In this case, judgment concerning Abram’s lie about Sarai is left ambiguous—but it’s implied that Abram has failed to trust God, since God just promised to provide Abram with many children (meaning that he wouldn’t let the Egyptians kill Abram). Nevertheless, God still takes care of Abram by ensuring Sarai’s release from Pharaoh’s house.



CHAPTER 13

Abram—who is wealthy in livestock, silver, and gold—journeys with his household from the Negeb to Bethel to Ai. At Ai, where Abram had earlier established an altar, he calls upon the LORD’s name. Meanwhile, Lot and Abram part ways, because the **land** can’t contain both men’s herds. Lot settles in the plain of the Jordan, placing his tent near Sodom, and Abram settles in the land of Canaan.

After Lot’s departure, the LORD tells Abram to look around. God will give Abram all the **land** he can see, to him and his offspring forever. What’s more, Abram’s offspring will become so numerous that they will be like the **dust** of the earth. Abram settles by the oaks of Mamre at Hebron and builds an altar to the LORD.

Now that Abram has been sent out from Egypt, he journeys north again and settles in Canaan’s hill country. Both Abram and his nephew Lot are wealthy men, meaning there would be competition for land, and they must stake out different settlements.



God reaffirms the promise he has made to Abram. The promise includes both land and offspring to fill the land—two elements of a great nation. Yet, so far, Abram remains childless, which raises the question of how God will fulfill his promise.



CHAPTER 14

In the Valley of Siddim, or the Dead Sea area, a group of Canaanite kings rebels against King Chedorlaomer of Elam and his Shemite allies. When the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah flee the battle, their enemies take their goods; they also take Abram’s nephew Lot captive. Someone escapes from Lot’s household and notifies Abram, who gathers a force of trained men and goes in pursuit of his nephew. He pursues the captives all the way to Damascus and successfully brings Lot and his household back from there to live with him.

After this, the king of Sodom meets with Abram. King Melchizedek of Salem, a priest of God, brings out bread and wine and blesses Abram. Abram gives Melchizedek one-tenth of his possessions. The king of Sodom offers his goods to Abram, but Abram refuses to take them, not wanting to be made rich by the king of Sodom.

The clash between the Canaanites (descendants of Ham) and Shemites fulfills Noah’s curse that Ham would be enslaved by his brothers. The Shemite kings crush the Canaanites and capture Abram’s nephew, whose family lives among them. Abram is himself a descendant of Shem and therefore blessed by God in his pursuit and rescue of Lot.



“Salem” is a name for Jerusalem, meaning that Abram receives a blessing in the place that will one day become the religious heart of Israel. The figure of Melchizedek is mysterious, however. He appears in one Psalm (110) and Christians later compare him to Jesus Christ (Letter to the Hebrews), but Genesis simply presents him as a figure of blessing and of contrast with Sodom’s king.



CHAPTER 15

After this, Abram has a vision in which the LORD tells him not to be afraid, because he will be Abram’s shield. But Abram complains that he is still childless, with a household slave in line to become his heir. The LORD promises that Abram’s own offspring will be his heir. Abram’s offspring will be like the stars—innumerable. Abram believes God, and God counts this “righteous.”

God has promised Abram both offspring and land—neither of which Abram has yet. Here, God addresses Abram’s concern that he is still childless. When God shows Abram the stars as a symbol of the uncountable nation that will come from him, Abram’s belief is considered “righteous”—his faith conforming to God’s will for him.



The LORD reminds Abram that he brought Abram out of Ur to give him this **land**. Abram asks how he can know that he will possess the land. So God instructs him to bring a heifer, a female goat, a ram, a turtledove, and a pigeon. Abram brings these animals, and cuts all but the birds in two.

Having addressed Abram's concern about his childlessness, God now reaffirms his promise to grant Abram the land. The significance of these precise sacrificial animals isn't clear, but the ritual is another opportunity for God to demonstrate his faithfulness to Abram.



At night, a deep darkness surrounds Abram, terrifying him. The LORD tells Abram that he can know for sure that his offspring will be aliens in a foreign **land**, where they will be enslaved and oppressed for 400 years. But God will judge their oppressors and bring them out of that land with great wealth. Abram himself will die peacefully at an old age. A fire pot and flaming torch pass between the animal carcasses. The LORD makes a covenant with Abram, giving him the land from the river of Egypt to the Euphrates River.

After Abram brings the sacrificial animals, God concludes the ritual, his presence symbolized by the fire pot and torch. (This moment contrasts with the anthropomorphic, or humanlike, way that God is depicted earlier in Genesis when he walks through Eden.) God also tells Abram of his people's future enslavement (described in the Book of Exodus), hundreds of years before this takes place. Although God has already spoken these promises to Abram, he now formalizes the promises through a covenant.



CHAPTER 16

After they have lived in Canaan for 10 years, Sarai has born Abram no children. She tells Abram that because God has kept her from having children, perhaps she is meant to have children by means of Hagar, her Egyptian slave-girl. Abram listens to Sarai and takes Hagar as a wife; Hagar soon conceives a child and looks on Sarai with contempt. Then Sarai gets angry at Abram and mistreats Hagar, who runs away.

Ancient customs held that women could give their maids to their husbands to become surrogate mothers; any children born to these unions would belong to them. In other words, Sarai is trying to solve the problem of her barrenness through human means instead of relying on God to keep his promise. In a move resembling Adam listening to Eve in the garden, Abram follows Sarai's lead in this, mistrusting God's provision.



The angel of the LORD finds Hagar by a spring in the wilderness and tells her to return to Sarai. He also promises Hagar that he will give her innumerable offspring. She will soon bear a son whom she must call Ishmael, because God has heard her affliction. In response, Hagar calls the LORD "El-roi," which means "God who sees." When Abram is 86 years old, Hagar bears him a son, whom he names Ishmael.

Though God has mostly made promises to those who are within Abraham's direct line, his encounter with Hagar shows that he doesn't deal with them exclusively—he also listens to outsiders and cares about their struggles. The name Ishmael means "God hears," emphasizing that God heard Hagar's troubles, too.



CHAPTER 17

When Abram is 99 years old, the LORD appears to him. He says that Abram must walk blamelessly before him. He also makes a covenant with Abram, promising to make him the ancestor of many nations. God says that Abram must be called Abraham from now on. God's covenant with Abraham will also include his offspring forever; he will give them the **land** of Canaan perpetually.

Though God made a covenant with Abram in Genesis 15 to give him children, this covenant takes a wider view, speaking not just of offspring, but of "many nations." Abram means "exalted ancestor," while Abraham means "ancestor of a multitude"—the change of name reflects his new status.



For Abraham's part, God says, he and his offspring must keep the covenant by undergoing circumcision; all the males among them must circumcise the flesh of their foreskins as a sign of the covenant. This will be done when each male is eight days old, and foreign slaves are included. Any uncircumcised male must be cut off from God's people as a covenant-breaker.

Then God says that Abraham's wife must no longer be called Sarai, but Sarah. God will give Abram a son by her, and from her will come nations and kings. At this, Abraham falls on his face, laughing; he is 100 years old, and Sarah is 90. He tells God, "O that Ishmael might live in your sight!" God repeats that Abram will have a son by Sarah, whose name will be Isaac. God will also bless Ishmael, making him a great nation. But God will make an everlasting covenant with Isaac and his offspring. Abraham takes Ishmael and all the men of his household, including male slaves, and circumcises them as God has commanded.

CHAPTER 18

While Abraham sits outside his tent by the oaks of Mamre, three men suddenly approach. Abraham runs and bows to them, urging the men to stop and refresh themselves. When the men agree, Abraham tells Sarah to prepare cakes, and a calf is slaughtered. He sets this feast before the visitors. Then one of the men tells Abraham that the next time he visits this tent, Sarah will have a son. Sarah, listening at the tent entrance, begins to laugh—she is long past childbearing age. The LORD repeats the promise, adding that nothing is "too wonderful" for God.

When the guests depart, Abraham walks with them in the direction of Sodom. The LORD says that he has heard an outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah because of their grave sin, and he is going to see if the report is true. Abraham asks God if he will destroy the righteous along with the wicked—if there were only 50 righteous people in Sodom, would God still destroy the whole city? Surely that would not be just. Abraham continues questioning God, asking if God would refrain from destroying Sodom for the sake of 45, 20, or even just 10 righteous residents. God says that he would not destroy Sodom if 10 righteous people could be found.

Just as God's covenant with Noah included a covenant sign (the rainbow), his covenant with Abraham and his offspring will also include a sign. Circumcision sets the males of Abraham's line apart as members of the covenant community.



