

MTP/HB Intro to the Hebrew Bible  
A Few Thoughts about Genesis  
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Genesis, as its name would indicate, is a book about beginnings: from the process of creation to the emergence of a people known as Israel, denoting their self-identification as one who struggles with humans and with God. But Genesis is also about family, or more specifically families. These stories were composed and preserved to express the ideological claim that the people called Israel all shared a common ancestry, and also that all humanity shared a common ancestry and source of origin. When the final compilation was done of these different myths and legends, there was still evidence of different sources that had been woven together into this theological tapestry. At times, editors seemed to try and smooth out or erase any evidence that this was not one seamless text, and other places, those differences among sources appear to have been left quite obvious, thus to remind future generations that there was not one singular story that could encompass the Israelites' history and their relationship with the God they worshipped.

Beginning in Gen 12, the audience is introduced to an older couple, Abraham and Sarah, who are childless because Sarah was barren. The story goes that God chooses this unlikely couple to be the progenitors of a nation. The ridiculous nature of the divine's choice makes both Abraham and Sarah laugh. However, when time passes and Sarah still does not bear a child, she gets anxious and decides to give God a little help. She has a servant, Hagar, who is Egyptian, and Sarah decides to follow a custom of the ANE whereby a woman could give her slave girl to her husband as a surrogate mother.

Any resulting offspring would legally be considered the children of the slave's mistress. Sarah tells Abraham to have sex with Hagar in order to produce an heir. Abraham does not argue with his wife, but Hagar is given no choice in the matter. When Hagar does conceive, her very presence reminds Sarah of her own failure to bear a child. Acting out of anger, she mistreats Hagar, who then runs away only to be told by an angel that she must return and submit to her owner. The only hope is that Hagar is told she will bear a son and his name will be Ishmael.

Later, when Sarah finally has her own son, Isaac, she sees the 2 brothers playing together, and suddenly, she realizes that Ishmael, as Abraham's oldest son, stands to inherit his father's wealth as well as the blessing given to Abraham by God, a blessing that included land, many descendants, and a special relationship with God. She has Abraham send Hagar and Ishmael away. Again, Abraham, after a brief protest and an assurance from the divine that Sarah is right, does send his first son away, and Hagar is again given no choice. Thus, Sarah's lack of self-esteem and the divinely mandated decision that the blessing can only be bestowed on one heir is visited upon the children and the 2 brothers are split apart.

This pattern of parental anxiety, insecurity, and dysfunction is repeated in each generation after Abraham and Sarah. When Isaac marries Rebekah, they have twins. The story goes that Rebekah had a difficult pregnancy, and when she asked God what was happening, she learned that the ancestors of 2 nations were in her womb. It was the divine choice that younger, who turns out to be Jacob, should rule over the older son, Esau, who was born first. Esau was his daddy's boy, and Jacob his momma's boy.

Once again, a tension in the family is created by the existence of the one blessing, which society and Isaac believed should go to Esau, and the knowledge of Rebekah that God declared that Jacob should inherit the blessing. While the patriarchal context would suggest that the triangle involves Isaac, Esau and Jacob, the story portrays Rebekah, God, and Isaac as being in a triangular relationship as well, with Isaac being the odd one out. Through disguise and deceit, Rebekah and Jacob trick Isaac into giving the blessing to Jacob. In order to protect her son from Esau's anger, Rebekah convinces Isaac to send Jacob back to her homeland to find a wife. The brothers are separated and the brokenness continues.

A similar situation is created by Laban when he dupes Jacob into marrying his oldest daughter, Leah, before allowing him to marry his youngest, Rachel, whom Jacob loved. Their father's greed and insecurities create a horrible situation for the two women. Sisters sharing the same husband is a bad idea. My sister and I couldn't even share a room. Knowing that she was never wanted by Jacob, causes Leah to seek other ways to earn his love and place of importance. She does this by bearing Jacob his first sons. Rachel, who is barren, becomes desperate to have children, so she follows the practice of her grandmother-in-law and gives Jacob her servant girl, who then bears sons on Rachel's behalf. This kicks off a baby competition between the sisters, with Leah also having to resort to using her slave girl, and Rachel finally has her own biological child. In the height of this competition, the two sisters finally find a way to cooperate so they both can get what they want and to bridge the separation visited upon them by dear ol' dad.