"Sarah" means "princess," alluding to God's promise that Sarah will be the ancestor of kings. The idea is so absurd, however, that it strikes Abraham as a joke—he and Sarah are surely too old to have even one child, and God must be referring to Ishmael. But God repeats the promise of a son named Isaac, which means "He laughs," a reference to Abraham's reaction here (and Sarah's reaction in the next chapter when she hears the news). Abraham obeys God by applying the sign of circumcision to his household.



Following up on the covenant God made with Abraham in the preceding chapter, this is a divine visit—note that the three men are identified with the Lord later in the passage. Seeming to recognize this, Abraham prepares a feast. Eavesdropping, Sarah laughs at the visitor's claim, much as Abraham did at the end of the previous chapter. Whether her laugh is bitterly disbelieving or happily incredulous, God hears it and responds with reassurance.



In this conversation with God, Abraham questions and even challenges God regarding what is just. God's justice, in other words, should not be arbitrary, but should be based on evidence, and the righteous shouldn't perish along with the wicked. Abraham's argument demonstrates his own reputation for righteousness as well as God's promise to bless others through Abraham.



CHAPTER 19

In the evening, two angels arrive in Sodom, where Lot is sitting at the gate. Lot greets the angels and urges them to spend the night at his house. That night, as the guests prepare to sleep, all the men of Sodom gather around Lot's house and demand that Lot bring the guests outside, so that they can have sex with them. Lot goes outside and implores the men of Sodom not to do this to his visitors—he will even offer them his virgin daughters instead. But the men scorn Lot and try to break down the door of his house. Lot's guests pull him inside and shut the door; the men outside are struck with blindness.

Then the guests tell Lot to gather his family, because they are going to destroy Sodom. The next morning, the guests take Lot, his wife, and his two daughters outside the city and instruct them to flee without looking back, or else they will be consumed, too. Lot and his family flee toward the nearby city of Zoar while God rains sulfur and fire onto Sodom and Gomorrah. However, Lot's wife glances back, and she is turned into a pillar of salt.

Afraid of staying in Zoar, Lot takes his two daughters and settles in the nearby hills, where they live in a cave. The elder daughter proposes to her younger sister that because there are no marriageable men here, they must get their father drunk and have sex with him in order to ensure that they have offspring. So both sisters take turns having sex with Lot while he is drunk and oblivious. Both daughters become pregnant, the elder bearing Moab, the ancestor of the Moabites, and the younger bearing Ben-ammi, the ancestor of the Ammonites.

CHAPTER 20

Abraham and Sarah settle in Gerar on the way to the Negeb. While there, Abraham pretends that Sarah is his sister, and King Abimelech of Gerar takes Sarah for himself. But God warns Abimelech in a dream that he will die if he approaches Sarah; he must return Sarah to Abraham, who is a prophet and will pray for him. So Abimelech does, asking Abraham why he lied about Sarah. Abraham says that he feared being killed in this godless place; besides, Sarah is indeed his half-sister. Abimelech gives riches to Abraham and tells him to settle where he likes. Abraham prays for Abimelech so that God will open the wombs of his wife and other household women.

Here, the wicked men of Sodom want to sexually assault Lot's divine guests, which suggests that what God heard about Sodom is right—its people are deeply sinful. While homosexual rape is perhaps part of the outrage, the primary offense that Genesis underscores here is that the men are violating the sacred obligations of hospitality, which was so important in the biblical world. That's why Lot risks his own life to try to placate the mob, even offering his daughters instead—a shocking act, even if he intends it as a bluff.



In an echo of the flood story, God destroys Sodom for the wickedness displayed earlier in the chapter. Demonstrating his mercy, though, he allows Lot and his family to escape because of Lot's righteousness. Lot's wife's disobedience to the angel's command (looking back at the city when she was explicitly warned not to) causes her to be swept up in the destruction, becoming a salty pillar like the surrounding Dead Sea landscape.



After what's happened in Sodom, Lot decides to live in isolation. However, Lot's daughters seem to think that their family is all that's left in the world, or at least that they'll be cut off from society forever. The Moabites and Ammonites are said to be the results of these incestuous encounters. The episode is reminiscent of drunken Noah and his sons in the cave after the flood, which resulted in a curse against Ham.



This story recalls a very similar incident in Genesis 12, right down to Abraham's claim that Sarah is his sister (the audience's familiarity with that story seems to be assumed). Interestingly, God identifies Abraham as a prophet, which hasn't been stated before. One aspect of this prophetic role is intercession, or the ability to pray on another person's behalf. When Abraham does, God relieves the barrenness with which he's afflicted Abimelech's women.



CHAPTER 21

The LORD fulfills his promise to Sarah—she conceives and bears Abraham a son, whom Abraham names Isaac. Isaac is circumcised at eight days old. Abraham is 100 years old when Isaac is born. Sarah says that God has brought laughter to her, and now everyone who hears about it will laugh along with her.

God's long-awaited promise to Abraham and Sarah is fulfilled with the birth of Isaac. Isaac's circumcision, in turn, fulfills God's commandment to Abraham. The "laughter" surrounding Isaac—his name's meaning—evokes joy, relief, and gratitude.



After Isaac is weaned, Sarah sees Hagar's son Ishmael playing with Isaac, and she gets angry. She demands that Abraham cast out both Hagar and her son. God assures Abraham, who is upset, that he will provide for Ishmael, so Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael into the wilderness with provisions.

Though it's not clear why Sarah gets angry, she seems to regard Ishmael as a rival to Isaac—suggesting that she still doesn't fully trust in God's promise to make Isaac Abraham's heir.



After they run out of water, Hagar settles Ishmael under a bush and walks away, unwilling to watch him die. When she weeps, the angel of God speaks to her, telling her not to be afraid; he will make a great nation of Ishmael. Then Hagar sees a well of water, and she gives Ishmael a drink. Ishmael grows up in the wilderness, and God is with him.

Once again, God listens to the outcast Hagar and fulfills his promise to provide for Ishmael's survival. God's tenderness toward the weeping Hagar contrasts with Sarah's cruelty toward her.



Meanwhile, Abimelech asks Abraham to swear loyalty to him, since God has made Abraham prosper, and Abimelech has treated Abraham fairly. Abraham swears. Later, when Abimelech's servants seize one of Abraham's wells, Abraham brings seven ewe lambs, and the two men make a covenant; the acceptance of the lambs is a witness that the well belongs to Abraham. Abraham continues to live in Beer-sheba, in the land of the Philistines.

King Abimelech, who'd earlier gotten in trouble for trying to claim Sarah for himself, develops a more amicable relationship with Abraham, which is expressed by means of a covenant. Even to those who might not worship Abraham's God, it's obvious that God is the source of Abraham's thriving.



CHAPTER 22

After this, God tests Abraham. He summons Abraham and commands him to take his beloved son, Isaac, to the land of Moriah and offer him as a burnt sacrifice on a mountain there. So Abraham cuts wood for the offering, loads his donkey, and sets off with Isaac and two servants. After three days' journey, they see the mountain in the distance. Abraham takes Isaac off alone to worship; Isaac carries the wood for the burnt offering. Isaac asks Abraham why they don't have a lamb for the offering. Abraham tells Isaac that God will provide the lamb.

Genesis doesn't reveal exactly how much time has passed since Isaac's birth. It's clear, however, that having just sent Ishmael into the wilderness, Abraham is now being asked to give up Isaac as well. This is a profound test of his faith in what God has promised to him, especially considering that child sacrifice doesn't seem to have been a normal part of his culture. Abraham's comment to Isaac suggests that he still trusts God to fulfill his promise somehow.



On the mountain, Abraham builds an altar. Then he binds Isaac and places his son on the wood of the altar. As Abraham is drawing his knife to kill Isaac, the angel of the LORD calls Abraham, telling him not to harm his son—now God knows that Abraham fears him. When Abraham looks up, he sees a ram caught in a nearby thicket. Abraham offers the ram as a sacrifice instead. The angel of the LORD addresses Abraham again, affirming that because Abraham has not withheld his only son, God will bless him, making his offspring as numerous as the stars or the sand on the seashore. After returning home to Beer-sheba, Abraham hears that his brother, Nahor, has eight children by his wife Milcah. Nahor's son Bethuel has a daughter named Rebekah.

At the last possible moment, God stops Abraham from following through on the sacrifice, and Abraham sees that God has indeed provided an alternative sacrifice. God then reaffirms his covenant with Abraham that he will provide many offspring. Some Christian interpreters have viewed Isaac as a prefiguring of Christ. Meanwhile, back home, the news of Nahor's offspring likewise hints at the future expansion of Abraham's family, as Rebekah will marry Isaac.



CHAPTER 23

Sarah lives for 127 years and dies at Hebron in the **land** of Canaan. Abraham asks the Hittites, among whom he lives, to let him buy property for a burial place, and they agree, as Abraham is an honored prince. When Abraham seeks to buy a cave on the property of a man named Ephron, Ephron tries to give Abraham the land outright, but they ultimately agree on a price. Then Abraham buries Sarah in the cave of Machpelah, east of Mamre.

Sarah, the matriarch of what will become known as the people of Israel, dies and is buried in the land promised to her offspring. In the ancient world, burial in a place would have been seen as a way of laying claim to it; here, too, Abraham's negotiation with Ephron shows a person of that land respecting Abraham's right to bury his dead there.



CHAPTER 24

Abraham is getting old. He tells his oldest servant to swear to him that he will find a wife for Isaac, not among the Canaanites, but from Abraham's native country. Isaac must not return to that land; the woman must be willing to follow the servant back to the **land** of the Canaanites. So the servant swears and goes on his way, taking camels laden with gifts.

Abraham doesn't want Isaac to marry a native Canaanite, implicitly fearing that such a marriage would draw Isaac away from worshiping God. The next phase of the patriarchal history begins with a servant's journey back to the land from which Abraham came, in order to secure Isaac's future.



When the servant arrives in the city of Nahor, his camels drink from a well on the outskirts. The servant prays that God will give him success in this errand, and that God will show him a sign—when he asks a girl for a drink, the one who offers to water his camels as well will be Isaac's future wife. As the servant finishes praying, Rebekah, Nahor's granddaughter, approaches. When the servant asks Rebekah for a drink of water, she immediately offers to draw water for his camels as well.

The servant travels to Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq) in search of a young woman who will meet certain specifications—one who takes initiative and shows a caring disposition. God quickly answers the servant's prayer by sending Rebekah (Abraham's grandniece, making her a cousin of Isaac).



When Rebekah finishes watering the camels, the servant gives her gold jewelry and asks her name. She introduces herself as Bethuel's daughter and Nahor's granddaughter; then she invites him to spend the night with her family. The servant gratefully worships God, thankful for his faithfulness toward Abraham. Rebekah runs home and tells everyone about the guest. Her brother, Laban, comes to welcome the servant and listens to his errand. After he hears the servant's news about Abraham and the details of his conversation with Rebekah, Laban says this is obviously God's doing.

Rebekah continues to show her generous and hospitable nature, and the servant thanks God for showing his faithfulness by leading the servant to the woman who will help extend Abraham's family line. To Laban, too, God's orchestration of events appears evident.



The servant gives Rebekah and her family more costly gifts. The next day, the servant urges them to send Rebekah to Canaan without delay. When the family asks Rebekah, she agrees to go with the servant and become Isaac's wife. Rebekah's family sends her off with a blessing. One day, while Isaac is walking in the field, he sees camels approaching. When Rebekah sees Isaac from a distance, she covers herself with her veil. The servant tells Isaac about his successful errand, and Isaac takes Rebekah as his wife.

Rebekah's willingness to leave her homeland and family behind and go to Canaan is important—a further sign that God has brought about these circumstances. The first meeting between Isaac and Rebekah, approaching one another from across a field, brings the episode to a dramatic conclusion. By taking Rebekah as his wife, Isaac takes another step toward becoming the great nation God has promised to make of him.



CHAPTER 25

Abraham takes another wife named Keturah, and she bears him many more children. After giving his possessions to Isaac, Abraham dies at age 175. Isaac and Ishmael bury Abraham with Sarah in the cave of Machpelah. Afterward, Isaac settles at Beer-lahai-roi. Ishmael, son of Abraham and Hagar, has 12 sons, all of them princes and leaders of tribes, and dies at age 137. His sons settle on either side of the Red Sea.

Not much information is given about Keturah, or the timing of Abraham's second marriage, since his posterity through Isaac is already established. The burial and the details of Ishmael's family (also an indirect offshoot from the covenant line) bring Abraham's story to a close.



The narrative turns to Isaac's descendants. At first, Isaac's wife Rebekah is barren, but after Isaac prays for her, she conceives twins. The twins wrestle in Rebekah's womb until she prays to the LORD in distress. God tells her that "two nations," a stronger and a weaker, are in her womb.

The story turns to the next generation of Abraham's family. Like Sarah, Rebekah is barren and must rely on God to help her conceive. The conflict in Rebekah's womb sets the tone for her sons' ongoing relationship.



When Rebekah gives birth, the first twin comes out looking red and hairy, so they name him Esau. The second twin emerges clutching Esau's heel, so he is named Jacob. As the boys grow up, Esau becomes a hunter, while Jacob prefers a quiet life. Isaac shares Esau's love of wild game and is partial to him, but Rebekah favors Jacob.

The names of both sons reflect their distinguishing characteristics. Esau's name is related to a word for "red;" the name Jacob means "he takes by the heel" or "he supplants." This name hints that even though Jacob is the younger twin, he will challenge Esau for preeminence.



One day, while Jacob is cooking a stew, Esau comes in from the field and hungrily demands some of the food. Jacob tells Esau he must first sell his birthright. Esau swears accordingly, so Jacob gives him some bread and lentil stew.

A birthright included special rights granted to an elder son, including a greater share of the inheritance. Esau is meant to look foolish for giving up his birthright for food, while Jacob is more clever.



CHAPTER 26

There is a famine in the **land**, so Isaac goes to King Abimelech of the Philistines in Gerar. The LORD warns Isaac not to go to Egypt, but to settle in Gerar as an alien; God will be with him and bless him and his descendants here, fulfilling his oath to Abraham. So Isaac settles in Gerar, telling the local men that Rebekah is his sister, not his wife—like Abraham, he fears that he will be killed and Rebekah taken, because she is beautiful. One day, King Abimelech sees Isaac “caressing” Rebekah and realizes the truth. He warns his people that nobody may touch Rebekah.

Abraham had dealings with a King Abimelech earlier in Genesis, so it’s unclear whether this is the same king or a successor of the same name. In any case, God promises to bless Isaac in this land and not to venture to Egypt. Isaac nevertheless finds that his beautiful wife makes him vulnerable, which was often the case with Abraham and Sarah. The Hebrew word used for “caressing” implies laughter, suggesting Isaac (whose name means “laughter”) was just being himself with Rebekah.



God blesses Isaac, and he reaps a great harvest in his new **land**, becoming wealthy. The Philistines become envious, so Abimelech tells Isaac to move away. Isaac moves into the nearby valley of Gerar, and after some quarrels over wells with the local herders, he finds a well for himself, which he names Rehoboth. After that he moves to Beer-sheba, where the LORD appears to him and reminds him of his promised blessing. After Isaac digs a well there, Abimelech and his men visit and propose a covenant, since it’s clear that the LORD is with Isaac. Isaac’s and Abimelech’s men celebrate a feast and exchange oaths, promising not to harm one another.

God fulfills his promise to establish Isaac in the land of Canaan, though not everyone receives his presence kindly, and it takes a while to find peace. (Rehoboth means “broad places” or “room.”) Like Abraham’s before him, Isaac’s success causes others to see God’s hand at work, and Isaac and Abimelech form a covenant to peacefully coexist.



Isaac’s son Esau marries two Hittite women, Judith and Basemath. These women make Isaac’s and Rebekah’s lives difficult.

Unlike Jacob, Esau does not choose wives from among his parents’ people. It’s implied that these wives are poor choices, further highlighting Esau’s foolishness.



CHAPTER 27

When Isaac is old and unable to see, he calls Esau to him. Isaac explains that he doesn’t know when he will die, so he wants Esau to hunt and prepare some game for him, just the way he likes it. Overhearing this, Rebekah tells Jacob to get two kids from the flock; she will prepare them for Isaac, and Isaac will then give Jacob his blessing. Jacob worries that if Isaac touches him, he will know that Jacob is not Esau—Esau is much hairier. So Rebekah covers Jacob with Esau’s garments and also places the kids’ skins on his hands. Then Jacob carries the prepared meal to Isaac.

Recall that earlier, Esau yielded his birthright to Isaac because he was hungry. Now Jacob (with his mother’s help) deceives his brother more cleverly. The story is filled with tension, as Rebekah outfits Jacob and hurriedly prepares Isaac’s meal while Esau is out in the fields. Blessings bestowed by a patriarch before his death were considered to have a shaping influence on sons’ lives, hence the high stakes of the moment.