The last storyline of Genesis is that of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat, no wait that Andrew Lloyd Weber. Actually it is the story of Joseph and his brothers. As the firstborn son of Rachel, Jacob favored Joseph over all his other sons and gave him special attention probably in an attempt to fill his guilt and sadness after Rachel's death. This parental favoritism causes a violent act of sibling rivalry by Jacob's other sons, who attack Joseph, sell him into slavery, and tell their father that a wild animal had killed their brother. As the story unfolds, Joseph ends up in Egypt and gains a prominent position in the King's court. Due to his ability to interpret dreams, Joseph gives Egypt the ability to prepare for a coming famine. When the food shortage reaches the land where Jacob and his other 11 sons are living, the patriarch sends his sons to Egypt to seek the mercy of that country's ruler. Of course the great surprise is when his own brothers, unknowingly beg Joseph for food and shelter. In the end, Joseph reveals his identity to his brothers, and rather than taking revenge on them, he offers them forgiveness and the family is reconciled.

But there's one part of these stories that I have left out and that usually is not emphasized. Other than the concluding reconciliation of Jacob's sons, we rarely hear about what happened to the other siblings who parents were responsible for their separation. Of course, for current affairs, this story of the separation between Ishmael and Isaac is often seen as the root cause for the continual fighting between Jews, by extension Christians, and Muslims. But that's not the end of the story. According to Genesis, when Abraham dies, Isaac and Ishmael come back together and bury their father. The story even seems to suggest that they lived as neighbors for a time. As

adults, Jacob and Esau are reconciled, with Esau offering his brother not only forgiveness but a chance to live together in peace. According to the reading Glen did earlier, this reconciliation only takes place after a long night of soul-searching by Jacob. Only then is he able to declare that seeing Esau's face is like seeing the face of God.

However, there is one story in Genesis where this happy ending does not take place. It is actually the first story of sibling rivalry, of triangles, and of parental projection. The tale of Cain and Abel, found in Gen 4, has been interpreted in many different ways, from a simple tale of fratricide to a myth about the struggles between farmers (represented by Cain who is described as tiller of the soil) and shepherds (represented by Abel who tended flocks). But this story also fits into our considerations today. Here a triangle is created among the two brothers and God, who represents the divine parent, even though Eve and Adam are their biological parents. At the beginning of Gen 4, we read that Cain, for some unknown reason decides to make an offering to the LORD of some of his crops. Abel, being the typical younger brother, decides to copy Cain's action but also to one-up him. Abel offers up to the LORD the firstlings of his flock. God, the divine parent, is pleased with Abel's offering but shows not regard for Cain's. We don't know the reason for this different in responses to the two boys. Some have suggested that Cain only offered the leftovers from his crop and not the best like Abel offered God. I think that excuses the deity too easily. God simply shows favoritism to Abel, perhaps because he was the youngest or because he was living in his brother's shadow. Abel's name comes from the Hebrew word for "vapor or wispieness". Maybe Cain was Eve & Adam's favorite, after all he did go into the family

farming business. Whatever the reason, this choice, of one child over the other causes a rift between the two brothers and, ultimately, leads to Cain killing Abel. This decisive action, of killing one's sibling, extinguishes any chance of reconciliation. The myth does say something about how the deity responds to the first murder. Instead of taking Cain's life, which would not bring Abel back, God consigns Cain to be a wanderer, a terrible fate for a farmer, but the natural role of a shepherd. In essence, Cain's punishment is to fulfill the role of his brother. To make restitution for the life he so violently ended. It is a clear reminder that we are, indeed, our brother's and our sister's keeper.