When Jacob comes in, he tells Isaac that he is Esau. Isaac wonders how the game was hunted and prepared so quickly, but Jacob claims that God granted him success. Then Isaac wants to feel his son to be sure of his identity. Touching Jacob's skin-covered hands, Isaac satisfies himself that although the man sounds like Jacob, it is really Esau. He eats the meal Jacob has brought, then kisses Jacob and blesses him. The blessing includes the prayer that Jacob's brothers will bow down to him.

While Genesis doesn't pass judgment on characters' behavior, Jacob deceives his father, and Isaac does appear to doubt whether this is really Esau. Again, tension mounts as Isaac makes up his mind and goes forward with the blessing. When he pronounces the blessing, it's clear why Jacob wanted it so badly; Isaac's prayer seems to assume that Esau is the chosen inheritor of Abraham's blessings, not Jacob.



No sooner has Jacob received the blessing and left than Esau comes in with the game he caught. When Esau identifies himself, Isaac trembles and says that he has already given a blessing. Then Esau cries out bitterly and begs for his own blessing. Esau says that Jacob is rightly named—he has supplanted Esau twice. Finally Isaac gives Esau another blessing, but the blessing says that Esau will serve his brother.

Jacob's deception reaches a climax as Esau and Isaac both discover what he's done. Jacob has lived up to his name as a supplanter. The giving of a blessing can't be undone, and the one Esau finally deceives confirms that he will be subservient to his brother.



Esau hates Jacob for stealing his blessing, and he resolves to kill Jacob after Isaac dies. But when Rebekah hears of this, she orders Jacob to flee to her brother Laban in Haran until Esau's anger subsides—she can't bear to lose both sons in one day.

Rebekah, who helped orchestrate the whole deception, sends Jacob away to spare him from Esau's anger. Again, no judgment is clearly drawn on Jacob's behavior, suggesting that even though he acted deceitfully, God has nevertheless chosen to bless this younger, trickster brother over the elder brother, as would be expected at that time.



CHAPTER 28

Isaac blesses Jacob once again, telling him not to marry a Canaanite woman. Instead, he must travel to his grandfather Bethuel's homeland of Paddan-aram and take one of his uncle Laban's daughters as his wife. Isaac prays that God will bless Jacob and his offspring with Abraham's blessing, and that the **land** where he dwells as an alien will one day belong to him. Jacob does as Isaac says. When Esau sees that Isaac doesn't want his sons to have Canaanite wives, he goes to Ishmael and marries Ishmael's daughter Mahalath.

Like Abraham before him, Isaac sends Jacob to marry a woman from among his own people, who worships his God, instead of a local woman. Though Isaac had originally intended Abraham's blessing for Esau, he now seems to be reconciled to the fact that it belongs to Jacob—Jacob will carry on Abraham's and Isaac's blessings of land and offspring. Esau, meanwhile, tries to do something that will gain his parents' approval.



On his way to Haran from Beer-sheba, Jacob stops and sleeps for the night, using a stone for a pillow. He dreams of a ladder reaching to heaven; angels ascend and descend on the ladder. In the dream, the LORD stands beside him and declares his promise to give this **land** to Jacob and his many offspring, blessing the earth's families through them. He further promises to be with Jacob wherever he goes. When Jacob wakes up, he is awestruck by the encounter with God. He takes the stone and sets it up as a pillar, calling the place Bethel. He vows that the LORD will be his God, and that out of what God gives him, he will always give back one-tenth.

On his way to his mother's family, Jacob experiences a dramatic divine confirmation of the blessings his father has given him. In his dream, Jacob sees a visual sign of the connection between earth and heaven, humanity and God. God also repeats the promise of offspring, land, and personal blessing. Jacob dedicates the place as Bethel, which means "house of God," reflecting his belief that God is making the earth a dwelling for himself through his blessing of Jacob.



CHAPTER 29

When Jacob arrives in the east, he sees a well with three flocks of sheep lying beside it. The shepherds tell him they're from Haran and that they know Laban; in fact, Laban's daughter Rachel is approaching with her sheep right now. When Jacob sees her, he goes to the well and waters Rachel's sheep for her. Then he kisses her, weeping. When Rachel hears that Jacob is her relative, she runs to tell her father. Soon Laban hurries to welcome and embrace Jacob.

After Jacob has stayed at Laban's house for a month, Laban says that Jacob shouldn't work for him for free—what should his wages be? Laban has two daughters, Leah and Rachel. Though Leah has lovely eyes, Rachel is more beautiful. Jacob tells Laban he will serve him for seven years if he can marry Rachel. Laban agrees, and because Jacob loves Rachel so much, the seven years pass quickly.

At the end of the seven years, Jacob asks Laban for Rachel, and Laban throws a marriage feast. But that night, he brings Leah to Jacob's tent instead. The next morning, when Jacob realizes what's happened, he demands to know why Laban has deceived him. Laban explains that it's not customary to give a younger daughter in marriage before the firstborn. He will give Rachel to Jacob in exchange for another seven years' labor. Jacob agrees, so after a week with Leah, he also marries Rachel. Jacob loves Rachel more than Leah.

God sees that Leah isn't loved, so while Rachel remains barren, he enables Leah to conceive a son. Leah names her son Reuben because God has looked on her affliction, and surely now Jacob will love her. Soon she bears another son, naming him Simeon because the Lord has heard that Jacob hates her. Her next son is named Levi, in hopes that her husband will now be joined to her. Next comes Judah, because Leah says, "This time I will praise the LORD."

Jacob's encounter with Rachel at the well echoes the encounter between Abraham's servant and Rebekah a generation earlier. Here, though, Jacob seems to instantly recognize Rachel as his intended wife, even without a prayer for divine guidance. Also, Jacob waters Rachel's animals instead of vice versa. Though Jacob's kiss might not be romantic in nature, it nevertheless shows his passionate gratitude at having found Rachel.



Instead of offering a dowry in order to marry Rachel, Jacob agrees to work for a set time. Jacob's love for Rachel (pointedly not Leah), and his hard work in order to marry her, helps set up the ironic twist to come.



Up till now, Jacob has been portrayed as a great trickster; but now, ironically, he is the victim of Laban's trick. At night, Jacob doesn't realize that he's actually consummated a marriage with Leah. Laban's explanation the next day is also ironic, given Jacob's status as a second son who's received a firstborn's blessings. But he's allowed to marry Rachel, too, following a honeymoon period.



God's "seeing" of the neglected Leah echoes God's care for Hagar when she was cast out into the desert and heard her cries. These examples emphasize that God even cares for outcast women who do not seem important. Reuben is Hebrew for "See, a son"; Simeon is related to the Hebrew for "hear." Levi comes from the word for "joined," and Judah comes from "praise." Many of these names reflect Leah's sadness and her unrequited desire for a loving union with Jacob.



CHAPTER 30

Rachel, still barren, envies Leah for her many children. She tells Jacob to give her children or else she'll die. Jacob becomes angry and tells Rachel that he isn't God. So Rachel gives her maid Bilhah to Jacob, hoping that she can have children through Bilhah. Sure enough, Bilhah soon bears a son whom Rachel names Dan, because God has judged her. Bilhah later has a second son, whom Rachel names Naphtali, because she has wrestled with her sister.

Leah stops bearing children, so she gives her maid Zilpah to Jacob as a wife. Zilpah bears Jacob two sons, Gad ("Good fortune") and Asher ("Happy am I!").

During the wheat harvest, Reuben brings his mother, Leah, some mandrakes. Rachel asks Leah for some of the mandrakes, but Leah refuses, saying it's bad enough that Rachel has taken away Leah's husband. So Rachel offers to let Jacob sleep with Leah that night in exchange for the mandrakes. Leah agrees, and that night she conceives another son, whom she names Issachar. Next she bears a son named Zebulun ("now my husband will honor me"), and finally a daughter named Dinah.

Finally, God remembers Rachel, and Rachel conceives at last. She names her son Joseph, saying, "May the LORD add to me another son."

After Joseph's birth, Jacob asks Laban to release him from service, so that he can return to his own country. Laban says that he has prospered because of Jacob and asks what he can give him in return. Jacob declines anything, but says he will sort through Laban's flock, removing all the black lambs and all the speckled and spotted lambs and goats; those will be his wages. Any other lambs or goats found among Jacob's possessions will be considered stolen. Laban agrees to this. That day, however, Laban removes all the striped and spotted goats from his flock, as well as the black lambs. He then leaves, putting three days' distance between himself and Jacob.

As emphasized elsewhere in Genesis, God is seen as the one who opens or closes a woman's womb. Like Sarah, Rachel takes her barrenness into her own hands and uses indirect means to have a child, having her husband sleep with her servant. In a culture in which childbearing was a sign of divine blessing, Rachel feels her barrenness to be a source of personal shame, and she goes to great lengths to rectify that shame. On another note, Dan means "he judged," while Naphtali is from the Hebrew word for "wrestle."



Gad means "fortune" and Asher means "happy." Leah's names for these sons sound like a mockery of Rachel's continued grief.



It's not clear why Rachel wanted Leah's mandrakes so badly, but it's possible that they were believed to increase fertility. However, Rachel's plan backfires when Leah conceives instead—not just once but twice. Issachar is from the Hebrew word for "hire," in the sense that Leah "hired" Jacob with the mandrakes. Zebulun is from the Hebrew word for "honor."



Once again, God's "remembering" does not mean that God literally forgot, but is meant in the sense that God finally looked favorably upon Rachel. (This is similar to when God "remembers" Noah and his family on the ark and ceases the flood.) Despite her joy at finally bearing a child, Rachel isn't content—she immediately wants more. Fittingly, Joseph is from the Hebrew for "He adds."



Here, Laban deceives Jacob once again. Jacob's management of Laban's flocks has brought him much wealth, and now Laban is reluctant to let it go. After making an agreement with his son-in-law, he removes the distinctive livestock from his flocks and disappears.



Then Jacob takes rods of poplar, almond, and plane wood and peels white streaks in them. He places the peeled rods in front of the flocks' watering holes. When the flocks gather to drink and breed, they breed in front of the streaked rods, producing striped, speckled, and spotted young. Next Jacob makes sure that the stronger animals breed, while driving the weaker ones into Laban's flock. That way he ensures that his flock emerges stronger. Through these methods, Jacob becomes very rich.

The streaked sticks are simply meant to identify certain groups of sheep to help Jacob ensure that these ones breed together. It's an example of Jacob's cleverness and his refusal to let Laban's deception get the better of him. Sure enough, Jacob's breeding program makes him even wealthier.



CHAPTER 31

Jacob hears that Laban's sons are upset about the wealth he's gained at their father's expense; he also sees that Laban is no longer so fond of him. Then the LORD tells Jacob to return to his homeland. So Jacob summons his wives and tells Rachel and Leah that he has served Laban well for a long time, but that now Laban has tried to cheat him. However, God didn't let that happen; he made sure that when Laban offered certain animals as wages, whether speckled or striped, that kind of animal increased.

The story turns back toward Canaan, the land God has promised to Abraham's descendants. As he explains the situation to Rachel and Leah, Jacob emphasizes God's blessing and the desire to rely on God's provision instead of remaining dependent on Laban.



Continuing his explanation to Rachel and Leah, Jacob says that once, while the flock was mating, he dreamed that all the male goats were speckled, spotted, or mottled. In the dream, the angel of God calls to Jacob and says that he is causing these animals to mate with the flock, because he sees that Laban is trying to cheat Jacob. Then he tells Jacob to return to his own **land**. Jacob's wives agree to this; there is nothing left for them in their father's house anyway. So Jacob gathers his household, flocks, and possessions and sets out from Paddan-aram to Canaan. He doesn't tell Laban they're leaving.

Jacob attributes his flocks' successful breeding to God's guidance and protection—a shift from depending on his own cleverness and ability to trick others. Jacob's character has matured as has learned to trust in God's promises (and perhaps as he's been the victim of tricks himself). His wives, too, are ready to leave their homeland and trust in God's provision instead of their father's.



Meanwhile, Rachel has stolen her father Laban's household gods. Three days after Jacob's household sets out, Laban's household pursues Jacob's. When Laban overtakes Jacob, he accuses Jacob of deceiving him and fleeing without giving him a chance to say goodbye. He also accuses Jacob of stealing his gods. Jacob denies this, so Laban searches among the tents. Rachel hides the gods in a camel saddle and sits on it. When Laban comes in to search for the gods, Rachel claims she can't get up to greet him because of her menstrual period. So Laban doesn't find the hidden gods.

The meaning of the Hebrew term for "gods" is unclear, but it may refer to small images or idols. Rachel's motive for taking her father's gods is also puzzling, but it's unlikely that she wanted to worship them; her concealment of the gods in a saddle suggests their powerlessness. Laban's anger about the missing gods suggests that he does believe in them, in contrast to Jacob's belief in the God of his people. His accusation also ignores the fact that he recently tried to cheat Jacob.



Jacob gets angry about his father-in-law's intrusion. He reminds Laban of all the good fortune he's brought him over the past 20 years. Laban offers to make a covenant with Jacob, so they gather a heap of stones as a witness between them. Laban says that God will be witness between them if Jacob mistreats Rachel and Leah or takes any additional wives. Jacob swears accordingly, and they eat bread together. Early the next morning, Laban blesses his daughters and grandchildren and leaves.

Jacob defends himself against Laban's accusations. In biblical times, treaties were understood to require divine witnesses; the heap of stones represents God's witnessing of the covenant Jacob and Laban have made. Having done this, Jacob and his household can finally return to Canaan, leaving Laban's influence (and his belief in other gods) behind.



CHAPTER 32

Jacob continues on his way, in the company of the angels of God. As he approaches the country of Edom, he sends messengers to his brother Esau. The messengers return with word that Esau is coming to meet Jacob, bringing 400 men. Alarmed, Jacob divides his household into two companies, so that if one group is attacked and destroyed, the other may survive. Then Jacob prays fervently to God for deliverance, reminding God of his promise to do Jacob good and grant him innumerable offspring.

God guards and blesses Jacob's return to Canaan. In his homeland, Jacob faces unfinished business—especially his youthful conflict with his brother, Esau. When he hears that Esau is approaching with a huge company, Jacob naturally fears that after 20 years, Esau still carries a grudge for Jacob's childhood deceit and wants to get revenge. In response, Jacob humbly appeals to God to fulfill his promise.



That night, Jacob prepares a gift for Esau—large flocks of goats, sheep, camels, cows, and donkeys. Then he gives these flocks to his servants and instructs them to drive the animals in Esau's direction. When they meet Esau, they should tell him that the gift is from Jacob. Jacob hopes this gesture will appease his brother.

Jacob's gift, taken out of the abundance of God's provision for him, is meant to signal to Esau that Jacob bears only good intentions toward his brother, and that Esau should trust him, despite his deceit long ago.



That same night, Jacob crosses the Jabbok river along with his wives, maids, and 11 children. After settling them there, Jacob sleeps alone on the opposite side of the Jabbok. A man comes to him and wrestles with him until daybreak. The man is unable to defeat Jacob, so he puts Jacob's hip out of joint and asks Jacob to let him go. But Jacob refuses to let the man go unless the man blesses him. The man declares that he must no longer be called Jacob, but Israel, because he has striven with both God and people and prevailed over them. He blesses Jacob, and Jacob limps onward.

"Jacob" and "Jabbok" are similar Hebrew names; the Hebrew word for "wrestles" also sounds similar to both. Jacob's mysterious wrestling match with the man is not fully explained. By the end of the encounter, Jacob apparently believes that he has wrestled with God. The wrestling seems to be God's response to Jacob's prayer for blessing. Jacob has striven with others his whole life (like with Esau and Laban); now what he needs most is not to prevail by his own strength, but to trust God's blessing.



CHAPTER 33

Jacob sees Esau approaching with 400 men, so he divides up his household with the maids in front, followed by Leah and her children, and Rachel and Joseph in the rear. Jacob walks in front, bowing seven times before Esau. But Esau runs to Jacob, embraces him, and kisses him; the brothers weep together. Jacob introduces the women and children. Esau tries to refuse Jacob's gift, but because Esau has received him with such favor, Jacob begs him to keep it, and Esau finally agrees. Esau then returns home, while Jacob and his household follow more slowly. When Jacob arrives at the city of Shechem in Canaan, he purchases **land**, pitches his tent, and builds an altar there.

Jacob approaches Esau with great humility and deference. However, Esau cuts short Jacob's formal greeting and joyously embraces him, showing he no longer harbors animosity toward Jacob. Jacob finally makes his way to Canaan, and his first act after establishing a dwelling is to build an altar and worship God. In response to God's faithfulness in bringing him to Canaan, Jacob obeys God.



CHAPTER 34

Leah's daughter, Dinah, goes to visit some neighbor women. As she goes, Shechem son of Hamor, a regional prince, sees Dinah, seizes her, and rapes her. Then he falls in love with Dinah and asks his father to get Dinah to be his wife. Meanwhile, Jacob hears about the rape. He and his sons are furious with Hamor, and when Hamor comes to them seeking Dinah for Shechem, they deceive him. They claim they'll intermarry with the local families as long as the men agree to get circumcised; Hamor, Shechem, and all the men of the place agree to do this.

Though Jacob's family is now settled in Canaan, their life isn't perfectly secure, as Dinah suffers a traumatic assault. In response to this crime, however, Jacob and his sons turn once again to deception.



Three days after the circumcisions, while the men are still recovering, Dinah's brothers Simeon and Levi attack the city and kill all the males, including Hamor and Shechem. They rescue Dinah from Shechem's house and take her home. Jacob's other sons plunder the city, taking captive the wives and children. Jacob tells Simeon and Levi that they have made the family infamous by doing this, but the brothers retort that Dinah must not be treated dishonorably.

Circumcision is intended to be a sign of God's covenant with his people, but Jacob's sons use the ritual as a pretext for committing retributive violence. Though Dinah's brothers want justice for her, Jacob sees that their vengeful way of seeking it has endangered his family's security in their new home.



CHAPTER 35

God tells Jacob to settle at Bethel and build an altar there, so Jacob tells his household to get rid of their foreign gods, purify themselves, and worship with him at Bethel. As they go, God causes fear to fall on the surrounding cities so that no one pursues them. They all go to Bethel, where God first revealed himself to Jacob upon fleeing from Esau.

After Dinah's rape and the subsequent slaughter, the family seeks another new beginning, and God protects them from interference as they go. Part of this fresh start is rejecting "foreign gods," perhaps remnants of the polytheistic beliefs of Rachel and Leah's upbringing.



God appears to Jacob again and says that he will now be called Israel. He commands him to "be fruitful and multiply"; he will make nations and kings from Jacob's offspring. He promises again to give Jacob the **land** that he gave to Abraham and Isaac. Jacob establishes a pillar at Bethel.

In Canaan, Jacob has assumed the place of his father Isaac and grandfather Abraham as the one through whom God's promises are passed down. Here, God repeats his renaming of Jacob as well as his promises of offspring and land.



As they journey onward from Bethel, Rachel goes into hard labor and dies just as her son is born. Rachel names him Ben-oni, but Jacob calls him Benjamin. Rachel is buried at Bethlehem, and Jacob sets up a pillar at her grave. Then he settles beyond the tower of Eder. (Around this same time, Reuben sleeps with Bilhah, and Jacob hears about it.) Jacob has 12 sons altogether: six from Leah, two from Rachel, and two each from Bilhah and Zilpah. Jacob comes to Isaac at Mamre, and after Isaac dies, Jacob and Esau bury him.

Ben-oni means "Son of my sorrow," while Benjamin means "Son of the right hand." While this second son brings Rachel to grief, he adds strength to Jacob. The aside about Reuben and Bilhah (Leah's maid) comes back to Reuben on Jacob's deathbed. Genesis sums up Jacob's descendants and also brings Isaac's generation to a close.



CHAPTER 36

The descendants of Esau, or Edom, are listed, all of them born to Esau's Canaanite wives, Adah, Oholibamah, and Basemath. Esau and his household move to the hill country of Seir since the land could not support both his and Jacob's possessions. Esau has several sons, Eliphaz, Reuel, Jeush, Jalam, and Korah, from whom Edomite clans and kings descend. These Edomite kings reign before the Israelites have kings of their own.

Esau's line is an offshoot from the direct line (Jacob's) to which God's promises are directly entrusted. Still, Genesis gives an overview of the descendants of Isaac's firstborn, who come to make up the Edomites. Edom, in what's now southern Israel and Jordan, was an ancient kingdom located to the south and east of the land of Canaan.



CHAPTER 37

Jacob (Israel) settles in the **land** of Canaan, where his father Isaac had lived. When Israel's son Joseph is 17 years old, he works alongside the sons of Bilhah and Zilpah as a shepherd. One day Joseph brings his father a bad report of his brothers' work. Joseph is Israel's favorite son, and he gives him a long robe. When Joseph's brothers see this, they hate him.

The remaining chapters of Genesis focus on the story of Jacob and his family, particularly his son Joseph. This subsection of the patriarchal history also shows how the people of Israel wound up in Egypt, transitioning to the Book of Exodus. The Hebrew word describing Joseph's robe is uncertain; besides referring to a robe with sleeves, it could also mean a "coat of many colors."



One day, Joseph dreams that he and his brothers were binding sheaves in the field, and his brothers' sheaves bowed down to his sheaf. When Joseph tells his brothers about this dream, they hate him even more. Later he tells them of a dream in which the sun, moon, and 11 stars bowed down to him. This time, even Israel rebukes Joseph.

By telling his brothers about his dreams, Joseph doesn't endear himself to them; in fact, his superiority in these dreams (despite being one of the youngest among them) makes him appear arrogant. The second dream suggests that even Joseph's parents will bow to him (the sun and moon), hence Israel's rebuke.



On another day, Israel sends Joseph to check on his brothers, who are pasturing the flock near Shechem. When his brothers see Joseph coming, they plot to kill “this dreamer”—they’ll throw him into a pit and tell Isaac that a wild animal got him. But Reuben convinces them not to kill Joseph. So when Joseph reaches them, his brothers take off his special robe and toss Joseph into a pit. A little later, they see a caravan of Ishmaelites coming. A majority of the brothers agree to sell Joseph to the traders. When they give Israel Joseph’s torn robe—which they’ve dipped in a goat’s blood—Israel goes into deep mourning. Meanwhile, Joseph is carried to Egypt and sold to Potiphar, Pharaoh’s captain of the guard.

Joseph’s brothers resent Jacob’s favoritism and Joseph’s dreams so much that they decide to get rid of him altogether. Though Reuben’s intervention spares Joseph’s life, he is—as far as they know—taken out of their lives forever by the caravan. However, Joseph’s arrival in Egypt, though it looks like an ending, is the beginning of the next major phase of history for the people of Israel.



CHAPTER 38

Around this time, Judah settles apart from his brothers and marries a Canaanite woman named Shua; they have several sons. When it’s time for Judah’s son Er to marry, Judah finds him a wife named Tamar. But Er is wicked and is put to death by the LORD. So Judah tells another son, Onan, to sleep with Tamar in order to beget offspring for Er. But Onan spills his semen on the ground, not wanting to beget offspring that won’t be considered his. The LORD puts Onan to death for this. Judah then plans to have his younger son, Shelah, marry Tamar one day, but he tells Tamar to return to her father’s house for the time being.

Especially with its graphic sexual content, this chapter seems like a diversion from the narrative. However, as the ancestor of one of the major tribes of Israel, Judah is a forerunner of the line of King David, which is probably why his offspring are discussed. Under Judah’s authority, Tamar is serially married to Judah’s sons. Onan is told to undertake what’s called a levirate marriage—begetting children for his brother’s childless widow—which is discussed in the books of Deuteronomy and Ruth. However, he selfishly (in the view of the time) demurs from this duty.



Eventually Judah’s wife Shua dies. When Tamar hears that Judah is shearing his sheep nearby, she changes out of widows’ clothes and veils herself, then sits by the road. When Judah sees her, he doesn’t recognize her and thinks she’s a prostitute. When he asks to sleep with her, Tamar requests the pledge of Judah’s signet, cord, and staff until he can pay her properly with a goat. Tamar conceives and goes home, taking the items with her.

Tamar has been waiting for Judah to marry her to his next youngest son, Shelah, but Judah delays. It seems that Tamar decided to take initiative to remind Judah of his promise. However, Tamar’s lone appearance by the roadside seems to have given Judah a different impression. More than anything, Judah is driven by the desire for his own gratification.



When Judah tries to send the promised goat, nobody knows where to find this prostitute, so Judah gives up. Three months later, Judah is told that Tamar has become pregnant, and he orders that she be burned to death for “whoredom.” But when Tamar reveals Judah’s signet, cord, and staff, Judah acknowledges his fault and says he should have allowed Shelah and Tamar to marry sooner. Later, Tamar gives birth to twins, Perez and Zerah.

Tamar is vindicated because she wisely insisted on keeping some of Judah’s possessions after his encounter with her. When Tamar shows proof of Judah’s fatherhood, Judah admits it, showing an uncharacteristic humility which becomes significant later. Perez is an ancestor of King David.



CHAPTER 39

In Egypt, Joseph, despite having been bought by Potiphar as a slave, becomes very successful, because God is with him. Potiphar puts Joseph in charge of his house and possessions, and God blesses Potiphar's house accordingly. Meanwhile, Potiphar's wife tries to seduce Joseph, but he refuses to betray his master. But Potiphar's wife keeps pursuing him, and one day she grabs Joseph's garment as he flees. Then she accuses Joseph before Potiphar, claiming that he tried to rape her. Furious, Potiphar throws Joseph in jail. While Joseph is imprisoned, however, God continues making Joseph prosper. Soon the chief jailer puts Joseph in charge of the prison, too.

Meanwhile, in Egypt, God protects Joseph and even causes him to prosper in this foreign land. Joseph wins favor wherever he goes, although he also attracts unwanted attention. However, even the accusation against Joseph and his imprisonment end up being part of God's plan—another example of how God demonstrates his faithfulness even in the midst of unfavorable circumstances.



CHAPTER 40

Sometime later, Pharaoh throws two of his officials—the chief cupbearer and chief baker—into prison, where Joseph is put in charge of them. One night, both officials have troubling dreams, which they ask Joseph to interpret for them. The chief cupbearer dreamed about a grapevine with three branches; he pressed the grapes into Pharaoh's cup and gave the cup to Pharaoh. Joseph says that the three branches represent three days. After three days pass, Pharaoh will restore the official to his role as cupbearer.

Joseph is known as a dreamer and an interpreter of dreams, and this becomes his path to freedom from prison. Gaining the trust of the fellow prisoners in his charge, Joseph predicts what will happen to them in the future.



The chief baker dreamed that he carried three cake baskets on his head, and the top basket contained various baked goods for Pharaoh, which birds ate. Joseph says that the three baskets represent three days, and that after three days have passed, Pharaoh will behead the baker, and birds will eat his flesh. Three days later, on Pharaoh's birthday, the chief cupbearer is restored to favor and the chief baker is hanged, just as Joseph had said. However, though the cupbearer had promised to speak to Pharaoh on Joseph's behalf, he forgets.

As Joseph predicts based on the two men's dreams, one man is elevated by Pharaoh and the other condemned. For now, though, Joseph himself remains stuck in jail. Joseph is portrayed as a righteous figure who patiently obeys God in adverse circumstances, until God "remembers" him and acts to rescue him.



CHAPTER 41

Two years later, Pharaoh has a dream in which he's standing beside the Nile, and seven sleek, fat cows emerge from the river. Seven ugly, thin cows also come out of the Nile and eat the sleek cows. In a second dream, Pharaoh dreams that seven blighted ears of grain devour seven plump ears. Troubled by the dreams, Pharaoh asks Egypt's best magicians and wise men for an interpretation, but nobody can help him. However, the chief cupbearer remembers Joseph and tell Pharaoh about him. Joseph is immediately brought from prison to hear Pharaoh's dreams. Joseph tells Pharaoh that these two dreams have the same message: God will soon bring seven plentiful years, followed by seven years of famine.

More time passes, and Pharaoh's cupbearer finally remembers what Joseph did for him. The cupbearer's remembrance of Joseph is another example of God "remembering" a person by acting on their behalf, even after a long time and in unlikely circumstances. Because of this, Joseph now has a chance to gain Pharaoh's favor and his own freedom.



Joseph advises Pharaoh to set a wise man over Egypt's affairs, as well as overseers to store grain for the coming famine. Pharaoh is pleased with this advice and decides Joseph himself is the best candidate, so he gives Joseph his signet ring, fine garments, and gold. He also gives Joseph the name Zaphenath-paneah and an Egyptian wife, Asenath. Joseph spends the next seven years touring Egypt and storing up food in each city.

In the meantime, Joseph has two sons, whom he names Manasseh (because God has made him forget his hardship) and Ephraim (because God has made him fruitful). Eventually, as Joseph had foreseen, famine comes to Egypt, yet because of Joseph, there's enough bread for everyone. In fact, people start traveling to Egypt from other countries, seeking to buy grain.

Now that Joseph has gained Pharaoh's favor and his own freedom, he is placed in a position of influence from which he can benefit many others. He uses the knowledge gained from Pharaoh's dreams to wisely prepare for future disaster, showing that his wisdom is pragmatic and not just a matter of symbolic dreams.



Manasseh means "making to forget" and Ephraim is from a word meaning "to be fruitful." Both are testimonies of what God has done for Joseph in Egypt; despite being rejected by his brothers and estranged from his family, he is serving God and prospering.



CHAPTER 42

Back in Canaan, Israel hears that there's grain in Egypt, so he tells his sons to go and buy some. All but Benjamin go to Egypt. When Joseph's brothers come before him, he recognizes them, but he speaks harshly to them, accusing them of being spies. When they protest, arguing that they are just a family from Canaan, Joseph throws them in prison. After a few days, Joseph lets them go, but they must leave one brother behind and bring back Benjamin from Canaan in order to verify their story and free the other. The brothers speculate that they are being repaid for having mistreated Joseph years ago. Overhearing them, Joseph weeps. He orders Simeon to be kept behind and then has the rest of the brothers' sacks filled with grain and their money returned.

The brothers depart for Canaan. When they discover their money along the way, they're frightened, wondering what more God has done to them. When they get home, they tell Jacob everything that's happened. Jacob is distraught that, after having lost Joseph and now Simeon, he's being asked to surrender Benjamin, too. He refuses to send Benjamin to Egypt, saying the grief would kill him.

The narrative briefly moves back to Canaan, where Jacob/Israel's family (Jacob himself believing his son his dead) are suffering. Though Joseph's brothers fail to recognize the newly elevated Joseph, he recognizes them. When they lament their situation in jail, it's also apparent that they've come to regret their actions, as Joseph overhears. Joseph, bearing no grudge, sends all but Simeon home with abundance, but he does not yet reveal his identity to them.



When the brothers see that Joseph has put their money back in their bags, they think they'll certainly get in trouble, and that this is divine revenge. For Jacob, grief is added onto grief as he feels that one son after another is being taken from him.



CHAPTER 43

Before long, however, the family eats up the grain they've brought from Egypt, while the famine persists. Judah reminds Jacob that there's no use in returning to Egypt unless they bring Benjamin, as they were told. If anything happens to Benjamin, he offers to bear the blame himself. Finally Jacob relents, but he makes them take a gift of Canaan's best produce and also return the money they found in their bags.

Eventually, another trip to Egypt can no longer be avoided, so Jacob's family does everything they can to ensure a successful appeal to Egypt's overseer (whom they still don't know is Joseph). Judah's willingness to bear a burden shows how he has matured as a character, becoming self-sacrificing instead of selfish.



When the brothers reach Egypt again and Joseph sees Benjamin among them, he orders a feast to be prepared. Bemused at the invitation, the brothers fear it's all a ruse to enslave them. They approach Joseph's steward and explain about the returned money. The steward reassures them and releases Simeon from jail. At the noon feast, Joseph asks after his father, Jacob, and greets Benjamin. Overwhelmed with love for his youngest brother, he leaves the room briefly to weep. He finally gets ahold of himself and returns to the feast, sending the biggest portions of food to Benjamin.

The tension continues to build through the contrast between the brothers' trepidation and Joseph's scarcely contained sorrow and joy. As Rachel's other son, Benjamin is Joseph's only full brother, which explains his especially heartfelt response.



CHAPTER 44

After the feast, Joseph tells his steward to fill the men's sacks with food, return their money, and also place a silver cup in Benjamin's sack. The next morning, after his brothers have left, Joseph sends his steward after them. When the steward catches up to Joseph's brothers, he accuses them of having stolen Joseph's silver cup. Indignant, they tell the steward to search their bags; if a perpetrator is found, he can remain behind as a slave. When the cup is found in Benjamin's sack, the brothers tear their clothes in grief and return to Joseph's house. Judah pleads on Benjamin's behalf, explaining that Jacob will die if Benjamin does not return. He offers to remain behind in Benjamin's place.

Joseph once again sends his brothers homeward with abundance, but this time, he puts an elaborate plot in motion, planting a cup among their possessions so that the brothers will be waylaid once again. When the cup is found among Benjamin's things, Judah (who'd promised Jacob to be responsible for whatever happened to the youngest) passionately pleads for him. Again, this shows how much Judah has grown.



CHAPTER 45

After hearing Judah's plea, Joseph can no longer contain himself. He orders everyone but his brothers to leave the room, then bursts into tears. He identifies himself to his brothers and tells them not to be angry with themselves for selling him into slavery—God sent him here in order to preserve his family's life. He urges his brothers to return to Jacob and bring him to Egypt without delay. They must all settle in Goshen, where Joseph will abundantly provide for them. The brothers embrace, with Joseph and Benjamin weeping the most.

Moved by his brother's show of compassion, Joseph finally reveals who he is. He also reassures them that God had a purpose in the crime they committed against them. What's more, Joseph not only wants their relationships to be restored; he also wants to care and provide for them, despite their past mistreatment of him. Joseph's generosity and compassion reflect God's character here: God has been kind to him, so he can afford to extend the same to his brothers.



When Pharaoh hears that Joseph's brothers have come, he personally invites Jacob and the brothers' households to move to Egypt and enjoy the best that the land has to offer. He gives them wagons for the journey, as well as new garments, livestock, and provisions. So the brothers return to Canaan and announce the good news about Joseph. Jacob is overcome with joy and eager to see Joseph before he dies.

Showing the high favor in which Joseph is held, Pharaoh welcomes and abundantly provides for Joseph's family. Jacob's overwhelming grief is brought to a joyful resolution.



CHAPTER 46

On the way to Egypt, Jacob stops at Beer-sheba and offers sacrifices. In a vision, God speaks to Jacob and tells him not to be afraid of life in Egypt; he will make a great nation of him. Moreover, he will be with Jacob and make sure that when he dies, Joseph's hand will close his eyes. So the house of Jacob—70 people in total—journey to Egypt.

Joseph meets his family's caravan in Goshen, and he weeps on Jacob's neck for a long time. Jacob says that he can now die, having seen for himself that Joseph is still alive. Joseph tells his family that because they are shepherds, they can dwell in Goshen in peace—Egyptians do not associate with shepherds.

CHAPTER 47

As Joseph has said, Pharaoh allows Joseph's brothers to settle in Goshen as shepherds. Joseph also presents Jacob to Pharaoh, and Jacob blesses Pharaoh. He tells Pharaoh that he is 130 years old and has lived a hard life, though his hardships do not compare with those of his ancestors. Joseph provides richly for his family.

Meanwhile, the famine grows worse in both Egypt and Canaan. All the money in both lands is spent in exchange for grain; after that, the people give their livestock in exchange for food. The following year, the people have nothing left to give, so they sell their land and themselves in exchange for food. Joseph gives seed to the people and instructs them to sow the land; four-fifths of the grain will be for them and one-fifth for Pharaoh.

In Goshen, Jacob's family prospers. Jacob lives 17 years more and dies at age 147. Before he dies, Jacob calls his sons to himself and asks them to swear that they will not bury him in Egypt; they must carry his body back to Canaan and bury him with his ancestors instead. His sons swear to do this.

Jacob's relocation to Egypt is marked by remembrance of God's goodness to him. God reiterates his promises to Jacob, including the intimate promise that Jacob will not die alone or alienated from his people. This suggests that the people of Israel as a whole will not be left helpless in a foreign land.



After many years and with great emotion, Joseph and Jacob are finally reunited. Now that Joseph has been restored to life after being thought dead, Jacob feels free to die. The reason behind the Egyptian distaste for shepherds is unclear, but the Israelites are kept at some distance from the Egyptians, perhaps for a mix of cultural and political reasons.



Joseph's family is blessed in Egypt as much as they've been in Canaan, God remaining faithful to them even in a foreign land—a comforting message for a Jewish audience that repeatedly faced exile. Before he dies, Jacob is even in a position to offer his benefactor Pharaoh a blessing.



The famine gets progressively worse, to the point that people are willing to enslave themselves in order to eat. Thanks to Joseph's prudent planning, he is able to equip the people to provide for themselves.



Though he has prospered in Egypt for some years, Jacob remains committed to God's promise to make him a great nation. In token of this trust, he prepares for his own burial in his homeland.



CHAPTER 48

When Joseph hears that Jacob is dying, he takes his sons Manasseh and Ephraim and visits his father. Jacob musters his strength to sit up in bed and tells Joseph about God’s promise to make him fruitful. This means that the promise applies to Ephraim and Manasseh, too. When Joseph brings his sons near for Jacob’s blessing, he puts Ephraim near Jacob’s left and Manasseh near his right. However, Jacob places his right hand on Ephraim’s head (the younger brother), and his left hand on Manasseh’s head (the firstborn). When Joseph tries to switch the blessing, Jacob patiently refuses, explaining that the younger brother, Ephraim, will become greater. He gives the boys his blessing—the blessing of the God of his fathers Abraham and Isaac.

This scene poignantly recalls Jacob’s deception of his father, Isaac, when Isaac offered blessings to his sons. Jacob now focuses on God’s ability to fulfill promises and not on the human attempt to seize or manipulate those blessings. In an echo of Jacob and Esau, however, Joseph tries to orchestrate the blessing he wants his sons to get. But Jacob is familiar with this trick—he knows what he’s doing, prophesying that Ephraim, the younger, will become the ancestor of a mightier tribe.



CHAPTER 49

Then Jacob offers his last words to his sons, telling each of them what will happen to them. Reuben, his firstborn, is the strongest of his sons, but unstable; he will no longer excel his brothers, because he defiled his father’s bed. Simeon and Levi are cursed for their fierce anger; they will be scattered in Israel.

In a long series of poetic blessings, Jacob prophesies what will become of his sons. The blessings don’t just apply to the individuals, but to the tribes that will descend from each of them. Reuben “defiled” by sleeping with Bilhah in Genesis 35; Simeon and Levi violently attacked the men of Shechem.



Judah receives an especially long blessing; his father’s sons will praise and bow before him. Jacob describes him as a lion, and a ruler who will bear a scepter.

Judah’s blessing is much more positive. Though his character has been somewhat mixed in Genesis, Judah will be the ancestor of the kingdom of David.



Zebulun will settle on the seashore; Issachar will become a forced laborer. Dan will be a judge, likened to a snake. Gad will be raided, but will later raid others. Asher will enjoy rich food, and Naphtali will be a doe with beautiful fawns.

Though what Jacob envisions for each son’s destiny isn’t always clear, in general the blessings reflect the fortune, prosperity, and oppression they’ll each face over the course of their respective histories.



Joseph also receives a long blessing—he will be fruitful, made strong by “the Mighty One of Jacob,” his father’s God who will give him all blessings. Benjamin, finally, will be a devouring wolf.

Joseph receives the longest blessing because of his special status among the brothers; Benjamin’s descendants are described as aggressive warriors.



Jacob commands his sons to bury him in the cave of Machpelah, where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah are buried. Then Jacob breathes his last.

Jacob finally dies, and he will be buried in the tomb his grandfather Abraham acquired for the family, in the land God has promised to them.



CHAPTER 50

Weeping, Joseph kisses his father's face. He orders the physicians to embalm Jacob, which takes 40 days, and the Egyptians mourn him for 70 days. Then Pharaoh gives Joseph permission to carry his father's body back to Canaan. Pharaoh's servants and household elders, as well as his brothers' households minus the children, all journey with him—a vast company. They all take Jacob's body to the cave at Machpelah, as he had commanded.

After Jacob dies, Joseph's brothers fear that he will bear a grudge against them and avenge himself. So they ask Joseph for forgiveness, explaining that this was their father's dying wish; they all weep together, and the brothers offer themselves as Joseph's slaves. But Joseph tells them not to be afraid, explaining that although they'd intended him harm, God meant it for good, so that God's people would be preserved.

Joseph lives for 110 years, seeing several generations of offspring. Before he dies, he tells his brothers that God will surely bring them up from this **land** to the land he'd promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He makes the Israelites swear to carry his bones to Canaan "when God comes to you." Then Joseph dies; he is embalmed and placed in a coffin in Egypt.

Jacob is honored according to Egyptian burial customs, but Pharaoh also honors his wishes to be buried in Canaan. His esteem for Joseph is reflected in the way Pharaoh facilitates this burial journey.



Jacob has stood as a kind of buffer between Joseph and the rest of his sons. Now that Jacob has died, the brothers fear that Joseph might finally get his revenge. Movingly, they offer themselves as slaves to the brother they'd enslaved. But Joseph concisely sums up God's intention throughout his enslavement, and indeed throughout the history of his people: God brings about good where human beings intend harm.



Like Jacob before him, Joseph asks to be buried in the land of Canaan. Unlike his father, he tells his brothers to carry him home only when God has come to them in Egypt. The original audience would have known that God did not bring Israel up from Egypt for hundreds of years to come. So when Joseph makes his brothers swear, it's a testimony to his faith that, once again, God will loyally fulfill the covenant he has made with them—to make them a great nation within the promised land. Thus the ending of Genesis finds the Israelites in Egypt, transitioning to the next book of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament: Exodus.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Patterson-White, Sarah. "Genesis." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 18 Dec 2020. Web. 29 Mar 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Patterson-White, Sarah. "Genesis." LitCharts LLC, December 18, 2020. Retrieved March 29, 2021. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/genesis>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Genesis* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Anonymous. *Genesis*. Zondervan. 2009.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Anonymous. *Genesis*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan. 2009.